

2 Thessalonians – Lesson 14

The Judgment at Christ's Return

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

1. Review 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4. Why does Paul *boast* about the Thessalonian believers?

Paul boasts that the Thessalonians are a great *example* of steadfastness in faith, even in the face of opposition and persecution. He uses them *before* other churches as an example of how the believer is to stand firm, trusting in Christ regardless of the difficult circumstances they might face in life.

2. (a) What “*evidence*” (or “*manifest token*” KJV) is Paul referring to in 1:5 (see v. 4)? How does this make one “*worthy*” of the kingdom of God?

The *evidence* that Paul refers to here is the fact that the Thessalonians remain steadfast; it is an evidence that a believer is “*worthy*” of the kingdom of God. Paul’s soteriology assumes that those who come to faith will *persevere* in that faith to the end of their lives; they will continue to trust in Christ by faith and walk in the faith without falling away in apostasy. The *evidence* of a person truly being a Christian, someone who has been born-again by the Spirit unto eternal life, is the one who remains steadfast in faith *even when that faith is being attacked*, both inwardly (through doubt and sin), and *outwardly* (through opposition).

- (b) Why is *suffering* an essential element of the Christian life, *in anticipation* of eternal life?

It is part of the decree of God that the elect should suffer in this life, just as Christ himself did. To suffer in affliction (i.e., in difficult circumstances) is a part of what God has purposed for his own *because it is a part of his plan to increase their trust in him and mold them into the image of his Son*. God does *not* purpose for the Christian to have an “easy” life; that is a lie spun from the depths of hell designed to “distract” the Christian and (the devil hopes!) lure him away from Christ to the things of the world, ultimately destroying faith and his entry into the kingdom of God. No, God purposes for his own to suffer in this life in order that they may be “fitted” for eternal life; to become “*worthy*” of eternal life, one must pass through the “fire” of affliction for the remaining vestiges of sin and unholiness to be burned away.

3. (a) According to 1:6, *why* will God “*repay with affliction*” those who persecute followers of Christ?

God will repay with affliction those who persecute Christians because it is “*just*” for him to do so. Although it is God’s purpose for Christians to be afflicted in this world (see 2b above), that should not be construed that the afflicter will be granted an “exemption” in doing so. No, the afflicter of the Christian will suffer his right punishment *for he chose to do so according to his own desires*. God will balance the scales of justice: giving respite to the afflicted, and giving to the afflicter what he rightly deserves in his sin and rebellion.

- (b) List some ways that God may “*afflict*” the persecutors of Christians, in this life and beyond.

God may inflict affliction upon those who persecute Christians in any number of ways: 1) they may suffer physically themselves; 2) they may endure guilt and shame for doing so; and 3) they may be given even *more* grace that their actions against God’s elect become an even greater guilt over them at the judgment. In other words, God may afflict persecutors in this life, or he may choose to leave the “balancing” until the end (see 4a below).

(c) What *else* will God do in response to persecution coming against his people (see 1:7)?

God will also **“grant relief”** to his people. Ultimately this relief will come when Christ returns to balance the scales of justice (see 4a below), but there are clear signs *in this life* that God relieves his people in their distress. Christians, for example, have one another, the church, to find solace in the midst of pain; the coming together for prayer and support is a grace of God granted to his own, in community, to uphold and relieve one another. Christians also have the innumerable promises of God in the Scriptures; these promises stand as stark relief for the believer, to be able to **“look beyond”** our momentary afflictions and see the victorious work of Christ on our behalf, and truly know hope and peace.

4. (a) From 1:6-8, *when* will this affliction come upon the persecutors? What *two* (2) types of individual will be swept up in this judgment (see 1:8)?

The affliction of the persecutor of the church will fall when the Lord Jesus comes. Not only will the persecutor stand before the judgment seat of Christ, to have all grace removed from him, but the believer will *also* stand there, to have all of the grace of God **lavished upon him**. The judgment seat is *both* the place where God will right the balance of injustice *and* the place where he will bring the positive rewards of mercy and love to those who are the objects of his affections. Obviously, for those who continue to persecute the church and remain unrepentant, the *ultimate* affliction of perdition will come upon them, when Christ will cast them from his gracious presence into hell, where they will experience an eternity of rebellion against God and his law and the wrath of God that comes because of it.

