

* The Heights Baptist Church * Series: 2 Thessalonians *
* Topic: Proper Perspective on Troubles * 2 Thes. 1 * 11/10/2024 *

MAIN POINT

Regardless of the difficulties we might face, we can trust that God will act justly, both for those who love Christ and for those who reject Him.

INTRODUCTION

Think back over a time in your life where something happened to you that “just wasn’t fair”. What predominant emotions did you feel during that time?

A difficult lesson we learn is that sometimes life isn’t fair. But whatever events occur here, we can take comfort in the fact that God is just, and that one day, God will deal with evil and make everything right.

UNDERSTANDING

Paul had first shared the gospel in Thessalonica around 50 AD. A new church was born, and shortly afterward, persecution sprang up (Acts 17). Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians were written shortly after he left, while they were undergoing persecution. It might be that after receiving Paul’s first letter, they had further questions, and the second letter may have been written in response to these questions.

1 Thessalonians taught us that a big part of our motivation to persevere in our walk with Christ should be our sure hope in His future return. In today’s lesson, Paul begins his second letter by thanking God for them and commending them for their growth and perseverance in the faith. He then reminds them of how God was using trials in their lives now, and of the end state of both for them and their persecutors.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-4

What do you think about the two things for which Paul prayed for the Thessalonians in verse 2?

It’s difficult to come up with two better things to pray for than grace and peace ☺.

For what was Paul thankful for in the lives of the Thessalonian believers?

Paul was thankful that their faith in God was growing, as was their love for each other.

What might these words of gratitude, encouragement, and thanksgiving from Paul have meant to these persecuted young Christians? How can we apply this to our lives today?

If you received a letter or email from someone who had been helpful in leading you to Christ, it might open with words similar to those Paul used to open 2 Thessalonians. Comprehending what God has already accomplished in our lives, and understanding how our lives can encourage others can give us motivation to keep on walking with Him in faith. And we can encourage each other in a similar way.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1, 9-10

In his first letter, Paul had challenged the church at Thessalonica not just to love each other, but to do so more and more. And now he is able to say this is indeed occurring. What does it look like when a church’s love is not just continuing but is actually increasing?

Paul commended the Thessalonians for their growing love and faith. Both of these are included in the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 6:22-23. If we are walking with the Spirit, all nine of the qualities should be developing in our lives. We should see less and less of self, and more and more of Jesus in our lives.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1:5-10

Considering verse 5, what did Paul say provided clear evidence that God's judgment is right?

"All of this..." refers to what Paul had just mentioned, the fact that they were persevering under persecution, and that their faith and love were increasing.

Looking again at verses 5-7, what would be the result of God's righteous judgment?

The Thessalonian Christians would be counted worthy of the kingdom of God and would be given relief, and their persecutors would be paid back trouble for the trouble they brought on the Thessalonian believers.

"The sufferings of the just, and the triumphs of the wicked, in this life, are a sure proof that there will be a future judgment, in which the wicked shall be punished and the righteous rewarded."
Adam Clarke Commentary on 2 Thessalonians

"Their faith being thus tried, and patience exercised, they were improved by their sufferings, insomuch that they were counted worthy of the kingdom of God. Their sufferings were a manifest token of this, that they were worthy or meet to be accounted Christians indeed, seeing they could suffer for Christianity."
Matthew Henry Commentary on 2 Thessalonians

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 PETER 4:12-19

These verses from 1 Peter 4 add another dimension to the judgement of God. What benefits do these verses say we have as we undergo persecution?

1. These fiery ordeals test us. And by suffering for Christ now, we can better look forward to being overjoyed later when His glory will be revealed.
2. We are blessed, since the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us.
3. We can praise God, since we are counted as worthy to bear His name.

Note to study leader: Verse 17 says, "it is time for judgment to begin with God's household. This verse can be difficult to interpret, since in Christ, we will not come under judgement (John 5:24). Here is Matthew Henry's comments on this verse; "First, The best of God's servants, his own household, have so much amiss in them as renders it fit and necessary that God should sometimes correct and punish them with his judgments: Judgment begins at the house of God. Secondly, Those who are the family of God have their worst things in this life. Their worst condition is tolerable, and will soon be over. Thirdly, Such persons or societies of men as disobey the gospel of God are not of his church and household.... The apostle distinguishes the disobedient from the house of God. Fourthly, The sufferings of good people in this life are demonstrations of the unspeakable torments that are coming upon the disobedient and unbelieving: What shall the end be of those that obey not the gospel? Who can express or say how dreadful their end will be? Matthew Henry Commentary on 1 Peter

What counsel does Peter give in 1 Peter 4:19 for those who suffer according to God's will, and why is this such good advice?

Commit ourselves to our faithful creator and continue to do good.

