

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

Comforting Words in a Chaotic World

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2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 1.

As you are getting there in your Bibles, I want to ask you all the simple question: *have you ever longed for justice? Have you ever longed for the wrongs done to you or a loved one to be made right?* Now that is a softball question to ask because I know for CERTAIN, that each of you here have felt that. We have all longed for justice to be done. And sadly, all of us have seen too many times when that justice is not carried out. When our longings weren't met.

God's people have always felt this struggle. The Psalmist cried out:

¹O God, do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! ²For behold, your enemies make an uproar; those who hate you have raised their heads. (Psalm 83:1-2 ESV)

Well the Christians in Thessalonica were feeling this big time! They were experiencing persecution at the hands of their fellow citizens SIMPLY because they were Christians. Not for stealing, rebelling against the government, but because they had turned from their idols to serve the Living God, Jesus Christ. Paul knew he had to give them some words of comfort during their persecution. They were going through difficult times and were wondering if they would ever receive justice for the afflictions they were facing. They were asking:

Does God care that His people are suffering?

Will He bring justice?

When will it come?

Paul wrote this chapter with these very questions in mind. With these things in mind, hear now from the Holy, necessary and wonderful Word of the Lord:

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.

³We 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. (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now you would be the odd one out if you were not struck with the middle portion of this text: the part about Jesus' return in flaming fire, inflicting justice and pouring out eternal destruction on His enemies. That is what 99% of the people in this room will be fixated on. And that makes sense because it is something that we Christians don't talk about often and this truth is blatant in this text.

Part of our avoidance comes from the fact that in North America, for the present time, we Christians live in relative ease. But for loads of Christians around the world, facing daily persecution, fearing for their livelihood, their families, their very lives, this truth is actually *welcomed*. They are not as offended by this truth as we are. And we know Paul wasn't. In fact, Paul meant this truth as a COMFORT to the Church. A COMFORT. It's a strange comfort to our ears but that is what is meant to be.

And we need to hear this comfort because the days *will* come when our faith brings on suffering. When we will ask the same questions. When we feel the same fears and pains as our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Comforting Words in a Chaotic World

As Paul begins this letter, he answers the question that every persecuted Christian will ask: is my suffering meaningless?

Paul tells the suffering Christian:

1. Your suffering is NOT meaningless

Let's look at verses 3-5 to see this:

³We 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.

⁵This 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 1:3-4 ESV)

Paul had said a few of the same things when he wrote 1 Thessalonians and he knew they were worth repeating. Christians need to be reassured that the persecution they face is *not* the judgement of God. They were not suffering because they had sinned. Their suffering was actually the *tool* that God was using to sanctify them further.

These Thessalonians were actually experiencing God's grace as He gave them a love for one another that was worth boasting about, and faith that could withstand these immense trials! God was PLEASED with their growth and faithfulness and they needn't to be reminded of this.

And God wasn't the only one who noticed their growth and faithfulness. It was being broadcasted to the Church abroad and acting as an encouragement to it! Isn't that a wonderful testimony?

Have you experienced this before? When God has brought you through a trial(s) and your faith was the encouragement that someone else needed? Is that you and I today? Are we growing in our faith and love for one another even amidst severe trials? Are we known as persevering and GROWING Christians?

By God's grace I think this is true for many here in this room. But even faithful, growing Christians can falter. And I know the past months have been all Covid 19 and no one wants to hear anymore about it, but hasn't this season exposed us in ways that we would have rather not seen? We could all fill in the blanks here and say how God had and has used this time to shake, expose, and refine us.

Friends, don't we want to be known as a Church like the Thessalonians? Who were growing in their love and faith amidst all the temptations to cower? Were they perfect? Absolutely not! But they were growing, thriving, and their faith was seen as one to aim for. Let's aim to be those kind of Christians.

Paul says though it is hard to believe and endure, KEEP IT UP! You are doing great! And you are counted worthy to suffer for Christ! AND, God is using your suffering to gird up His people to endure as you have. Your suffering is NOT meaningless. We need to know this if we are going to endure the fires and trials that come our way.

Secondly, Paul tells the Church:

2. Your God is Perfectly Righteous

We serve a JUST GOD. Paul tells reminds us all important truth here. Let's read vs 5-6 to see this.

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 (2 Thessalonians 1:5-6 ESV)

These believers were wondering if relief would come to them. They needed to know that their God would not overlook the suffering they were facing. They were holding on but wanted the promise that God saw and cared about the suffering they faced. Paul tells them that ULTIMATE RELIEF for all believers will come at the return of Christ. Hear that, ULTIMATE RELIEF. We may see glimpses of it here and now, but we have to be patient as we await our Savior's return

Friends, our God is a JUST GOD. He is altogether RIGHTEOUS. He cannot be bribed. He is not partial. There is not ONE sin that is overlooked by our Father. That is good news. Paul says to the

Church that this day of judgement will come at the hands of Jesus Christ and the wrongs done to us and others will be avenged.

But there is another important question we have to ask: who will experience this judgement? What is the distinguishing mark of the person who opposes God? Paul makes it very clear in verses 7-8.

