

Thessalonians, Part 14: God Balances the Books

2 Thessalonians 2:1 ESV (Pg 575) Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: **2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **3** 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. **4** 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. **5** 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— **6** since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, **7** 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 **8** 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. **9** They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, **10** 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. **11** 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, **12** 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.

- I. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians was written shortly after the first one. We know because the 3 missionaries who planted the church at Thessalonica, mentioned in the opening lines of the first letter, Paul, Timothy and Silvanus (or Silas), are mentioned again in the opening of the 2nd letter, obviously still together at the time of writing. But we know that later Timothy became a pastor in Ephesus, and Silas isn't mentioned in Acts after Paul's 2nd missionary journey ends.
 - A. After the first letter was delivered, Paul got word that some things were still unclear to them; other things had been intentionally distorted by people with bad intentions. Furthermore, there were reports of bad behavior and thinking occurring in Thessalonica that Paul must address pastorally in a 2nd letter.
 1. The two letters were both written during Paul's 18 month stay in Corinth (355 miles away from Thessalonica) that we read about in Acts 18.
 2. The time between the two letters is probably not more than a few months. This may seem like a long time to be called a "quick response", but remember travel was mostly on foot, and treacherous in those days. There was no postal service as we understand it today.
 - B. "**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**". The gospel is summed up by the grace (unmerited favor) that has been bestowed on us, and the peace with God we have resulting from that grace.
 1. Next, Paul offers sincere thanksgiving for them "**We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right**".
 - a) He says that they "ought" to give thanks, and that it "is right". Thankfulness is the **legitimate** and **necessary** response in the face of the persecution they are facing, and in spite of their doctrinal confusion.

Neither hard times, imperfect wisdom or weak faith invalidates who they are in Christ, or the good things that the Holy Spirit is doing in their midst.

- b) **Romans 8:35a ESV** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall **tribulation**, or **distress**, or **persecution**...? **38b** I am sure...neither... things present nor things to come, **39b** will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
2. “your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing” Paul prayed for this to be the case in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, and it happened in their church just as he prayed!
 - a) Regardless of the persecution, the faith of their church is growing roots! The devotion and sacrifice of the believers for one another is swelling.
 - b) Paul is bragging on them in the other churches. “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.”
3. Their faith was not wobbling no matter what the devil threw at them. Paul isn’t boasting because God has delivered them from trouble, but because they haven’t flinched even when they are right smack dab in the middle of it!
 - a) Many of us believe that if the clouds will just clear, then we will open our mouths and praise him. But we promised to live for Jesus not because we’re given a guarantee of luxury, but because he is glorious and worthy,.
 - b) A believer’s joy isn’t tied to favorable circumstances, so Paul had told them “rejoice always”. They had a God who is very present in their time of need, so he said, “pray without ceasing”. That same God would sustain them until the day they were glorified, so Paul reminded them to “give thanks in all circumstances”. He said all this rejoicing, praying and giving thanks was the fulfillment of God’s perfect will for them¹.
- C. Paul explains the wisdom of God in the middle of all they are suffering: “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.”
 1. Standing firm shows God’s judgement is righteous. To better explain that reality, he will point them again to the coming of the Lord, and what it promises for both them and their wicked persecutors on that day.
 2. Their perseverance demonstrates that God is on their side, not letting their faith and hope evaporate, and sustaining them until the final bell. Enduring patiently doesn’t **make** them worthy, but it shows that they are the ones who **are** worthy of entrance into the kingdom because of their faithfulness, even if it looks like the “bad guys” are succeeding for a time.
 - a) Over and over in Revelation 2 & 3² great promises are made to “those who overcome”. These promise are to those who don’t give up!
 - b) The Thessalonians were proving themselves worthy by their endurance. How does this put or day to day struggles to believe, to forgive, and to grow in holiness in perspective? How easy is it for you to throw in the towel instead of being clothed in the strength of Christ to press on?
 3. Both the Thessalonians and you and I have been given the same Holy Spirit. We are made by God to be “more than conquerors”³ in spite of all our trials and afflictions, and by relying on God’s strength, that’s who we will be!

- a) I'm sure the church still wanted to know when and how it would all end. Will it get better, or is the Christian life only one of pain and heartache, subject to the cruel harassments of both the devil and the unrighteous?
 - b) Paul had already told them the fate of their tormentors. "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."⁴
- II. Now he elaborates by basing the coming punishment on God's justice.: **"indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you..."**
- A. A.W. Tozer said of God's justice in his classic "The Knowledge of the Holy" **"Everything in the universe is good to the degree it conforms to the nature of God and evil as it fails to do so. God is his own self-existent principle of moral equity, and when he sentences evil men or rewards the righteous, He simply acts like himself from within, uninfluenced by anything that is not himself."**⁵
 - 1. When God takes vengeance, it is always "just". When you and I take vengeance, it is from a sinful desire to vindicate ourselves. But vengeance for God is about restoring holy justice. It is never unholy, because he is perfectly holy; nor unrighteous, because he is perfectly righteous.
 - a) **Romans 12:19 ESV** 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."⁶
 - b) God judges all sin. You may say, "I've been forgiven! My sin hasn't been judged!" Don't you understand the cross? Wrath wasn't poured out on Christ for his own sin! It was your sins and mine that were being dealt with there in holy vengeance, so that we could ever hope to be forgiven!
 - B. All unrepentant tormentors of Christ's holy church have a fearful, inescapable future judgement awaiting them; one for which they will not be able to raise any just accusation against God. Their punishment will be fully deserved and undeniably just. But what will it look like? God will surely balance the books forever on the day he will **"grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us"**.
 - 1. All believers across all time who have stayed faithful when poorly treated, viciously persecuted, or mercilessly afflicted will be gloriously vindicated as God proves before the watching world who belonged to him and who didn't.
 - a) But we wait, remaining steadfast. God may actually save some of them. We are instructed to live and pray in such a way that this is possible.
 - b) **2 Timothy 2:24 ESV** And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, **25** correcting his opponents with gentleness. **God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26** and they may **come to their senses** and **escape from the snare of the devil**, after being **captured by him to do his will**.
 - 2. But make no mistake, because the justice of God will not be delayed forever! All of the time will eventually run off the clock, and it will be "game over".
 - C. But when will this be? **"when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 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. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might". All this will come to pass when Jesus returns. No more delays. All the payments for unrepented sin will come due.

