

September 12, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

The Righteous Judgment of God

2 Thessalonians 1:1 – 12

This second letter to the Thessalonians seems to have been written very shortly after the first letter we just spent the better part of this year going through, and apparently written while Paul was still in Corinth. We can suppose this because we see as in the first letter, both Timothy and Silas, or Silvanus, are still together with Paul, and Corinth is the only place where they were known to be together during this time. Another clue is in Acts 18 where we read about Paul's time in Corinth and he was brought before the Roman officials by jealous Jews. And in this second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul asks them to pray that he would be delivered from perverse and evil men (3:2), apparently the very ones we read about in Acts 18.

As we read this letter we understand that the persecution of the believers in Thessalonica had grown more intense and was causing despair and discouragement among many in the church. Some were evidently shaken and disturbed in their faith (2:2) perhaps on the verge of shipwreck, and in danger of falling prey to deceptive teaching. And so Paul begins this letter the same way he began so many others: *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2 Whether we face persecution and suffering, or we are relatively secure, our biggest need is grace and peace. **Grace is the power of God that enables us to do His will whether we are safe or suffering, and peace grants us the divine assurance that God is sovereign over every situation and circumstance.** What we need as believers is the grace and peace of God. Grace to grow in God and peace to rest in Him.

Paul's careful use of language needs to be noted as well. He tells the saints that this grace and peace are from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Grace and peace from God the Father speaks to the care and protection and provision and discipline in the believers lives, and grace and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ speaks to the power of God in the believer, and His authority and ownership.** God is our loving Father, watching over us and protecting us, and disciplining us and growing us as His very own children whom He loves. And He is our Lord Jesus Christ which implies that we are not our own, but under His authority and we are His possession. This is the real mark of a believer: they live under the realization that all they have comes from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow, and with the real conviction that Jesus Christ is really Lord in their lives. He is not just a good moral teacher, or some kind of Sunday morning experience. But His will is paramount in the life of His followers.

And whatever progress or growth that has taken place is owing to the power of God's grace to do in us what we could never do. That is why Paul says in verse 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.* 2 Thessalonians 1:3 The reason that it is right that God should get the thanks for the believer's growth in faith and love is because **it is God who has done the decisive work.** This is why it is not only tragic, but ultimately dangerous not to grow in the Christian life. If it is God who grants the grace to grow, and indeed commands that we do grow, then not to grow means **either God is not at work in us** and we are deceived into thinking that we are saved when in fact we aren't; **or it means that we are resisting the Holy Spirit's work** by persisting in some sin.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit has convicted us of some sin that we are unwilling to part with and we resist His urging and prompting time and time again, so that we may persist in our rebellion. Time and time He brings us to the point of conviction, and time and time again we resist. What we need to know as believers is that ultimately He will win – He will overcome our resistance and break those strongholds. However each time we are brought to that point and we resist, the price gets a little higher. We run the risk of seeing 1 Corinthians 3 come true in our lives, *'...if any man's work is burned up he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.'* 1 Corinthians 3:15 I don't know what that looks like in the end, but I do know I don't want to find out. I want faith that grows abundantly and love that increases. I want to pursue every means of grace for the growth of faith and the increase of love so that when Christ returns I will have reason to rejoice and not be ashamed.

The Thessalonian's growing in faith and increasing in love was reason for Paul not only to give thanks to God but also to boast about the Thessalonians to 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.* 2 Thessalonians 1:4 I always find it interesting and instructive to see what Paul considered important in the churches where he ministered. He never seemed to be concerned with any outward signs of growth, like bigger churches, bigger budgets, bigger congregations or things like that. **What was evidence of God's grace on the church for Paul were things like, steadfastness – or endurance, and faith, and love for one another.** What was important to Paul was that the Thessalonian's faith in Christ and love for each other, was not only growing but it exhibited a patient, sustaining and enduring steadfastness in the face of persecution and affliction.