Look there with me:

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**. (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 ESV)

This judgement is not only for those oppress God's people, but for ALL WHO OPPOSE HIM. Those who refuse the call of the Gospel will face the vengeance of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no middle ground. You are either in the Kingdom of God or you're out. Oppressive governments, rapists, murderers, thieves, all of these will be treated as Gods enemies. And those who live relatively 'good lives.'

That groups our family, friends, neighbors, and those who have never heard the Gospel in as well. Why? Because there is not one who is innocent. Paul says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that the wages of sin is death. Those wages will and must be paid. Jesus return means that wrath will be poured out for all who oppose Him whether boldly or apathetically. Both of these groups are His enemies and God's righteousness will be seen in pronouncing judgement on them. And Paul says, 'Christian, this is YOUR GOD. The One who HATES SIN AND LOVES RIGHTEOUSNESS more than you could imagine.

Suffering Christians need this reminder. Your God is perfectly righteous. And flowing out of that truth, Paul comforts the suffering Christian with the reminder that:

3. Your longing for justice will be satisfied

One day, our longings for justice, whether directly related to persecution or other evils, *will* be met. Paul says:

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 (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 ESV)

Paul tells us that when Jesus returns Christians will taste the vindication they have been longing for. The language that Paul uses is that of *relief*. Those who had previously been treated like second rate citizens will taste the ultimate rest. God will not overlook the suffering His people endured. The Thessalonians needed to hear this as do all believers. Paul wants the Church to have an eternal perspective regarding their suffering. HOPE and VINDICATION AWAIT! Glory awaits all Christians.

When the Christian's present situation so engulfs them they need to know for certain that God will make all things right. When believers are fired from their jobs for their faith, chased from their towns, persecuted for converting to Christianity, they need to know that God will vindicate them.

Krysta and her sister Bethany have this unwavering desire to see justice met. And I sometimes don't have the capacity to empathize the way they do for a situation so far apart from me. But that is a gift from God! The desire for justice is God given. And one day it will be met in full. Sin will be punished. Hurts will be mended. Rest and relief will be given to the children of God when Christ returns.

Fourthly, Paul tells us that:

4. The punishment will fit the crime

This is by far the hardest part of the text to grapple with. A judgement that lasted for a year, a decade, even a lifetime would be difficult to swallow, how much more when we are told God's enemies 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 ESV)

The enemies of the Lord will face an eternity without Him. Now I think there are many like me who want to recoil at this truth but we have to sit under it. We have to wrestle with it. We have to let it shock us, humble us, make us feel uncomfortable. Matthew Henry helps us feel the weight of it:

They will then be punished. Though sinners may be long reprieved, yet they will be punished at last. Their misery will be a proper punishment for their crimes, and only what they have deserved. They did sin's work, and must receive sin's wages. Their punishment will be no less than destruction, not of their being, but of their bliss; not that of the body

alone, but both as to body and soul. This destruction will be everlasting. They shall be always dying, and yet never die. Their misery will run parallel with the line of eternity.¹

The truth is God is just. And if He sees fit to punish His enemies this way, then we have to believe that THIS IS RIGHT. THIS IS JUSTICE. Wayne Grudem says:

The fact that there will be a final judgement assures us that ultimately God's universe is *fair*, for God is in control, and he keeps accurate records and renders just judgment.²

God is not impulsive in this final judgement. He is not like us who change so quickly. His judgement, whether it seems too much for us or not, is RIGHT. It is JUST. It is FAIR. I think we need to hear that again. It is FAIR.

Part of the problem with our lack of understanding and grasping this is most definitely that we cannot fully grasp the Holiness of God. We talk about it but don't often think about it deeply. We sing and speak about God's love but only in passing speak about His Holiness. His perfection. His worthiness.

And then the flipside is that we don't really think that sin is that bad. Sure, some sins are bad. Rape, murder, adultery, stealing, we can all agree, Christian and non-Christian alike, that these are bad, but we do not weep over our sins and the sins of others as we should. Friends, if we saw sin for what it was, both in us and others, then we would be horrified by it! Our response to God's wrath against sin would be very different. If we saw sin rightly, we would glory in God's justice. Do you believe that today?

But the God who will eternally punish is also the God who mercifully gives us time to repent. More than this, He gave HIMSELF to save us! In the fullness of time Jesus came and lived among us, showed and taught us the way to live before God, and then went to the Cross, suffering Hell for us! Jesus took on the eternal wrath that we deserved.

But you might be thinking, *should I be longing for the destruction of God's enemies? Can I long for my tormentors to be punished?*

¹ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary*, (Public Doman), (Digital).

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1147.

