

Last week we saw from the prophet Joel three themes regarding the vengeance of God:

First, we saw that God avenges grievous wrongs against his people –  
and that he does this because when the wicked attack the people of God,  
they are actually engaging in self-destructive behavior,  
because *salvation* comes to all the earth *through* the people of God!

And second, we saw that God’s vengeance is proportional.

The punishment fits the crime.

He gives to each *according to* his deeds.

And third, we saw that God’s vengeance will be fulfilled in the Day of the Lord.

There are partial judgments that happen throughout history.

But on that final Day, God will make *everything* right.

These three themes recur throughout the bible’s teaching on God’s vengeance.

We see them again in Psalm 94 – our song of response.

Psalm 94 identifies the LORD as the “God of vengeance,”

reminding us again that vengeance is not *bad*

rather, we are *bad* at vengeance!

But since God is the holy Judge of all the earth

we can trust him to bring *just* vengeance to all the earth.

And his judgment is proportional:

“repay the proud what they deserve”

“he will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness”

And there is a time when he will make all things right in the end.

Sing Psalm 94

Read 2 Thessalonians 1

We often think that vengeance is bad –

but vengeance simply means

“punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for an injury or wrong.”

The problem with vengeance is *not* that vengeance is bad.

The problem is that *we* are bad at vengeance!

Left to ourselves, we would tend to over-react –

we would inflict too severe a punishment –

which would only serve to boomerang back on our own heads –

One thing leads to another and the cycle of vengeance never ends

until everyone is dead!

But God’s judgment is just – his retribution is fair –

and so at the final judgment he will make an end of war

by judging everyone according to what they have done.

Today we see these same three themes in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10.

First, God avenges the grievous wrongs done to his people –  
because God's purpose is to bring salvation to Jew and Gentile alike –  
and so when the wicked attack his people,  
they are destroying their own hope for salvation!  
Second, there is a proportional quality to the judgment of God:  
he repays with affliction those who afflict you –  
God's vengeance follows a strict proportionality.  
The punishment fits the crime.  
And Third, all of this focuses on the Day of the Lord –  
the Day when our Lord Jesus will make all things right in the end.

I mentioned last time that verses 3-10 form one *long* sentence in Greek.

I think that the ESV does very well at translating it into readable English!

But there are two things that you miss this way.

First, when you recognize that this is one *long* sentence,  
you pay more attention to how the sentence is constructed –  
and how the various parts are related.  
For Paul, verses 3-10 form one whole thought.  
Our thanksgiving concerning you is bound up with God's judgment.

And second, verse 10 (in the Greek) ends with the words, "in that day."

The ESV *very understandably*  
has moved "in that day" up to the beginning of v10  
because Paul *is saying* "when he comes on that day"  
but English and Greek use different grammatical tools  
to accomplish the same things!

I mention it because the way Paul constructs his sentence  
opens with our duty to give thanks to God for the growing faith and love  
of his church –  
and it ends with the hope of all God's people –  
with the coming of the Lord Jesus *in that day*.

<sup>3</sup> *We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.* <sup>4</sup> *Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.*

Flip back a page or two to 1 Thessalonians 3:4-5.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul had expressed concern that their faith was wavering –  
"For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand  
that we were to suffer affliction,  
just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.  
For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith,  
for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you

and our labor would be in vain.” (1 Thess 3:4-5)

Paul was concerned that suffering might cause some to fall away from their faith.  
We’ve all seen it –  
    many of us have experienced it personally!  
When affliction comes,  
    sometimes it is really hard to believe in God and trust his promises!

The tempter comes to *all of us* –  
and tells us – “if God is good – then he wouldn’t let that happen!”  
    “If God loved you – he would never do that to you.”

Affliction and suffering will do one of two things:  
    either it will destroy your faith;  
    or it will cause your faith to grow abundantly –  
        and your love to increase and abound.

Haven’t you noticed this?  
Think of the people in your life whose faith is deepest and whose love is richest.  
    When you get to know their story,  
        don’t you generally find that at the heart of that faith and love  
            is some profound suffering?  
It can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes –  
    sometimes it is physical pain – other times mental or emotional turmoil –  
    anguish of spirit or body both count!

But Paul wants to encourage the Thessalonians to continue in faith and love –  
    and so he points them to their *hope*.