Looking again at 2 Thes. 1:7, when will we be given relief from our troubles, and when will God in His justice bring trouble on those who trouble us?

These things will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his angels.

Note to study leader: *Not everyone agrees as to exactly when this revealing of our Lord Jesus is referring to. A likely answer is that it refers to Christ's glorious return at the end of the seven-year tribulation period, as described in Matthew 24:31, and Revelation 19:11-21, when our Lord Jesus gloriously returns to gather his elect, and tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty on those remaining on earth who rebelled against Him. This is the time "when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with him, (and) he will sit on His glorious throne" and "All nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." The sheep will enter into Christ's millennial kingdom, and the goats will be sent away to eternal punishment.*

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 16:33

How does it help us to know that one day, God give us relief and do away with wickedness forever?

It does us great good to know there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and what a light it is! As Jesus said in John 16:33, "Take heart!" Or, as the King James translation says, "Be of good cheer!"

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1:11-12

What are the main things Paul asked God for, and what can we learn from this as we pray?

Praying for immediate needs is a good thing to do, but Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians reminds us that prayer should also include petitions related to our long-term spiritual walk with Christ.

Looking at this prayer, from whom will we receive power as Christians to make us worthy of God, and to bring to fruition our every desire for goodness and our every deed prompted by faith?

Paul prayed that God would make them worthy, and that by God's power He would bring to fruition their every desire for goodness and their every deed prompted by faith.

We read in verse 12 that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in us, and we in Him. How does serving Christ in this life, including enduring trials, bring glory to Jesus?

We bear His name as Christians, and our life witnesses of Christ to those around us (1 Peter 2:12).

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ PHIL. 3:20-21, COL. 3:4, 2 THES. 2:14, AND 1 JOHN 3:2

In 2 Thes. 1:12 we read that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in us, and we in Him. How will we be glorified in Christ?

This is too wonderful for us to grasp now (1 John 3:2), but we will be made like Jesus. He is still God, and we are not, but our present lowly bodies will become like His glorious body (Phil. 3:20-21)

APPLICATION

Where is God calling you into greater gratitude no matter what you are currently facing?

Can you think of a situation where you can encourage someone who is facing difficulty?

PRAYER

For your closing prayer, use Paul's prayer as a guide. God, we pray for Your continued grace and peace in our lives. We pray that You would make us worthy of Your calling, and that by Your power, you would fulfill our every desire for goodness and bless every deed we carry out by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in us, and us in Him, according to your grace.

COMMENTARY

2 Thessalonians 1

It is estimated that only a few months separated the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. While Paul was likely the primary inspired writer of both letters, he named his two friends as co-senders. They were valuable co-laborers working alongside him, and they were with him when they first came to Thessalonica. At the outset of this letter Paul reminded the Thessalonians that God was already at work in their lives, and that God continued to give evidence of His presence and power in their lives

1:1. The Thessalonians personally knew Paul, Silvanus [sil VAY nuhs] (also called Silas), and Timothy because they had been part of the original church planting team a short time earlier. (See Acts 17:1-9 and the surrounding context.) These three had left Thessalonica amidst persecution and were currently involved in establishing a church in Corinth. (See Acts 18:1-18.)

They wrote to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a good description for any local church—grounded in a particular city or town, belonging to the community, but connected to our Lord. The church is an assembly of people, called out from the city's throng to worship Christ, then also commissioned by Christ to go back into the city to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. We live in this world but are citizens of a different kingdom (Philippians 3:20).

1:2. What a great thing to pray for a fellow believer; grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians were familiar with Paul's greeting of grace to you and peace (1 Thess. 1:1). Both the Father and the Son are involved in bestowing favor to human beings. Paul used three names for the Son: "Lord" emphasizes His divine sovereignty; "Jesus" is a reminder of His earthly life and ministry; "Christ" acknowledges Him as the Messiah of biblical prophecy. Every true church will confess these truths about Him.

God is the wellspring of grace. He has a passion to give, and this extravagance issues from His love. Grace is any action or gift freely given; it cannot be earned or retained by personal effort. And when we are speaking of God's grace, it covers everything. But even though God's grace does not depend upon us, it can be hindered by us through sin, ingratitude, and refusal.

True peace can be achieved only through Jesus Christ. Peace deals with our legal standing in the court of God's justice. Peace from God also brings wholeness, restoring the fragmented condition of humankind. God offers us His peace that passes understanding, even in the midst of the chaos going on around us (Philippians 4:6-7)

1:3. Paul's opening statement, "We ought always to thank God for you", sounds like obligation is felt in these words, but it is not guilt-induced. Paul did express a duty to God to give thanks. He literally had an outstanding debt before God, and it was a debt of thanks. Hearing of the spiritual life and development in the Thessalonians, he knew that God's faithfulness was responsible for their progress. Consequently, an ongoing offering of thanks was due God.

