

*Not Yet, So Be*  
2 Thessalonians 1:5-12  
3/31/19  
John Song

It is a great, great season here as we get ready for Easter. We've got all different kinds of signs around us telling us that Easter is coming. Maybe, you know, those yellow bunny marshmallows being sold at Target, right? Men wearing pink on a higher than average basis. You know, it's a wonderful time of year. But as we all know, none of these are the point of Easter. They are just seasonal traditions that have nothing to do with what Easter's all about. And as we've been exploring the letter of Thessalonians over the past several months, we are discovering what it means to live between the time of the first coming and the second coming, learning how to be a people of advent, a people of waiting, much in the same way that the people of the Old Testament were a people in the waiting of their coming savior.

We discovered last week as pastor Randy preached on the introduction to 2 Thessalonians that the trust in the grace in the good news of Jesus Christ required for the church of Thessalonians to have grit, perseverance, to endure their trials and their sufferings. And today, we get to explore the end result of their grit in the coming of Jesus Christ.

So, please open your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12 as today, we talk about something that's important for all of us here to listen to today. Yes, even our children from ages four to 1<sup>st</sup> grade who are joining us here today. We will be talking about God's judgement. Now, this is something that we don't want to shy away from talking about, especially – and I implore and plead with you – the parents in this room, do not shy away from talking about this topic. But at the same time, it's important to think about how we talk about God's judgement in a way that reflects the fullness of God and the fullness of what Scripture teaches about judgement. This isn't just going out and saying, #turnorburn, okay? This is something a little bit more nuanced, something a little bit more positive, helpful, hopeful. And then by looking at God's judgement, we will realize that one of the reasons for God's judgement is to provide us with a road map of how the gospel calls us as a community to live in comfort, humility, and hope of our Redeemer.

With that, let's look at 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12.

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 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 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 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, 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. 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.  
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Won't you pray with me?

Father, as we await the coming of your Son, help us to see that knowing the end of the story can help us in the here and now, to live for Christ with a comforted, humble, and hopeful expectation for His return. Please let your Holy Spirit now guide us in the teaching of your word as we hope to glorify you

through our worship according to the grace of Christ that allows such a marvelous thing to occur. It is in His name we pray. Amen.

So, let me start here with an observation of pop culture in movies. Have you ever noticed that every sort of epic battle scene in movies for the last 20 or 30 years follows the same kind of pattern? Let me exemplify these. Let's take it back, *Star Wars Episode IV*, for those of you in the room. The rebellion with its small hopeless force of star ships rides out to destroy a planet size star ship that brings about terror and death. One might even call it a Death Star. And as the heroic forces dwindle in the trench one by one, when all hope seems lost, there's only one ship in the trench. Luke Skywalker with three Imperial star ships gaining ground. A target lock is on Luke and the final blow to the rebellion is about to be crushed, and we as an audience wait for who? The Millennium Falcon coming in as we knew Han Solo would come back to save the day and to help Luke blow up the Death Star into glorious 1970 CGI bits.

So, maybe that analogy doesn't resonate with you. Maybe you're under 20 and have no idea what I'm talking about. How about *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Helm's Deep, Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, and King Théoden trapped in the inner castle desperately riding out against not a rabble of mindless orcs, but the uruk-hai, armor thick and shield broad. Théoden crying out perhaps for the final time, "Let this be the hour that we draw swords together." They've called for aid and were left wondering who would come as they fight for the last shimmering, fleeting hope. Would it be the elves? Would it be the dwarves? Gondor? Nay, at first light on the fifth day, they looked east. And who comes? Gandalf the White and the riders of Rohan coming in at the final moments to destroy the orcs.

I could go on, couldn't I, right? About the coming hero in the midst of dangerous odds. The pilot Russell riding in his jet on Independence Day, Harry Potter coming back to life to defeat Voldemort, the Bash brothers in *Mighty Ducks 2* coming in a halftime to defeat team Iceland, Thor coming back in an infinity war to turn the tide against Thanos's army. We love this moment in movies. It's so predictable, but we just can't get enough of this. Why? This idea of a coming savior who comes in majesty and splendor and awe to take what was wrong and make it right again, giving a reason for the people who were fighting, the people in the trenches a reason to continue to fight and hope, giving a reason to live in the not yet of the darkness and to find resolve in the hero that is coming.