After all, faith and love do not last for long without hope.  
    Hope has to do with something that you do not have.  
        No one hopes for something he has!  
        If you have a job, you do not *hope* for a job.  
            You might hope for a *better* job –  
                or that you will be able to *keep* your job –  
                but you do not *hope for a job*.

In the same way, the Christian hope is for something that we do not have *yet*.

And this is where Paul turns in verses 5-10.

### **1. The Evidence of the Righteous Judgment of God (v5-10)**

#### **a. Your Suffering – That You May Be Considered Worthy of the Kingdom of God**

<sup>5</sup> *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—*

Paul says that the *righteous judgment of God* is our hope.

And the evidence that Paul brings forth is both present and future.

The present evidence is the affliction and suffering of God's people –  
along with their growing faith and increasing love.

The future evidence is the retribution promised against those who afflict you.

And Paul wants you to hold on to this central point:

your suffering is not a sign that things are going *wrong* –

your suffering is a sign that things are going *right!*

So long as you are suffering for the sake of *Christ!*

If you are suffering a hangover because you got drunk last night,  
that is *not* suffering for Christ!

If you broke a leg because you were showing off a crazy stunt,  
that is *not* suffering for Jesus!

On the other hand, even *ordinary* suffering can become suffering for Christ.

Cancer, car accidents, depression, trauma –

whether caused by nature or by other people –

all these can be sanctified by the Spirit's work,

as we endure “ordinary” suffering by faith,

it becomes Kingdom suffering.

After all, remember what we saw from 1 Thessalonians 3.

Who was behind the suffering and affliction in 1 Thessalonians 3:4-5?

The tempter.

When you look through the NT at demonic activity,

*most* of what demons do in the NT is cause affliction and suffering  
(whether physical or emotional).

Sometimes I think that Hollywood has affected us too much about the “demonic.”

We think of horror movies or weird stories about the paranormal.

But the NT does not suggest anything “spooky” about the demonic.

It exists right out in the open in everyday life.

You don't need to go to the jungles of South America to find the demonic.

It exists on Wall Street – and Main Street –

in suburban neighborhood quarrels –

just as much as inner city gang bangers.

Because Satan's goal – in *any* affliction and suffering –

is to use it to lure you away from Christ!

And so Paul says that *this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,*

*that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God,*

*for which you are also suffering...*

What does it mean to be “considered worthy of the kingdom of God”?

Paul doesn’t explain it here –

but he talks a lot about this in his other epistles.

In Romans 5, Paul says that while we were sinners –

while we were enemies –

Christ died for us – he died for the ungodly.

Likewise, in Philippians, Paul urges us to have the same mind as Christ –

who though he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God

a thing to be grasped – but made himself nothing –

being made in human likeness –

taking the form of a servant –

and thus he humbled himself – enduring the cross *for us*.

For Paul, our *imitation* of Christ – our enduring suffering and affliction –

bearing the cross –

is always rooted first in our *participation* in Christ.

Because we have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection,

*therefore* we share *now* in his sufferings

that we might be conformed to the likeness of his death –

so that we might also be conformed to the likeness of his resurrection glory.

There is no way to glory – except the way of the cross!

That was true for Jesus.

And that is true for us as well!

If you would be Jesus’ disciple,

then you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him.

This is why I have repeatedly exhorted you

that the Christian life is a life of suffering and affliction!

A servant is not greater than his master!

If they persecuted Jesus, they will persecute you.

That doesn’t mean that there is no joy in the Christian life!

Far from it!

The Christian is able to find joy and peace *everywhere!*

Even in the midst of afflictions!

Indeed, Paul rejoices that the Thessalonians are standing firm in their faith –

in spite of their afflictions!

But then in verse 6, Paul points to another source of comfort in the midst of affliction:

**b. Their Affliction – Because They Afflict You**

<sup>6</sup> *since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,*

That may sound a little odd at first.

Take heart – don’t worry –

God will repay those who afflict you!

This is why I spent a whole sermon last week on the theme of vengeance.

The problem with vengeance is not that vengeance is bad.

The problem is that *we* are bad at vengeance!

How often have you misjudged someone else?

Just the other day I realized that I had misjudged Ginger.