(b) What is the **“punishment of eternal destruction”** Paul speaks of 1:9? Describe how it will be *carried out*, according to Revelation 20:11-15.

The punishment of eternal destruction is simply a *metaphor* for hell, the eternal **“lake of fire”** reserved for the devil and his angels, wherein the reprobate will also be cast. In this place, all of the grace of God will be removed, and the reprobate man will be **unrestrained** in his rebellion against God. For all eternity, such a man will continue to despise the law of God and be filled with the desire to rule, over himself, others, and even God. Such **unfulfilled** desire will **“burn”** within him, and he will find none of the **“creature comforts”** that were present in this life, provided to him by the common grace of God. Instead, he will suffer unimaginably without any hope, companionship, love, or anything else that would soothe his hatred of God. Upon this will come the **active** wrath of God, whereas God will send **real afflictions** that will add to the suffering. And, this will continue until the heart of the man turns in repentance to embrace the law of God and love him, something that can and will **never** happen.

(c) How can the reprobate be cast **“away from the presence”** of an *omnipresent* God (1:9)? What does this phrase mean in light of them also being cast away **“from the glory of his might?”**

The **“presence”** of God, in this sense, is **more** than his *physical* presence; it is the presence of all that makes him God *in the most positive of senses*. To be **“away”** from the presence of God is to be away from all of the **goodness** and **grace** of God. There is no *physical place* that a man can be **“apart”** from God, so Paul is not referencing his *physical* presence, but his **glorious** presence. The man in hell is fully **“surrounded”** by God, since God is everywhere. But, that same man has no experience with the **love** of God, his mercy, his kindness, his compassion, his grace. Instead, he will experience, forevermore, the **wrath** of God, his justice, and his lack of compassion and mercy. In other words, the **“glory”** of God will be withheld from the condemned, and they will exist only in the **“darkness”** of the wrath of God forevermore.

(d) What is the outcome of this judgment for **“his saints”** (see 1:10)?

For the elect, the **opposite** is true: they will be **“glorified”** in every way. The glory of God, all of his beauty, love, compassion, mercy, etc. will be lavished upon them such their physical nature is made perfect and their spiritual nature (already justified by faith in Christ) is joined to this perfection to enjoy all of the positive elements of God’s love forevermore. Their never-ending love for him will be rewarded with all of his grace and glory, unto eternal bliss.

5. (a) To what “*end*” does Paul pray for the believers in Thessalonica (see 1:11)? What does it mean to be “*worthy of his calling?*”

Paul’s prayer is simple: that God would “*make them worthy*” of his calling upon them (i.e., his decree to save them and to *actually do so* in time and space). That God would “*fulfill every resolve for good*” in them; that the faith he has imparted to them would seep into every aspect of their lives and that they would shine forth as a great example of God’s purpose in them before the whole world. In other words, Paul simply prays that God’s *intention* in saving them would be completed; that the Thessalonians, along with all believers, would come to manifest the purpose of salvation in every aspect of their existence and become the *objects of his glory*.

- (b) What is the *ultimate* goal of the Christian, as he struggles through this life of trouble (1:12)? What is Paul saying to the believer about the *role* of persecution and how does this *encourage* us?

Ultimately, the Christian is to become a “*reflection*” of the very name of Jesus Christ before the world; that the Christian, in living out his life of faith, enduring opposition and persecution, would demonstrate an utter fidelity to Christ that (ultimately) makes Christ glorious in all creation. The glorification of the believer is *not* to his own end, but to the end of lifting up the name of Jesus Christ over all the earth. The church is to be filled with individuals loving Christ so much that, in the end, *he* becomes the object of worship for every creature. Ironically, it is *persecution itself* that creates this result. As the Christian suffers under the weight of persecution he is transformed into the very image of Christ himself, and that image becomes the “*pointer*” away to Christ, to magnify the One who himself suffered all things to be the *object* of God’s glory in creation.