Our passage today is that story. You see, the Thessalonian church is faced with persecution from every part of culture that surrounds them. They are mocked for their beliefs, threatened to face government oppression, surrounded by the temptation of other idols that pervade their culture. And the only hope that they have is this message that the King would come again.

Now, how would you react in this situation? After all, you might say, hey, we're the ones who chose to follow Christ. Isn't Christ the one who is coming to bring the kingdom? Isn't He the one to deliver us? Then where is He? Why are we going through this right now?

For the Thessalonians, Paul needed to correct in them an understanding of what it meant to live in two realities: number one, the already of the kingdom, and number two, the not yet of the kingdom. You see, the Thessalonians get excited about the telling of the coming of Jesus in Paul's first letter so much so that they erroneously believed, as we'll discover later on in this sermon series, that the day of the Lord had already come, that the kingdom of God had already arrived, and that the church would be victorious. So, they had real questions, then, and real doubts about, why then are they still under oppression? Why then are they still faced with various trials? Why do they still face death, tears, pain, suffering?

So, Paul with the heart of a pastor wants to let them know that living in the not yet of the kingdom doesn't mean that we sit on our hands just waiting for Jesus to come back, but rather that knowing what lies ahead, the not yet should leave us with a "so be," to be comforted because He will vindicate us, to be humble because He will avenge us, to be hopeful because He will be glorified in us.

Paul starts in verse 5 of our text here today to talk about living in the reality of comfort in the not yet. You see, rather than persecution and suffering being signs of God's displeasure, or even worse, that

the day of the Lord had passed and that somehow the Thessalonians still remained in judgement, that the evidence of their sufferings was a picture proof that they belonged in the kingdom of God. This is an internal comfort in the face of external discomfort. This is a faith in the evidence of things unseen because what you do see in front of you seems to be hopeless. Paul wants their current circumstances to not drive them to despair as though the kingdom of God has come and passed them by, but rather that the escalation of suffering in their current context was actually greater proof that the Lord was nearer to them and that they are a part of the people of God, not removed from it.

In other words, Paul isn't trying to lie to them about the reality of the Christian life and the life that we live today. This isn't escapism into pleasure that tries to numb the pain by pretending that it doesn't exist. This isn't entertaining yourselves to death and ignoring the real emotions and the real challenges presented by the darkness that you and I face every single day. Paul is giving them a theology of suffering and understanding that being in the people of God, one of its identifying markers is that suffering is real and that they will experience it if they are truly indeed called to be His people. In other words, the pain means that it's working. Or perhaps better said, the pain means that He's working.

This is so important for us here, especially in our context. Look, I love Howard County, and I know I've spoken about it in terms that challenge our suburban idols when I've come up here to preach from time to time. I really do love this area. I grew up here. I went to Bryan Woods Elementary, Burleigh Manor Middle, Wild Lake High. I taught in the Oakland Mills area in Talbot Springs and sort of the Glenelg area. I love every stretch of Howard County and where we are. But sometimes we have to pull the curtain away and realize that the Wizard of Oz is trying to present to us a reality that isn't real about our lives.

Think about this. Right now, in Howard County in downtown Columbia, \$100 million renovations set up for apartments, store fronts. *Time Money Magazine* number one best place to live. Chrysalis in Merriweather Park being built. Consistently ranked schools and the best high schools in America. *WalletHub* ranked number one safest place to live in America. One of the highest average median incomes, not just in the United States but in the world. This isn't normal, but we've come to say that we deserve it. We're not to experience any outward discomfort or suffering so much so that when life actually does hit us, we are faced with the calamities of life and the weariness of following Christ in a world that doesn't want to. We actually think much like the Thessalonians do, that God is against us and that He's forsaken us because we're uncomfortable.

So, what does Paul mean when he says that He will vindicate us? What does he mean by comfort? Those of us here who are dealing with suffering and pain right now, and it seems like when you look around in the church hallway that everyone is living the good life except for you. You're just dying to try and hang on and wondering where God is. I want you to be encouraged that this is actually a season that is demonstrating God's faithfulness to you rather than His hand of judgement. We are like the Thessalonians in that we are actually in the safest hands of God when outside everything seems contrary.