I suspect, though, that we will see the point quicker if I turn it around:

How often have *you* been misjudged by others?

How often do people do things to you that you *didn't deserve*?

This is why vengeance gets us into trouble!

In my little world, where I know myself and my own motives –

*I know* I am right!

How dare they do that to me!

What would happen if we sought to avenge ourselves on everyone who had wronged us?

That is why Paul says in Romans 12:14, 19

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them....

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written,

‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’

To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink;

for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Our personal response to those who afflict us must be to “overcome evil with good.”

But we do this *not* because we are indifferent to justice –

far from it!

We are able to do good to those who have wronged us

because we know that if they do not repent,

God is going to destroy them!

It is just for him to repay them for what they have done – AND HE WILL!

And when we consider how God has been so merciful to us –

not treating us as *our* sins deserve –

but sending his Son to die for our sins –

that begins to make us a little more merciful to others.

But notice this!

Mercy does *not* say, “You can get away with whatever you want!”

The mercy of God says, “You deserve death for what you have done –

and because I am just, I must punish sin.

That is why I sent my only-begotten Son  
so that the power of his Divine life  
might bear the awful weight of my wrath and curse due to sin,  
for all those who believe the good news of Jesus.”

And that is where Paul turns in verse 7

**c. Your Relief – When the Lord Jesus Is Revealed from Heaven**

*<sup>7</sup> and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels*

We have already received the forgiveness of sins – by faith, in this life.  
Already, in Jesus, we have assurance of God’s love,  
peace of conscience,  
joy in the Holy Spirit,  
increase of grace,  
and perseverance therein until the end.

But we do not yet have relief from our afflictions.  
The miseries of life – and the sufferings of the cross –  
continue to afflict us day after day.

And so we still await that Coming Day –  
when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.  
We still await *relief* from our afflictions.

Yes, we may catch glimpses of it in this life.  
There are moments in which we experience peace and joy.

One of the joys of working on the Breckinridge biography is reading the letters  
of so many faithful Christians whose experience shines light on these things!

Sally McDowell was R. J. Breckinridge’s niece.  
Her father was the governor of Virginia.  
She married the governor of Maryland.  
What could she know of suffering and affliction?!

Well, she married Governor Thomas against her father’s wishes –  
because Governor Thomas – her husband – suffered from paranoid delusions.  
Nowadays we would call him “emotionally abusive” – to an extreme degree!  
Only a few weeks into their marriage  
he manipulated her into various false confessions (including one of adultery).  
When she miscarried, he falsely accused her of having an abortion  
in order to hide the offspring of her supposed lover.  
He escalated his obsessive controlling behavior  
until, at the request of her father (the governor of Virginia)

her Uncle R. J. Breckinridge came to the governor's mansion in Annapolis and brought her back to his house in Baltimore, where the two governors met in his parlor to try to resolve the situation.

(The family feared that her father would challenge Governor Thomas to a duel in order to defend her honor!)

Governor Thomas wound up publishing a lengthy pamphlet detailing his accusations against his wife.

The result was a lengthy slander trial – followed by a suit for divorce (which in those days in Virginia required a special act of the legislature!).

Imagine then, if you will, poor Sally McDowell!

She was 20 years old when she married a man nearly twice her age.

Her marriage lasted for eight months –

and ended with a five-year legal battle that left her reputation in shatters.

Eight years after the divorce, at the age of 33, she wrote to a friend:

“You know not what it is to live, with the spring of life broken; to live on and on amid the scattered debris of all that you valued in life; to have existence, but to spend it ‘among the tombs’ of every thing that made it a blessing.

You know not what it is to have your pure name spoken by polluted lips; to have your high and cherished honor assailed by mouths whose very breath was infamy; - and to have your grief, that sacred thing, - so deep as to be powerless even to throb out an appeal for mercy, denied the last poor privilege of decent privacy.

This – all of this, has been the bitter experience I have garnered up in the very Spring-time of my life.

But these are not the only lessons of the past. This seed time of tears has brought forth some precious fruit.

