

September 19, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

The Righteous Judgment of God – 2

2 Thessalonians 1:1 – 12

Last week we saw Paul giving thanks to God for the growing faith and increasing love of the Thessalonian believers. And we heard him boasting to the other churches about their steadfastness and faith that were exhibited in the middle of all their persecutions and afflictions. And a part of what we understand from this is that the evidence of God's grace on the church is found in things like endurance and a growing faith and an increasing love for one another. It is not primarily outward signs of growth, like bigger churches, bigger budgets, bigger congregations - but rather in how we respond to the pressure of persecution and afflictions.

And this response Paul said was evidence of God's righteous judgment, which we see in **the purpose of suffering – the punishment of the wicked – and the promise of vindication**. Very simply, God's purpose in ordaining suffering for His people is to fit unholy men for His holy kingdom. Persecution and affliction in the life of the believer is not for the purpose of punishment but purification. *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

God's righteous judgment is seen too, in the punishment of the wicked, and 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: *'...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

And finally, God's righteous judgment is seen in the promise of vindication. God 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 the purpose of suffering, the punishment of the wicked and the promise of vindication has a specific time frame – there is a day when all this comes to light. Right now it may be difficult to see through the suffering to glory; it may look as though the wicked have the upper hand; it may seem that God's people enjoy no relief – no rest or relaxing of the pressure; but there is a day in which all of this will be over, and the people of God will have been made worthy through trials – the refining over, the fullers job done and the enemies of the cross have been swept away in righteous judgment, and Jesus Christ reigns in righteousness on His eternal throne.

Paul says in verse seven that that day will 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.* 2 Thessalonians 1:7b – 8 That will be one awesome day. I don't want to be found disobedient to the gospel on that day. He is coming with flaming angels the word says to *'...inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel.* When you read the word vengeance, don't be tempted to think that God is somehow operating out of a spirit of revenge, which is one meaning of the word. Instead it is better understood as God prosecuting His purpose with great force and violence. He is serving up justice to all parties – sweet relief to the saints and bitter recompense to the unbelieving.

Notice to whom this vengeance is delivered: those who do not know God, and those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Notice the two groups. **The first group does not know God** Paul says. Once again I want to emphasize what the Bible teaches about these people. It is not that they are somehow unaware that there is a God and He is bringing judgment one day on all people. The Bible says very clearly in Romans chapter 1: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* Romans 1:18 – 20

In other words, those who do not know God are those who have rejected Him outright. They live their lives as though there were no God – as though they were their own god. But that is a conscious and deliberate decision. They didn't just fall into that frame of mind. On the one hand, the road to hell is not very easy. These people first of all have to suppress the truth about God. That is they must take the truth to which every man is privy, the truth of God's eternal power and divine nature, and push it down, blot it out, erase it from their hard drive in order to deny God. And having done that, having lived their lives without God, they willingly embrace the alternative – an eternity without Him.

The second group are those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They may accept the fact that there is a God, but they reject any notion that holds them accountable to Him. The gospel is the good news that the God who loves us sent His only Son to save us from certain destruction, and it is only when we repent of our sin and embrace the humiliation and the power of the cross that we are saved. But to these people, the very idea that we are somehow fatally sinful and deserve condemnation and hell is repugnant, and so they do not want to obey the gospel that says turn from sin and turn to Christ. If you are among either group this morning, I want to urge you by the mercies of God to obey the gospel and turn from your sin that will carry you to hell and embrace the Savior who stands ready to save you.

Because there is a day coming in which God's righteous judgment will come about and you are either going to be faced with flaming angels and condemnation, or relief and vindication. If you continue to reject God, to not acknowledge Him or to disobey the gospel that calls you to repentance, Paul says that this is what you can expect: *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 Two words in this sentence have spawned a lot of debate, especially in recent years – **eternal destruction**. What does the Bible mean when it says that the wicked will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction?

