

It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus Christ! ... Yet... sometimes in our efforts of presenting the Gospel... we give the opposite impression... *“Just give your life to Jesus and everything from then on... will be smooth sailing... Pray this little prayer and that’s all you need to do...”*

Please consider what Billy Graham once wrote in his book, *Approaching Hoofbeats*:

For Paul the Christian life was one of suffering. The same could be said of a multitude of Christ's followers, many of whom were killed for their faith. So when Christ said time after time that one must "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" He was indicating that it is not easy to be His true follower. The apostle Paul warned, *“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2nd Timothy 3:12). He offers no cheap grace, no easy life. As someone has said, "Salvation is free but not cheap:"

Many believers through the centuries have demonstrated an understanding of this... by their lives. Charles T. Studd was a famous sportsman in England, captain of the Cambridge XI cricket team. A century ago he gave away his vast wealth to needy causes and led the "Cambridge Seven" to China. His slogan was, *"If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."*

In the 1950's, Jim Elliot went from Wheaton College to become a missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador. After his plane landed they were surrounded by this fierce tribe, and murdered before they could say a word. Later Jim Elliot's widow, Elizabeth, found this in his journal. He wrote, *"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose:"*

Christian faith brings its own "blood sweat and tears" to those who would follow Jesus Christ. Christ calls us to discipleship. ... Christ calls us to follow Him ... regardless of the cost... and He has never promised that our path will always be smooth. ... So... why would anyone want to follow Him...? How is it that Christ has any disciples...?

I chose to follow Christ... not because He takes away all my pain and hardship... but because He gives me strength to cope with that pain and wisdom in the long range to realize victory after victory. He is with me as I go through it.

There is another reason why I chose to follow Christ... even through hardship that it might bring. And that is the subject of our passage this morning. ... Christianity is a life of delayed gratification and reward. ... Corrie ten Boom, who survived a German death camp during WWII, but had to watch her sister die in it, said, "*The worst can happen but the best remains!*"

In our studies of 2nd Thessalonians we come today to the topic of suffering, which we will examine in light of the second coming of Jesus Christ. ... As we live for Christ... we will experience troubles... because we are trying to be God's people in a perverse world.

This morning we will look at verses 5 through 12 of chapter 1. This passage has two sections. In the first section... we will see how God will afflict our persecutors... and in the second we will see how God will bless His followers who have been afflicted. ...

My prayer is that whenever any of us suffer a wrong... a hardship... an unjust treatment because of our Christian walk... that we will leave room for the right and true vengeance of God... That we will not feel the need to extract our own revenge by retaliation. ... God will act with complete justice when he punishes our enemies. We see in today's passage a clear statement... that God will see to it... that those who inflicted persecution and suffering... will themselves receive much worse.

### **2 Thessalonians 1:5-9**

First... Paul establishes that God is at work in you. Please look again at verse 5... Paul writes: *“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God...”*

Their patience and faith... proved beyond a reasonable doubt... that their conversion was authentic. ... Paul draws a conclusion here... based on his factual observations... that he wrote about in 1:3-4. ... The growing faith and love of the Thessalonians... which had anchored them immovably in the very midst of storms of persecution...is **manifest evidence**... not circumstantial... or even subject to doubt... that the **righteous judgment of God** would ultimately prevail on their behalf... just as God had elected them.

Sometimes when we go through hardship... we want to know why God is punishing us. *Have I done something wrong, Lord? Why are You doing this to me...?* But what we find here... is that Paul interprets the fact that the Thessalonians are not only persevering and trusting in the midst of

persecution... but actually growing and increasing... as a sign of God's blessing... not judgment.

God was working out His great plan for them... and in them. ... We are prone to think that suffering proves that God does not care... when just the opposite is true. ... Furthermore... the way we act in times of trial proves to others that God is at work.

Endurance in trials does not make one worthy of heaven - one does not earn heaven by suffering. ... But endurance in trials does *demonstrate* our worthiness. ... How...? ... Well... what is our worthiness...? What are we counting on... to live with Christ in eternity...?

A Christian is made worthy by God's grace... which he receives as a free gift by faith in Jesus Christ. ... (LISTEN...) Whenever trials come upon a believer... what gets exposed... is simply whatever is there already. ... God has already placed inside of us His grace... which makes it possible for us to withstand the fires of even the worst kind of persecution... .. persecution that would otherwise destroy non-Christians. The way we respond to our persecution... demonstrates our worthiness... which is the presence of God's grace in our life.