The Thessalonians were the occasion of Paul's thanksgiving, but God was the source, for it was God working in them, and it was He who caused their faith and love to increase. Faith refers to the outworkings of Christian belief. True faith is revealed as belief in action.

1:4. This is a transition verse, combining delight with a hint of what will follow. Paul turned his attention to the hardships these believers confronted each day. Despite some of the internal problems of the church, such as laziness and misconceptions about Christ's return, Paul recognized some sterling qualities in these believers. He encouraged them by pointing these qualities out: their perseverance, faith, and love (v. 3). Paul also mentioned the fact that he was boasting to the other churches about how these qualities were increasing in their lives.

The persecutions and trials they encountered were varied, yet unspecified. These could have been anything which resulted from faith in Christ and from seeking to live righteously in a hostile culture. Their perseverance was not a meek “I can take it” but a steadfast, dynamic strength from God. Such continuance under difficulties results from an abiding trust in God’s goodness and sovereignty.

Further confirmation of God’s work in these believers was their endurance or perseverance in all the persecutions they were putting up with. We don’t have details about what these afflictions looked like as they moved on from the first troubles this church endured (Acts 17:1-5; see also 1 Thess. 3:3-5, but we can see from these verses that persecution was continuing.

1:5. When believers endure patiently in the face of troubles, they see clear evidence that something good still lies in the future: the righteous judgment God will render to every person. Judgment in this case is not condemnation; rather, it results in a favorable verdict for Christians.

When God judges, He always decides in perfect righteousness. Those who have entrusted themselves to Christ will be judged as worthy of God’s kingdom. In the case of the Thessalonians, they were suffering for the kingdom. Their distress showed they were already part of the kingdom that will be fully realized after Christ’s return.

Paul declared, “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right.” All what? It hardly seems likely that the persecutions were evidence of God’s righteous judgment. Most likely it was the Thessalonian believers’ ability and power to persevere and stand in the midst of unjust hardship that was the evidence pointing to God’s judgment. The truth of the gospel, the transformation of their lives, and the certainty of the future justice of God were proved by their ability to withstand the various trials. In addition, their lives proved God’s indwelling power. The Thessalonians’ endurance came from something besides human capacity. By their lives they validated God’s work and strength and the transforming energy of his Spirit.

Suffering with strength not only proves the power of God; it also proves the saving faith held by these Christians: as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God. They did not attain their salvation through suffering; they demonstrated it, thus establishing their worthiness to inherit the joys and benefits of God’s favor when Christ establishes His kingdom.

1:6. Paul wanted to encourage these believers further by directing their attention to the future. God is just, he declared, and then he pointed to the evidence for this truth.

That God is righteous (“just,” or “fair”) also indicates He will condemn evildoers when the last judgment comes. Christ so identifies with His people that to treat them poorly is to treat Him poorly (Matt. 25:45). Thus, those who afflict God’s people can expect only affliction in return. Justice requires their affliction.

The verb “repay” implies well-deserved vengeance (Isa. 66:6). God will balance accounts someday. Knowing this may not eliminate the present-day pain of undeserved suffering for believers, but it will make the burden easier to bear.

1:7. In this verse the opposite of affliction (God’s punishment on the wicked) is rest (or, “relief”). Paul included himself as an afflicted believer in the words along with us. Many of God’s choice servants have experienced much misery and persecution. Rest implies that one of the glories of heaven will be the end of stress and trouble and all the other things that may lead us to think that life is not fair.

This verse and these comments do not imply we will have nothing to do in heaven—that the redeemed will laze about forever. The Scriptures teach that we will actively serve our Lord throughout eternity (Rev. 22:3-5; but see Heb. 3:7–4:13 for more teaching about rest).

Believers should expect the full display of God's righteous judgment only at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven. The second coming of Christ is here termed His apokalypsis ("unveiling"). At Christ's return, the eyes of all the world's peoples will be opened to see what believers now know by faith: Christ is the Judge. He will be accompanied by powerful angels, often mentioned in Scripture in connection with His coming.

1:8. Here the apostle noted two other evils meriting divine condemnation. These two are closely connected, like the front and back of a coin. First is the sin of refusing to know God (implying that general knowledge of God is available to all; see Rom. 1:18-20). Second is the sin of refusing to obey the gospel, a way of referring to God's command to repent and believe in Christ to be saved.

God's righteous condemnation of such sinners is described as vengeance with flaming fire. From the Book of Genesis (with the destruction of Sodom by fire) to the Book of Revelation (with the account of the lake of fire), Scripture consistently describes the fate of evildoers in terms of a destroying fire.