When borne down by a sorrow too deep for the reach of human aid however truly & affectionately rendered, my poor heart turned to listen to the tones of One who commended himself to me as being ‘acquainted with grief,’ and by his gentle ministrations I was gradually soothed into calmness & peace. A new light burst in upon my darkened heart; a new motive-power was applied to it.... I learned to cast the burden that was heavier than I could bear, upon Him who offered to bear it for me; and at last gathered courage and strength to take up, I hope uncomplainingly, my cross and bear it.”  
(Sally McDowell to John Miller, October 13, 1854, Buckley, p15-16)

In those days, divorce was rare – and remarriage unheard of (especially among the elite) – and particularly when the Governor of Maryland had published a scurrilous pamphlet against you!

But Sally found comfort in the midst of her afflictions through the gospel – through the good news that Jesus had come to bear her grief.



Oh, and the friend she was writing to was a Presbyterian pastor, John Miller –  
(whose sister had married R. J. Breckinridge’s brother John),  
whom she married two years later!  
(and from all we know, they had a very good marriage).

I use the example of Sally McDowell  
because she sets up well how we should think about verses 8-9:

**b’. Their Punishment – Eternal Destruction**

*<sup>7</sup> and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*

Sally had every reason – and in some ways, every right –  
to wish that her ex-husband would burn in hell forever!

After what he had done to her – he deserved it!  
And maybe you know people like that as well.

Paul says that it’s okay to admit that.

The Lord Jesus is going to bring justice.

He will make all things right.

And that includes “inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God  
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” –

which certainly includes those who do heinous things to the innocent!

We are not going to obtain perfect justice in this life –  
so we can leave vengeance to the Lord –  
but the Lord Jesus *will* bring justice in the end.

He will come from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire –  
bringing final judgment to the earth.

And notice two things here:

First, in verse 8 – the vengeance is on those who “do not know God”  
and “who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

These are not two different categories of people.

“Knowing” God means much more than just knowing *about* God.

Knowing God *means* obeying the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

If you know God, then you will obey the good news!

If you disregard the good news, that means you don’t know God!

And furthermore, this is not a different group of people from “those who afflict you.”  
The three things go together.

Those who do not know God – *also* do not obey the gospel of Jesus –  
and *therefore* they persecute God’s people.

You could say it the other way around as well:

Those who persecute God’s people do it *precisely because*  
they neither know God nor obey the gospel of Jesus.

Why does Paul focus on how they relate to God?

Yes, he *starts* with how they have afflicted the saints –  
but here in verse 8 he focuses on how they do not know God  
and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

The reason is because if you know God, then you will love God,  
and you will love other humans – because man was made in the image of God.

But if you do not know God – that means more than just marginal ignorance.

It means that you hate God – you do not want to obey the gospel of Jesus!

But so then, in verse 9 – we see the punishment for those who afflict you –  
those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus:

*<sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,*

(And remember this is still the same sentence that started back in verse 3!)

The punishment is “eternal destruction.”

Paul often speaks of “eternal life” as God’s free gift to those who believe in Jesus.

He now uses a parallel construction to talk about the judgment – the punishment –  
that will come to those who remain in rebellion against God.

Their rebellion is against God.

They do not know him – they do not obey his gospel.

And so their punishment fits the crime.

They do not want to be near to God.

They want to be far away from him!

And so he gives them exactly what they want – exactly what they deserve.

*They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*

After all, think of what Jesus said in John 17:3 –

what is eternal life?

“This is eternal life,

that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

If eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ whom he sent,

then eternal destruction is *not* knowing God –  
eternal destruction is isolation from God –  
being *away* from the presence of the Lord.

Think about that word:

*Eternal destruction.*

The phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible in the same way it is used here.  
Some people have tried to make it mean “annihilation” –  
as though the wicked will simply cease to exist –  
but that it is not what the phrase means in Greek.  
Eternal destruction is the opposite of eternal life.  
It refers to perpetual ruin (Witherington, 196).

Even in English, you can see what I mean.

If a wrecking ball slams into a house, we say that the house has been “destroyed.”  
But that doesn’t mean that the house ceased to exist.  
All the wood, bricks, and glass are still there –  
lying in twisted ruins on the ground.

In the same way, eternal destruction refers to the eternal disintegration of the person.  
It’s not that the damned cease to exist –  
it’s that they are eternally falling apart.

We were created to be *whole* – to be well-integrated  
living in harmony with God, with others, with ourself, and with all creation.