And this example of growing faith and love was used by Paul to encourage the other churches. In fact he boasted or spoke proudly of their perseverance to the other churches in order to spur them on in their faith. They held tightly to their faith in spite of severe suffering and did not deny their Lord. Here Paul makes the point that their steadfastness and faith were especially noteworthy because they were exhibited in the midst of all kinds of persecution and afflictions. **Persecution** here is a word that means *to chase or pursue or hunt down* and **afflictions** talks about being *pressed into a narrow place*. And Paul says that they were continually enduring – that is the trials were unrelenting and continuous.

And then he makes a remarkable statement: *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--* 2 Thessalonians 1:5 The Thessalonians may have been thinking that the tribulation they were suffering did not make sense in light of the righteous judgment of God. That is, **'Does God let the righteous suffer without punishing those who cause the suffering'?** Some quality of the way the Thessalonians endured persecution was in itself, evidence, or a plain indication that God does indeed judge righteously, otherwise Paul wouldn't have brought it up. The evidence was not the persecution or suffering itself, but rather **the Thessalonians response to that suffering.** The fact that their faith was growing abundantly and their love for one another was on the increase, only served to confirm that God was at work in them, enabling them to behave in ways that were contrary to the natural man's response to hardship and suffering.

So how does the patient enduring of persecution and suffering work together with the righteous judgment of God? **First of all we need to understand that the persecution and suffering of the saints is part of God's righteous judgment.** God is sovereign over all things, and that all He does is holy and just, and even the terrible evil that men do, all the hostile and sinful acts of those who do not acknowledge God, are part of His holy and righteous judgment. Although God governs the sinful acts of rebellious men, He Himself never sins or does evil. The persecution of believers is sinful; but in the hands of God it becomes the evidence and proof of His righteous judgment.

I think we can see this in three ways: **the purpose of suffering – the punishment of the wicked – and the promise of vindication.** I want to look at these in reverse order so we'll start with the **promise of vindication.** Verse 7 says that God's righteous judgment will: *'... grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us...'* 2 Thessalonians 1:7 Persecution and suffering are temporary for the believer. One day it will end and those who have sneered at the crucified Christ will receive their just and holy judgment. And in all the places where it looked like defeat for the believer, victory choruses will ring out. Where we have shared our Lord's humiliation and shame at the hands of evil and hostile men, they will look at us in wonder and see how very wrong they have been.

And then Paul defends the righteousness of God in allowing the persecution by showing that all the evil that seems to be triumphing now will one day be brought to account – He will **punish the wicked:** *'...since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you...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.* 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8 When the Lord Jesus returns in glory, it will be in flaming fire for those who have rejected Him and have persecuted and afflicted His children. Accounts will be settled on that day; for some it will be sweet relief and for others it will be the awful reaping of God's vengeance. And so in God's design, His righteous judgement is shown in vindicating His people and punishing His enemies.

Finally, His judgment is righteous because the persecution and affliction that He ordains for His people has the purpose of fitting unholy people for the holy kingdom of God. This answers the unspoken question that Paul addresses: **'Is God unrighteousness in allowing His children to suffer?'** That is, is there a redemptive purpose in seemingly pointless suffering? Is God still righteous even when He allows his people to be hacked to death with machetes in Nigeria, or shot to death in Dagestan, or tortured in India, or raped in Pakistan for the sake of the gospel? Paul responds with an emphatic **'Yes'**. *'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--'* 2 Thessalonians 1:5 **Persecution and affliction in the life of the believer is not for the purpose of punishment but purification.**

To be considered worthy here is not that we are somehow made deserving of the kingdom through suffering, but rather that we have been declared worthy and those trials and tribulations are working for us an eternal weight of glory. The phrase – *for which you are also suffering* does not mean **'in order to gain the kingdom'**, but rather **in the name or interest** of the kingdom. That is, we do not endure suffering to gain merit before God, but we suffer because we have already been declared worthy. **We endure persecution and suffering because we are Christians.** *'Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'* 2 Timothy 3:12 That is a promise – not merely a possibility.