Perhaps no other topic in the Bible is less taught on today than this one. And perhaps no other topic is as guaranteed to diminish the popularity of the preacher as the topic of eternal punishment. R.C. Sproul commented that ***'I can't think of anything more politically incorrect to preach in 21st century America than the wrath of God, or the justice of God or the doctrine of Hell'***. Most people today just want the good bits of the gospel and prefer not hearing about the certainty of the punishment of those who reject God and reject His Son. Some see it as a fear tactic and don't want to offend people they are trying to win to Christ. ***"I don't think fear, as a tactic, really moves people toward faith these days,"*** Willow Creek Pastor Bill Hybels said. ***"So, tactically, I think there are better ways to interest the uninterested in the claims of Jesus Christ."*** Hybels is considered to be the leader of the "seeker friendly" church movement. His Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago has drawn thousands over the years and has spawned hundreds of similar churches.

Spring Branch Community Church in Virginia Beach, Va., is one of them. The church's website declares that one of the reasons people don't like church is that ***"pastors make people feel ignorant and guilty."*** ***"I think pastors can sometimes do that very inadvertently by saying, 'You don't do this,' or 'you're doing this and this behavior is against everything that is in the Bible,'"*** Rev. Michael Simone said. Simone believes ***the people who come to his church want to know how to improve their lives, their marriages.*** He has even delivered a sermon called, "Sex and the City." He says preaching a sermon like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" wouldn't work today, when most Americans seemingly have it all. ***"Today, I think the title of that sermon would be, 'I Went on Vacation and Felt Empty Inside,'"*** he said.

So the apparently the gospel is the answer to simply ***'feeling empty'*** on the inside. If you want fulfillment, if you want to be all you can be, if life seems hopeless and meaningless, then Jesus is the answer. And in some sense that is all true. People without God are empty, they are hopeless, life is meaningless. ***But filling up the emptiness is not what the gospel is all about.*** That is merely a side benefit. ***The gospel tells us how to be saved from the wrath to come*** – it is not about how to have a better life, more money, bigger homes, or improve your marriage. I don't want an improved life or a better marriage if in the end I don't find out how to be saved from the wrath to come and I end up in hell.

But the shift away from preaching that clearly lays out the eternal issues facing people is summed up in this statement I found on the website of the Church of the Great God: ***For centuries, many ministers have been preaching "hellfire and brimstone" sermons and promoting a religion of fear by teaching that the unsaved face an eternity of torture. The common teaching is that incorrigibly wicked people will be tormented forever in some fiery, macabre manner in a terrifying place called hell...But does this make sense? Would a loving God devise a plan of salvation that consigned millions or perhaps billions of people to suffer indescribable torture forever?***

There it is – that is the issue. Would a loving God devise a plan that included indescribable eternal suffering for people? Clark Pinnock, an evangelical theologian and professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, wrote *'I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine...How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon His creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than God?'*

It may seem enlightened, humane, even civilized and compassionate to deny the existence of a place of eternal punishment. but it is in actuality, arrogant of us the creature to dare to take what we perceive to be the high moral ground in opposition to what God the Creator has clearly revealed. But if we understood who God is and who we are, we would be staggered – not that some people will go to a well-deserved hell, but shocked that any one of us would be granted access to God's holy heaven. **We are not the ones to say that infinite holiness does not demand eternal punishment.** If we deny the eternity of hell, we demean Christ's work on the cross because we lower the stakes of redemption. In the words of Randy Alcorn: *'If Christ's crucifixion and resurrection didn't deliver us from an eternal Hell, His work on the cross is less heroic, less potent, less consequential and thus less deserving of our worship and praise.'*

In the end however, we must deal with the text, and Paul says that *'...those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus...will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might...'* You can argue all you want about the concept – what remains however is the reality that the Bible says that there is a place of punishment of eternal destruction, and all the rejectors of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ will go there. I suppose if I had a choice and the Scriptures were not so clear, I would rather not believe in hell. It is too awful to contemplate, and that is why there is a huge movement away from any teaching on hell. But those who would rather teach on more pleasing topics tend to forget that in the Bible, **Jesus says more than Paul or anyone about the reality of hell.**