When we respond with patience and faith... it proves beyond a reasonable doubt that our conversion is authentic.

The Thessalonian believers received a supernatural strength—God's strength—when they were persecuted. Their strength was so forceful that it was clear that it was being given by God. The believers...

- were not becoming hysterical.
- were not retaliating... or breathing out threats... back
- they were not wringing their hands... or feeling hopeless

Instead... they showed their worthiness – which was not their own goodness... it was the clear presence of God's grace in their lives.

Trials bring us closer to God. They lead us to discover the grace God places in us... and to depend on it... not ourselves.

When Paul suffered severe trials... he saw it as a lesson to see himself as inadequate for his own handling of it. ... This is what he confessed in his letter to the Corinthians, " . . .

**2 Corinthians 1:8-9 (ESV)**

*For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*

Paul knew that the righteous Judge was at work in his life through a trial so severe... that despite his intellect... his background, etc. ... he was helpless to face it alone. Through it Paul learned the great lesson in life: that we should "no longer trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

On the surface it may have appeared to the Thessalonians that God was not a righteous Judge... that He was not at work on their behalf. Yet the very fact that they were enduring and bearing up courageously under persecution and affliction... was clear evidence that God was at work in

them. Their attitude as they endured suffering was proof that God was their strength... their courage... wisdom... and fortitude.

Thus the Thessalonians were suffering persecution and affliction... SO that they might be declared worthy of the Kingdom of God. ... They endured not by their own efforts or strength... but by the power of Christ working within them. ... Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *"When God calls a man, he calls him to die: this attitude toward the Christian life can only come by the power of Christ working from within."*

Paul then turns his attention to the factions in Thessalonica who were causing pain and suffering to the Christians in that city. He declares to them what God's righteous Judgement on them will be. ... If you want evidence for the law of "What goes around comes around"... here it is. The persecutors of this world will suffer tremendously... while the Christian sufferers of this world... will have rest.

## **2 Thessalonians 1:6**

This is a note of encouragement for the Thessalonian saints and for all believers in Jesus Christ. While at times it seems that evil is ruling at will, the day is coming when evil will be punished by God and the righteous in Christ will be exonerated.

Whatever God does is absolutely right. He can do no wrong. Sometimes we complain about the things that happen to us because we are ignorant; we do not understand God's ways. When He judges, it will be correct.

One expects righteousness when God is sitting on the throne. No crooked lawyer will be able to make any deals with God to favor judgment for a client. God judges according to righteousness.

One day Jesus Christ will turn the tables and the wicked will suffer while the believers are rewarded. Our Lord never promised us that life here would be easy; in fact, He taught that we would have to face difficulties and fight battles. But He also promised a future reward for all who were faithful to Him.

The coming of Christ back to earth will execute judgment upon the persecutors. And this knowledge should cause comfort ("*rest*") for the troubled saints.

## **2 Thessalonians 1:7**

His return in judgment shall be a spectacular appearance from heaven. The word "revealed" (apokalupsei) means to be unveiled and uncovered. The day is coming when Jesus Christ shall rip open the heavens and return to earth in judgment. As Matthew Henry says, "*He will come in all the pomp and power of the upper world*"

Christ came to earth the first time as a helpless babe in lowly circumstances. The second time Christ will come back in great power and glory. ...The "*mighty angels*" that he will come with... will make certain that the persecuted saints will find relief from their troubles. Might and power will be on Christ's side when He returns to earth.

I love what Warren Wiersbe has written on this:

Certainly, the wicked who persecute the godly do not always receive their just payment in this life. In fact, the apparent prosperity of the wicked and difficulty of the godly have posed a problem for many of God's people. .. Why live a godly life... if your only experience is that of suffering?

But Listen... .. As Christians... we must live for eternity... and not just for the present. ... In fact... living "with eternity's values in view" ... is what makes our Christian life meaningful today. ... We walk by faith, and not by sight.

This brings to mind the story of the two farmers... one a believer and the other an atheist. ... When harvest season came... the atheist taunted his believing neighbor... because apparently God had not blessed him too much. ... The atheist's family had not been sick... his fields were rich with harvest... and he was sure to make a lot of money.