These are very important questions and there is most definitely a sweet spot that we want to land on. One where we can long for justice, like the text before us. AND one where we can pray for our enemies as Jesus modeled for us. Both of these need to be held in hand despite the seeming contradiction. Because we see that Paul is comforting the Church WITH the promise of justice. He is telling them that their persecutors will face impending wrath. Then we have the example of the martyred believers in Revelation crying out:

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:9-10 ESV)

How do we wrestle with these two truths? I think John Calvin helps us here to find the proper middle ground. He says:

It may be asked, however, whether it is lawful for us to desire vengeance, for Paul promises it, as though it could be lawfully desired. I answer, that it is not lawful to desire vengeance upon any one, inasmuch as we are commanded to wish well to all. Besides, although we may in a general way desire vengeance upon the wicked, yet, as we do not as yet discriminate them, we ought to desire the welfare of all. In the mean time, the ruin of the wicked may be lawfully looked forward to with desire, provided there reigns in our hearts a pure and duly regulated zeal for God, and there is no feeling of inordinate desire.³

What is he saying exactly? He is saying that it is RIGHT to long for justice against all sin. Yes and amen! But we should at the same time be seeking the good of ALL PEOPLE. We should aim to love, forgive, and seek the salvation of ALL people.

In short, we really need to examine ourselves when we are experiencing these longings. Are we praying for the repentance of our persecutors? Are we ok if God sees it fit to delay justice? Are we longing for vengeance or justice? Are we longing above all for God to be glorified? Or for our reputation and glory?

We have to leave justice and vengeance to God. We need to prayer for relief when we see our brothers and sisters in Christ suffering for the faith, we need to pray for Damascus road conversions in our persecutors, and we need to hope in the promise that one day Jesus will return and bring His perfect and fair justice.

And with Jesus’ return, Paul comforts the Church by promising that:

³ John Calvin, *2 Thessalonians, Calvins Commentaries* (Digital).

5. Your King will be Exalted

Jesus will be marveled at by ALL HIS PEOPLE. Paul tells us:

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. (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10 ESV)

Christ will be glorified through His judgement being poured out and through comforting His Church. Don't we need to see this grand vision of Christ more and more? When we think of Christ we often think of our crucified Savior, but we need to remember that He is coming again as a Warrior King! He in humility took on flesh and died on the Cross, but when He returns His Glory will be on FULL DISPLAY.

Christ will come in His glory with an army of angels and He will execute the long-awaited judgement.

Here we see Jesus Christ coming as the conquering warrior King John saw:

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ 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. ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (Revelation 1:12-17 ESV)

That's our King!

One day Christ will return and when He does He will come to finish what He started. The time for repentance and mercy will be done. His enemies will be crushed and we His people will marvel at Him power, judgement and glory. That should both humble and excite us.

Now this won't do it justice, but for any of you Narnia fans, do you remember when Aslan joins the battle after he comes to life again in the Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe? When he enters the

battlefield and everyone sees him victory is sure for the Narnians. He destroys the White Witch with ease.

Take that and multiply it by a million and you get what it will be like when Jesus returns. All our piddly visions of Him will fall to the ground for we will see Him as He is in glory. Paul says to the Thessalonians, ‘be comforted by the promise of Jesus’ glorious return.’ Should we long for the New Heavens and Earth? Should we long for resurrected bodies? Of course! But friends, there should be a massive part of each of us that LONGS to see Christ exalted, praised, and seen for ALL THAT HE IS AND HAS DONE! Our joy is found in HIS GLORY.

Do you long for that day? Do you long to see Jesus marveled at by all? That ought to be each of our heart cries.

And *finally*, Paul comforts the Church with the promise that:

6. You are not alone

Aren’t those comforting words? To a group of people suffering for their faith, these words are a needed comfort.

Paul prayed this for the Church:

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. (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 ESV)

Paul prayed that God would empower the Church to live in a manner worthy of their calling as believers. He says you have been called out of darkness, you know that glory awaits you, now keep being faithful to God FOR HE IS AT WORK WITHIN YOU! You are not fighting this battle alone!

Continue to do good as you wait. Remember, Paul said this to *suffering* Christians. He didn’t say take it easy, you’ve been through enough, just hang on. No. the call is to persevere. To press on! These men and women’s endurance amidst persecution had been praised around the churches and Paul says ‘KEEP IT UP! YOU’RE NOT ALONE.’

The Christian suffering in Pakistan is not alone. The house church movement in China is not alone. The Christian student on the liberal campus feeling estranged for clinging to his Christian faith is not alone.

AND NEITHER ARE YOU! *You* need to hear that today. *I* need to hear that today. The hope that we have is a FUTURE HOPE, yet in the meantime we have the sure promise that our God is with us, and our brothers and sisters are with us. Remember and lean into this when you feel your walls crumbling.

To end this prayer and this section, Paul roots all our efforts and endurance in the glory of God. That is our aim now and forevermore. Do you believe that? Do you pray ‘Hallowed be thy Name O God?’ Is that your desire? Because if it’s not, do you think you will be able to endure? What grounds the believer is the hope that they will one day see Jesus lifted high in glory. That’s what drove Paul. And that is what we will need to drive US.

Friends, the promise of justice, vindication, and seeing Jesus’ glory is our SURE HOPE. And these promises are what we will need to cling to as we push through all obstacles before us. Let’s end with a sure promise and word of wisdom:

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. (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 ESV)

Let’s pray.