To quote Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:15, "The outer self is wasting away, but the inner self is being renewed day by day. Look to the things that are unseen in your suffering. Look to your Savior to trust and remind you that he will vindicate you."

This is nowhere more apparent than what's going on right now in a church in Chengdu, China. Some of you may have heard of this church, Early Rain Covenant Church, a church that had grown to about 500 plus members, something like the size of Columbia Presbyterian in this room, a church that founded its own seminary, its own liberal arts college, a K-12 education center, built two sanctuaries. It seemed to be light in a place where light was not legally allowed to exist. But in December 9 of 2018, the Chinese government arrested pastor Wang Yee and his wife along with hundreds of others for questioning, charging them with rebellion against the state. They began searches in homes of other families, taking away their personal property. Some of the members of the church were detained, were beaten physically. Some of them were told to strip naked, given up to starvation, being forced to sign pledges to never return to this church again. Many of them were fired from their jobs for being a part of

an evil cult. Authorities have also frozen the accounts of not just those in prison, but of the wives outside of prison and for their children as well. And we may ask ourselves, how could anybody feel comfort in a situation like this?

But hear what pastor Wang Yee preached to his congregation in 2017 regarding the inevitable persecution and suffering that was to come. There is a quote from him that we can have up on the screen.

“The government has the authority to confiscate all of our property. If it wants to confiscate our things, then it can confiscate them. If it wants to kick us out, it can kick us out because God will clearly judge it. But the Lord has not given them the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He has given them to the church. Over the past 2,000 years of church history and in Chinese church history, the church has always been faced with this struggle and this choice. What should we do? In this world, in this crooked, depraved, and perverse world, how do we demonstrate that we are a group of people who trust in Jesus? It is through bodily suffering that we demonstrate the freedom of our souls.”

This is what that church holds on to, the kind of resolve to continue to meet in house services on Sundays even after the arrests for those who were able to escape. This is after they continue to meet, even more members being arrested continually. And this should give us confidence to know that God will vindicate us.

And this is the heart of verse 6 when it says that God will afflict those who afflict us. Just as He has vindicated every generation of believers underneath His promise, the great covenant throughout scripture, we're reminded. And these echoes that Paul is using in his language here, that He will afflict those who afflict us. This is scripture language, language of the promise to Noah that he would be vindicated in his belief that a flood would arrive amidst a perverse and wicked world. This is echoes of Abraham, that he would bless those who blessed him and curse those who would curse him in going to the land. This is echoes of Israel and Moses in the wandering of the wilderness that they would be a holy nation despite the seemingly insurmountable opposition ahead of them to the promise land. He promised David that his kingdom would reign for eternity despite Israel's destruction and exile. He promised that He would be with His disciples until the end of the age, despite facing martyrdom, persecution. And He promised us that He would never leave us or forsake us despite us living in the not yet.

And the greatest of all, He not only promises this, but He lives it, doesn't He? When the Son of God Himself was persecuted, suffered, Jesus Christ on our behalf to demonstrate that His power would take the judgement of sin that we so rightly deserve. For on this side of biblical history, we have this great comfort knowing that Christ has suffered, Christ Himself was persecuted to afflict to Satan and the power of sin and death the greatest blow of them all. This is the hope of the gospel.

And this is why in verse 7 the relief that is promised is not one that would just remove our physical pains and sufferings now or the amount of work we have in our inboxes or the unjust things that are said about us. The relief that is promised here in verse 7 is the relief of rest, sabbath in the original language, of comfort knowing that our God is faithful and a righteous judge.

So, how will He accomplish this? This leads us to our second point in our outline that in the not yet of waiting for Christ's return, so we must be humbled because He will avenge us. If you look over verses 7-10 in our passage, you will see that Paul doesn't have a picture of Jesus that is often portrayed today which is Jesus this big softie who all He wants to do is give you a hug. This is Gandalf coming down with the riders of Rohan. This is the day of the Lord, and when it comes it will bring about a sudden destruction on the wicked of those who both do not know God and those who do not obey God.