*"I thought you said it paid to believe in God and be a Christian,"* said the atheist.

*"It does pay,"* replied the Christian. *"But God doesn't always pay His people in September."*

Our rest is not based on what we immediately experience. The "rest" mentioned by Paul has two long-range dimensions. We can rest in knowing that our sufferings are strengthening us... making us ready for Christ's Kingdom. We can also rest in the fact that one day everyone will stand before God. At that time... wrongs will be righted... judgment will be pronounced... and evil will be terminated.

Apart from the work of God's grace in my life... I am prone to want immediate... quick... judgment. But... often... the payback does not occur in this life. ... But payback will happen for sure when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. The flaming fire is a picture of God's holy presence. ... Our current observable life is not all there is to reality! ... A time is coming when "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil"

The judgment of God is not a popular topic today. The dogma of our society is *tolerance*. ... God... if He exists at all... it is thought... must be a God of love... accepting any and every lifestyle. ... He cannot be a God of judgment... only mercy. ... Justice cannot be pursued... because that just would not be fair. ... The postmodern outlook argues that all beliefs are valid and no one should judge another because of his or her philosophical ideas. ... In essence... there is no right or wrong... so everyone's thoughts should be accepted. ... These are the assumptions that our culture tries to foist on God. ... But Scripture declares these to be wrongful assumptions.

Once we understand the character of God's vengeance... we will be more likely to leave it in God's hands... and not try to extract our own. ... Look at the dramatic words Paul used to describe it: tribulation, vengeance, flaming fire, punishment, and everlasting destruction.

## **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9**

That will be the day when Jesus will again appear on the earth for the specific purpose of bringing judgment upon the nations... as well as establishing His righteous rule on earth.

The prophets looked forward to that day. ... Amos saw it as the day when God would avenge His people... and judge Israel's sin. ... But he also saw that day as a time of hope... when God would usher in a new age with His Messiah Jesus.

Isaiah also saw the "day of the Lord" as the day of judgment... as well as restoration for the remnant of Israel. ... Malachi stressed the unbearable judgment and purging... as well as the healing and joy that day would bring.

The New Testament also makes frequent mention of that day. John identified Jesus as the Judge promised by God in Daniel 7. ... Jesus Himself spoke of- the "day of the Lord" in Matthew:

**Matthew 13:41-42 (ESV)**

*The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

The "day of the Lord" is not actually limited to a day... but rather is a period of the first event... of which will be Jesus' return to earth... to gather His people. ... On that day He will come 'like a thief in the night" (Matt. 24). Then, at the end of the tribulation period... He will return... and be visible to all.... The whole earth will see Him coming with His saints and angels in flaming fire to judge the living and the dead and set up His divine rule on earth.

Revelation 19 gives a graphic description of this event.

## Rev. 19:1-16

Coming back to our text in 2 Thessalonians now... Paul says that retribution will be paid to one group with two problems "those who do not know God" (that is, those who do not know God personally... those who have heard of him but do not want to know him); and... secondly... "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (that is, those who have heard the good news but have refused to repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord). ... They oppose obedience to anything God commands.

Judgment will be on all those who disobey God — because that disobedience is an expression of audacious disrespect for God. Disobedience of God insults God. It insults God because it defies God's authority... His wisdom... and His will.

The word *vengeance* must not be confused with *revenge*. The purpose of vengeance is to satisfy God's holy law. ... The purpose of revenge is to extract punishment from a personal grudge. ... God does not hold a grudge against lost sinners. Quite the contrary... He sent His Son to die for them... and He pleads with them to return to Him. ... But if those who reject Christ prefer not to "know God," and ... not to "obey the Gospel" ... there is nothing left for God to do but judge them.

The penalty they will receive... is eternal ruin... not annihilation... they will not cease to exist... but they will experience complete ruin... a resurrection to disgrace... and eternal contempt. ... They will find themselves... in Paul's words... "away from the presence of the Lord" (separated from life as life was intended to be lived)... and "away from the

glory of his power" (separated from the source of power which enables men to enjoy life). Everything that makes it possible to benefit... and take pleasure in being alive... will be removed. ... It is devastating to their possessions... their peace... and their prospects. ... It is utter ruin of all their hopes and happiness.