1. He will appear with his angels in "flaming fire". For the sinner, this terrible sight will take their breath away. Two types of people will suffer on that day: those who don't know God, and those who refused to obey the gospel.
 - a) "Those who do not know God" are those who cling to false religion, or rejected any notion of a creator though there is ample evidence⁷. It also includes those who had the external appearance of connection to the Son, but to whom Christ will say, "Depart from me. I never knew you."⁸
 - b) "Those who do not obey the gospel" are those who hear the good news and reject it, or modify it, relying on good works for salvation. No longer good news of hope for them, it is now a sentence of doom. **Hebrews 2:3a ESV** how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?
2. The nature of their punishment is described here as a "punishment of eternal destruction". It is called a punishment, because all who suffer it will be responsible for their own damnation. God never punishes innocent people.⁹
- D. But the punishment is described as "eternal destruction". "Destruction" means utter ruination. There is no coming back from what awaits them. There will be no burgeoning post-apocalyptic society like we see in the movies. "Eternal" means that no one will be simply annihilated, but instead will suffer ruin unendingly.
 1. The promise is that this eternal destruction will take place removed from the presence of God, and with no benefit from his saving power.
 2. What a torment to be fully aware of the existence of God while in hell, but yet have no hope of accessing his mercy, grace, or power! Like those who drowned in the flood of Noah's time, repentance will no longer be an option.
- III. But for those who obeyed the gospel, it is a different story. What will this day be like for them? "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".
 - A. "To be glorified in his saints" doesn't just mean that the saints will praise him (which they certainly will!), but that all that he died for will be finally seen in them, as they stand before him entirely free from sin or the possibility of further pollution, in glorified, resurrected bodies, trophies of his great grace forever!
 1. The saints will marvel at him, finding him more beautiful and loving than they ever dared to imagine. They will examine the nail prints in his hands and feet, and reel from the full realization of what he has done for them on the cross. He won't be some emaciated figure from a crucifix. Christ will be fully glorified, like John saw him in Revelation!
 2. **Revelation 1:13 ESV** and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. **14** The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, **15** his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. **16** In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

- B. Paul says they will see him because “our testimony to you was believed”. Be encouraged brothers and sisters! Your trust in the gospel hasn’t been for nothing, no matter what your temporal circumstances appear to be! God will balance the books! The righteous in Christ will be rewarded; and the wicked aren’t getting away with anything, not Hitler, Bin Laden or Jeffrey Epstein.
- IV. “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, 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.” Paul concludes with a prayer that God will make them worthy of their calling. He has already said that their endurance was evidence that they were worthy of the Kingdom. Now he prays that God’s refining work in them, through their trials, wouldn’t be for nothing.
- A. Everything we experience as believers, the good, the bad and the ugly, is refined by God into something more precious than gold. Though we may only feel pressure and heat in this life, someday what he has built will be revealed.
- B. But Paul also prays for them in this life, that every good work of faith they are pouring into will be fulfilled. The specific reason is that Jesus may be glorified in them, and they in him, and all of this by the grace of the Lord Jesus.
1. The take-home message for today is that “things are not always as they seem”. Even when wickedness seems to triumph, and righteousness falters, God is keeping perfect records and promises to vindicate his people.
 2. But also, we aren’t to expect only pain and heartache until the day of our final vindication. Even now the Holy Spirit is at work to cause our faith in Jesus to become more grounded, and to cause us to grow in love for each other. He is daily making us worthy of his calling, and fulfilling “every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power”. And to what end?
- C. “...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.”

1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

² Revelation 2:1-3:22 - the right to eat from the tree of life; to receive the crown of life, and to be unhurt by the 2nd death; to eat hidden manna, and be given a white stone with a new name; to be given the morning star and to have authority over the nations; to be robed in white garments, their names never blotted out of the book of life, and confessed before God and the angels; to be made a pillar in the house of God, and given the New Jerusalem, and Christ; to dine with Christ and to be granted to sit with him on his throne

³ Romans 8:37

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3

⁵ Quoted from "The Knowledge of the Holy" by A.W. Tozer (pp. 87-88) in *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*; by Mark Howell; Pg. 208 © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

⁶ See also Deuteronomy 32:35 and Hebrews 10:30

⁷ See Romans 1:18-25

⁸ Matthew 7:21-23

⁹ See Genesis 18:25