The Bible tells us that there is a holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14), and God works that holiness in us primarily through persecution and suffering. It is through persecution and suffering that the Lord disciplines us for heavenly living and burns away the dross of sin. Malachi 3 gives us a vivid picture of this process. *"But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness."* Malachi 3:2-3

There are two word pictures in this passage that we need to understand. The process to which the Lord commits His children is compared to **a refiners fire** and **fullers soap**. I would bet that very few of you in here have any idea to what **'fullers soap'** refers. To understand what it means we have to go back to one of God's favorite word pictures for His children: sheep. When you shear a sheep, you get fleece -- raw wool. And as you can imagine, it smells and feels like a sheep does – which, having considerable experience with that contrary animal, I happen to know is just plain foul. So to use the raw wool for anything, the **fuller** would take the filthy, dirty wool, crawling with lice, and wash it so that it gets really white and clean. He used boiling-hot water, and soap which was extremely caustic. Often the wool would be beaten with rocks to really get the nasty smell, dirt, muck, and sheep-do out of the fleece prior to spinning it into thread -- and then often it was done again to the thread when it was woven into fabric to make the cloth as tight and clean and presentable as possible. So when the Bible says that Christ will be like **"fuller's soap"**, it's not just saying, "Jesus will clean you up." It is describing a whole, hurtful process that takes dirty sheep and fits them for heaven.

And He is also like a refiner's fire. This reference to refining and smelting and purifying silver puzzled some women in a Bible study, and one of the women offered to find out about the process and get back to the group at their next Bible Study. That week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest beyond her curiosity about the process of refining Silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse that says: *'He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.'* She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, 'How do you know when the silver is fully refined?' He smiled at her and answered, 'Oh, that's easy -- **when I see my image in it.'** If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has his eye on you and will keep watching you until He sees His image in you.

So what should we take away from this today? I believe that the first thing we ought to gain from this passage is that it is **God who does the decisive work in a believers life** through grace and that our endurance and growth, particularly in tough times are evidence of His grace in our lives. Secondly, to have the peace of God means that we enjoy the divine assurance that **God is sovereign over every situation and circumstance**. Thirdly, I believe we need to realize that if we are not growing in faith and increasing in love for one another – something is wrong. We ought to be those who are pursuing every means of grace for the growth of faith and the increase of love so that when Christ returns we will have reason to rejoice and not be ashamed.

Finally, this passage should give us great hope and assurance that **there is divine purpose and plan in our persecution and suffering**. It is meant to make us worthy of the kingdom, to fit us for heaven. Nothing is random or purposeless in the divine will of God. In the words of one wise old saint, it is passages like this that were given so that **we can trust God's heart even when we cannot trace His hand**.

We can rest in the confident assurance that **no evil will ultimately triumph** – that those who disobey the gospel, those who work to harass, and persecute and kill the believers, will, in the consumation of all things, be righteously dealt with: *They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might*, 2 Thessalonians 1:9

And we can rejoice in the fact that **our suffering will be rewarded** in the end with the grand promise of verse 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*. 2 Thessalonians 1:10 No more tears. No more sorrow. No more suffering or pain. The people of God have been made worthy through trials – the refining over, the fullers job is done and the enemies of the cross have been swept away in righteous judgment, and Jesus Christ reigns in righteousness on His eternal throne.

Our good and gracious God and Father,

We thank You this morning for Your marvelous grace that is the power of God in us to do Your will whether we are safe or suffering; and the peace that grants us the divine assurance that it is Your hand that works all things for our good and Your glory. Grant dear Lord that our faith would grow and mature and that our love for one another would increase and overflow so that the watching world would see evidence of Your righteous judgment. Forbid it Lord that we should resist in any way the work of Your Holy Spirit in our lives, but rather let us pursue every means of grace for the growth of faith and the increase of love, so that when Christ returns we will have cause to rejoice and not be ashamed. Cause us to see that persecution and affliction only serve to fit us for heaven, and that You will punish the wicked and vindicate Your saints one day. May we be encouraged and empowered to delight in You more and more, spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people until that day we reign with You in glory, we pray in the precious, overcoming name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.