Dorothy Sayers, a Christian writer said: *'There seems to be a kind of conspiracy, to forget or to conceal where the doctrine of hell comes from. The doctrine of hell is not 'mediaeval priestcraft' for frightening people into giving money to the Church; it is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin...we cannot repudiate hell without altogether repudiating Christ.'* In the gospels Jesus refers to hell as a literal place that has raging fires and a place where the worm does not die. (Mark 9:43-49) He talks about a place that will see the destruction of both body and soul. (Matthew 10:28) He talks about those who are cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42,50; Matthew 22:13; Matthew 25:30, 46) He tells a story about a poor man and a rich man, one ends up in paradise, the other ends up in hell – both are conscious, one enjoying rest, the other suffering agony – the one in hell still has desires, memories, reasoning and cannot be comforted, cannot escape the torment and exists in hopeless abandonment. (Luke 16:19-31) That is a picture of eternal destruction if ever there was one.

Read the Bible – hell is very hot and lasts a very long time – forever actually. I am not trying to scare anyone – I don't trust conversions due to fright anyway. I am simply trying to paint the picture the Bible is displaying. Hell is not a party place. It is not a place where the unbelievers will gather and chat over a beer or two. It is not some giant bar where people are going to party on. It is rather the most awful torment imaginable. It is a place of conscious punishment for sin, and the reality of hell ought to break our hearts and take us to our knees with tears for those without Christ. When we talk about living in the light of Christ's return, this is the other side of that.

On July 4, 1854, Charlie Peace, a well-known criminal in London was marched to the gallows as a priest came behind him reading these words from the Book of Prayer: *'Those who die without Christ experience hell which is the pain of forever dying without the release which death itself can bring.'* When he heard those words, Charlie Peace stopped in his tracks, turned to the priest and shouted in his face, *"Do you believe that?"* The priest, stunned, paused and then stammered, *"Well...I...suppose,...I suppose I do."* *"Well I don't,"* Charlie angrily replied. *"But if I did, I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl all over Great Britain, even if it were paved with broken glass, if I could rescue just one person from what you told me."*

If we are going to get serious about the gospel, if we are indeed those who have been made glad in God and live to make others glad in Him, we need a robust and accurate view of hell – otherwise our gospel preaching is liable to degenerate into 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life' sound bite, that reduces Christ's call to repent and escape the wrath to come into a 'Have your best life now' materialistic gospel of self-esteem and self-advancement. **The fact that there is a very real heaven to gain is somehow not so urgent, or so precious, without the prospect of a very real hell to avoid.**

On the one hand, those who have believed the gospel will rejoice: *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 We should be those who live with the grand and glorious expectation and anticipation of His return so that we may marvel at Him.

On the other hand, the awful reality of hell should cause us to live with trembling and with tears. It ought to **produce a seriousness over all of life, and an urgency over all we do, and an earnestness that seasons everything and makes sin seem that much more sinful and righteousness seem that much more righteous, and makes life seem more real, more dear, more profound, and make God seem so much more weighty and the gospel that much more precious.** God loves us enough to tell us the truth – He is holy and righteous and just, and His judgment is at hand.

There are two roads and two eternal destinations – and we must choose which road to follow because one leads surely to hell and the other leads surely to heaven. The most loving thing I can tell you if you are on the road to hell is to get off that road and on to the heavenly one. Because there is coming a day in which all of this will be over, and the people of God will have been made worthy through suffering – the refining work is over, the fullers job is done; the enemies of the cross have been swept away in righteous judgment, and Jesus Christ reigns in righteousness on His eternal throne.

Our gracious Lord and compassionate Father,

We do tremble at the awful revelation of eternal destruction away from Your holy presence. Help us not to measure the justice of everlasting torment by an inadequate sense of our own sinfulness, but rather grant us to understand how great our sin really is by the measure of the horror of hell. May we fear it rightly and work to rescue all we can. Let the revelation of the terrible penalty of sin cause us to cherish the Christ who bore our sin in His body on the cross, absorbing the wrath of God for us so that we may rejoice and glory in Christ and not fear His coming. Let it produce a seriousness over all of life, and an urgency over all we do, and an earnestness that seasons everything. May we stand in awe of Your perfect justice and conquering grace. And may we be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the powerful, sin-conquering, wrath-satisfying name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.