The phrase "with flaming fire" in verse 8 grammatically (in Greek) could modify either "powerful angels" or "taking vengeance." God's justice can be seen in consolation, encouragement, warning, or punishment. Unlike human judges and justice systems that are flawed, infected by personal bias and limited understanding, God is the measure of His justice. God is unchanging, uncompromising, impartial, and righteous. We can be certain that God's judgments are fair, above appeal, without dispute. One demonstration of God's fairness is that He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. Every act takes place before God's holy gaze. He deals out justice, matching punishment with sin.

Conversely, those who are now troubled will, at that time, receive relief, or rest. This is not a rest from work, but an easing of stress and trouble. It seems likely that Christians will in some way "work" forever, but the future envisions a "work" unhindered by external snipping and quarreling. This relief will come when Christ returns to earth. Christ will be revealed from heaven. The second appearing of Christ has been termed the parousia (His "coming presence"), and the epiphany (the "shining forth"). Here it is called the apocalypse or "unveiling." The word indicates a type of revelation, a disclosure of what already exists (Rom. 16:25). Just as the servant of Elisha had his eyes opened so he could see heaven's horses and chariots of fire upon the hills (2 Kgs. 6), so will the eyes of all people see the reality of what already exists—Christ the Judge.

1:9. Paul continued with two further descriptions of God's judgment of the wicked. They will experience everlasting destruction, the opposite of eternal life. Destruction refers to "ruin" rather than to annihilation or total obliteration. Even more horrible is the description of the wicked as being cast away from the Lord's presence, forever banished from everything beautiful and good. This is indeed a heavy penalty, indicating how seriously God takes the offense of refusing Him.

1:9. Having described those who would be judged by Jesus, Paul stated the nature of Christ's judgment. There will be no deliberations, no appeals, no lessening of the sentence, no possibilities for parole. Judgment will be final and irrevocable. The punishment will be everlasting destruction. We do not know exactly what Paul meant by this "destruction." What is certain, however, is that those who have rejected Christ—and so become enemies of God—will receive a punishment commensurate with such a high crime. These people are sentenced to eternal punishment and separation from God, the source of life. These people who have rejected God while in this life on earth will be shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power. This, then, is hell. As physical beings, we tend to think of the punishment of hell as excruciating pain, the damned dancing and writhing in flames. But the greatest pain is spiritual, as evidenced by Christ's own cry of agony from the cross, not at the nails or spear, but at His being forsaken by God the Father. Paul's description of eternal punishment is in keeping with Jesus' experience. Paul sketches the punishment of hell in terms of separation from God.

1:10. But for the believer, Christ's coming will begin the eternal magnificence of His presence, the ceaseless experience of our desire—God Himself. When Jesus comes, He will be glorified in His holy people. Christ will not only display his glory, but in some way this glory will be shown in those who belong to Him. This future includes all who believe the testimony of Christ and the Scriptures. Indeed, the redemption from the kingdom of darkness which Christ accomplished, and the transformation which awaits His people at the completion of salvation, belong to the work of Christ, the keeping grace of the Spirit, and the power of God.

So far in Paul's meditation on God's justice, he had focused on the punishment of evildoers. Here he provided a few details on God's vindication of those who have responded to the gospel. At the second coming, His saints will fully see Christ in His glory and at last will completely enjoy His magnificent presence. At His coming, Christ will be admired by all those who have believed. The unrighteous will be shut away from Him, while believers will have free access to His presence forever.

Paul stressed the importance of personal faith in Christ as a prelude to these blessings by using the verb "believed" two times. Those who die unrepentant will experience God's just condemnation. Yet the most heinous sinners and persecutors of God's people can respond to the gospel invitation: repent and believe.

1:11. Paul then gave an outline of the prayers he offered on behalf of the Thessalonians. This prayer was based, in part, on the preceding description of their present suffering, endurance, and faith, and their future justice, rest, and glory. This was no out-of-sight, out-of-mind relationship. Paul not only felt the weight of responsibility to teach, preach, and correct, but to pray day after day in their behalf.

Near the end of his first letter to these believers, Paul had instructed them to "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17). In using the words we always pray, the apostle showed he was an example of this kind of praying. Here he moved from thanksgiving (v. 3) to petition.

1:12. This verse picks up the theme of glorifying Jesus from verse 10. Just as surely as Christ will return in glory, so will the two goals described here be accomplished.

The point of this prayer is that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him. The purpose and driving energy in history is the glory of God in Christ Jesus. Our lives in the present prepare us for the future. In the future, the glory of God will be proclaimed through the redemption and worthiness of His people. We will be His glory. Because we are coheirs with Him, we will also receive glory, sharing in the honor of our Lord.