But because of sin, we experience alienation – disintegration –  
we experience brokenness in our relationship with God –  
in our relationships with others, with all of creation –  
and even with our self.

All of us have experienced this – at least in some small way.  
Where your self becomes alienated from yourself.

It happens bodily in auto-immune diseases – where your body is literally fighting itself.  
It happens in cancer – where your cells are running amok.

But it also happens spiritually and emotionally.  
Have you ever had the feeling that you were doing something  
contrary to your own will?  
“I don’t want to be doing this”  
“Why am I doing this?”  
“I feel like I’m not in control of myself!”

All these miseries of body and soul are a taste of *hell*.

God gives them to us as a warning – as a reminder of what is coming  
unless we bow the knee before Jesus, who entered our miserable world,  
endured the miseries of this life, death itself, and the pains of hell –  
so that we might live forever.

But for the Christian all these sufferings and afflictions take on a new character.  
The disintegration of the self is a reminder of what we *were* –  
apart from Christ.  
You see this perhaps most painfully in the process of dying.  
Some people linger for a long time –  
some people – toward the end of their lives –  
are *very fragmented* – with very little that is left holding them together.  
But for those who are in Christ,  
their body and their soul *both* still belong to Jesus!  
In life – and in death.

*He* is our integrity.  
*He* is our wholeness.

Even when we are falling apart – body and soul –  
Jesus holds us together.  
Even when our body and soul are rent apart by death –  
Jesus holds us together!

There is no eternal life apart from him!

Again, as Jesus said in John 17:3  
“This is eternal life,  
that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Or as John put it in 1 John 5:11 –  
“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”

Because that is our hope – as Paul says here in verse 10:

**a’. Your Hope – the Coming Day When the Lord Will Be Glorified in His Saints**  
<sup>10</sup> *when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who  
have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Jesus is coming on that day – the Day of the LORD –  
the Day when he will make all things right.

We say in the Creed that Jesus “shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead.”  
Because he is coming with glory –  
*both* the glory when he “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” –  
*and* the glory that will be revealed *in his saints*.

This is where Paul zeroes in at the end of his sentence.

He “comes on that day to be glorified in his saints,  
and to be marveled at among all who have believed –  
because our testimony to you was believed.”

In other words, one of the central demonstrations of the truth of the Christian religion  
is precisely the fact that the apostles’ testimony was believed.

The Christian religion has this remarkable coherence with the world *as it is*.

When you live the way that Jesus taught us,  
you find yourself in harmony with the universe.  
And when you live contrary to the way that Jesus taught us,  
everything falls apart.

Of course, it is worth noting that Jesus taught that everything is falling apart anyway!

So whether you follow Jesus or not,  
everything is going to fall apart!  
But if you follow Jesus, he will put it all back together again.  
Only partially in this life.

But beautifully, gloriously, and wonderfully on *that day* –  
when he comes to be glorified in his saints –  
in those who have believed the testimony of Paul.

Remember – this is eternal life,  
that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.  
Knowing God –  
knowing Jesus –  
this is eternal life.

And let me add here that there is still time!

If you realize that you do not know God –  
all you have to do is repent and believe the gospel!  
(That’s what it means to *obey* the gospel –  
because the gospel calls you to repent of your sins –  
and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners!)

And then Jesus calls you to live a life of repentance and faith –  
continuing to obey the gospel day by day,  
growing in faith, hope, and love.

That’s why Paul prays for you the way he does in verses 11-12:

## **2. May God Make You Worthy of His Calling (v11-12)**

<sup>11</sup> *To this end*

(To what end? To the end that Christ might be glorified in you!)

*To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,<sup>12</sup> so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

In verse 5 Paul had said that your suffering – your affliction –  
was part of the evidence of the righteous judgment of God –  
that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.  
Now Paul prays that God may make you worthy of his calling.

We do not make ourselves worthy!  
Rather, God makes us worthy –  
fulfilling every resolve for good  
fulfilling every work of faith –  
by *his power* –  
the power of his Spirit!

God works in and through the little things –  
that little resolve for good –  
‘I think I want to work on being gentler with others...’  
every work of faith –  
“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!”

*so that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him,  
according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

That’s where all this is going.  
He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the Day of Christ!

Come quickly, Lord Jesus!