What is the apostle describing here'? He is speaking of hell the place of eternal torment and misery. That is the final destination of "those who do not know God and those who after not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.'

It is a *righteous* thing for God to judge sin and condemn sinners. A holy God cannot leave sin unjudged. People who say, "*I cannot believe that a loving God would judge sinners and send people to hell*" understand neither the holiness of God nor the awfulness of sin.

Paul has been speaking of the punishment of the wicked at the coming of Christ to earth. The saints were being so persecuted that they needed this prospect of the punishment of evil. However, he now emphasizes the glory of the return of Christ. Those who have been afflicted... will be rewarded... at Christ's return

## **2 Thessalonians 1:10**

The punishment of the wicked at the coming of Christ... is not the only action involved in His coming... in fact it is almost incidental. ... The main purpose in the coming of Christ to earth... is a revealing of His glory to mankind. ... Much of this will be done by the saints. ... Salvation is for more reasons than just to deliver us from hell fire. ... Its main reason is to bring honor to Jesus Christ.

Christ will be “glorified **in**” (not *by*) His saints... that is... His glory will be mirrored in them. ... Christians on that day will reflect something of the greatness and character of Jesus. ... Christians will marvel in that they will admire their Lord for what He has done in them. ... They will completely reflect all of His beauty... love... mercy... and tenderness.

All believers will marvel — not just those living on the earth when Christ returns... but also those who return to earth with Him... those who had previously been caught up to be with the Lord at the Rapture.

His glory being seen by everyone in us... happens at Christ’s second coming. ... “The Day of the Lord” includes an event that we call “the rapture” and it also includes the event that we call “the second coming of Christ.” Paul’s FIRST letter to the Thessalonians spoke of the rapture. What we are reading... now in his second letter... deals with the return of Christ. We may contrast these two events:

**1 Thessalonians**

**4:13-18**

**2 Thessalonians 1:5-12**

Christ returns in the air

Christ returns to the earth

He comes secretly *for* the church

He comes openly *with* the church

Believers escape the Tribulation

Unbelievers experience Tribulation, judgment

Occurs at an undisclosed time

Occurs at the end of the Tribulation period, the Day of the Lord

Our passage ends with a prayer of the Apostle Paul for the Thessalonian believers. ... Now notice that he did not pray for their suffering to end... but rather that... through it... and because of it... they would accomplish God's spiritual purposes in their lives. That is not how we often pray for ourselves and for others... when we are going through a trial... is it...? We simply ask God to remove us from the problem. *"Make it stop, Lord!"*

**2 Thessalonians 1:11-12**

We must never neglect a present responsibility because of a future hope. On the contrary, the future hope must encourage us to be faithful today.

But please notice something that is vitally important from Paul's prayer. Paul prayed that they might have a resolute will... **empowered by God**... to do what He wanted them to do. In other words... obedience and service do not spring from human talent and efforts... but from **God's** power as we trust Him. It is... once again... God's grace working inside of us.

... ..

Before I close this morning... I want to say a few words about the harshness of these verses in 2 Thessalonians about the judgment of God upon unbelievers.

Believer... do not be embarrassed by... or shrink back from the sternness of Paul's message here. ... As I stated earlier... our postmodern culture... places "tolerance" in an elevated position... as the greatest good for society... contrary to what Scripture teaches. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians leaves no room for such soft thinking... which assumes there will not be a coming judgment. ... .. Regardless of modern culture's thoughts and feelings... at Christ's return... those who have rejected Him will be punished as rebels against the God of the Bible.

The harshness of what is made clear in Scripture will never disappear. AND ... it will be better understood... once it is recognized that there is no greater sin... than not being... or doing... what the Creator intended His creatures to be... and do. ... Is it fair for God to FORCE us to accept His free gift of salvation... and His work of grace inside of us...?

The cure for the ailment of rebellion and sin... is the cross of Christ. Those who reject the cure will suffer the consequences.

The fairness of God's entire plan for judgment... is supported by every drop of blood Jesus shed for the sin of the world.

He has made provision for you to escape this judgment. Have you placed your complete trust in Jesus' death as punishment for your sin and rebellion? Placing such faith in Jesus Christ brings forgiveness... into a right relationship with God... and an abiding grace to meet trials and tribulation with His supernatural patience.