Paul touched on the reality of their defeat, that it is not just a mere annihilation as some religions profess, but an eternal reality of judgement away from the presence of the Lord. A phrase used in

scripture to denote is the presence of salvation. God's judgement is present in hell, but the presence of salvation is not. And, also, it's away from the glory of His might. These are sobering words. As one commentator puts it, "Those in judgement incur at the last days an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night which no morning dawns."

And looking at verses 7-10, there are several applications that need to be understood here for us as believers today. One, God takes sin and unbelief seriously. You see, for the church in Thessalonica, it might've been hard to see that as the swirling evil and troubles of life were around them, the injustice in the world were face to face. The persecution that we're enduring, it seemed as though as they might as well have been singing Psalm 13 and wondering, Lord, how long, O Lord? Have you forgotten us? Why is this here? Why do you let it persist? And Paul is reminding them that the Lord is not yet here. So, be humble about the nature and the character of our lives and how we live. Do not give in to the pressures and temptations of sin and unbelief around you. To think about integrity not just in the big moments of life. Oh, I don't murder, I don't steal. That's fine. But to even think about the areas of integrity in our life that would almost seem inconsequential. To take sin seriously in our own lives, to be humble, and recognize that the ones who flippantly curse God in their disobedience of Him will receive a judgement that is more than a slap on the wrist, an eternal judgement forever. God takes sin and unbelief seriously, so seriously that He sends His one and only Son to take the penalty of that sin for you and I.

Number two, application point here. God's vengeance is not unjust. Sometimes, we as the Americanized church look at judgement passages like this and often place our own sense of what we like to think is a more righteous judgement. We pose statements and make claims that, well surely God wouldn't cast out eternal judgement, that seems to be unfair. As though we have a clearer sense in our society and our day - with our chronological snobbery, as C. S. Lewis puts it - a clearer sense, a truer sense of what justice means today. Sometimes we like to think of the exceptions. As many of us here who are engineers and programmers in the room tend to like to do, we like to play God for a fool and make His judgement seem capricious and evil. We ask questions like, well what about the innocent man in the indigenous tribe somewhere that hasn't heard the gospel? Presuming wrongly in our hearts that somehow an innocent man in the world exists.

God's vengeance is a righteous one. Think of it in our analogy of Thor coming down in the Avengers movie. A judge will come to make the wickedness in the world destroyed for all that is due to them. This is the severity of sin and what it deserves. And we rightly look at God in His judgement of these things and we know He is right for doing so, because otherwise His holiness as a perfect God would not stand.

Three, God's judgement should make us humble in our evangelism. Passages like this remind us in our humility, we don't go on streets with a bull horn or an angry self-righteous sign screaming at people that they're going to hell. Because knowing what we've been redeemed from in passages like verses 7-10 should make us humble and loving in our approach to reach the lost with compassion even as we know what penalty awaits them. It's looking at someone with a death sentence in a prison cell and not audaciously telling them that they are going to die. It's letting them know that if they would believe and trust and place their hope not in their own righteous living, but in the righteousness of Christ they could be set free. Remembering that from apart from the grace of God, it is we, too, who belong in that cell with them.

We need to stop thinking of God's judgement, God's avenging judgement, like a child on a father's lap on a bus. Cornelius Van Til, the famous theologian and defender of the Christian faith, would often give this analogy of a young boy sitting on his father's lap on a bus yelling at his father, berating him, hitting him, telling him that he's unfair, telling him that he's unjust. And just, sort of screaming all sorts of obscenities at him. But what the child doesn't realize in this analogy is that the very foundation that the child sits on to be able to oppose his father, the father is giving to him.

CPC youth, think about that the next time you're told by your parents to clean your room. The judgement that awaits the child in that moment will be deserved. The judgement that awaits all of us who are apart from faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will be deserved. And we need to be humble in realizing that the only foundation we have for righteousness and truth and justice is the foundation that our very Lord has given to us.

And this leads us to Paul's conclusion in verses 10-12. That because Christ has not yet come, so we must be hopeful because He will be glorified in us. Paul concludes this exhortation by speaking of the truth that He will come to be glorified in His saints, to be marveled by those who have believed. And he culminates this by letting them know that he is praying for them.

Now, I want you to notice this. Don't just gloss over this. Paul's knowledge of the coming of the day of the Lord literally revealed to him by God to write down to the Thessalonians, Paul's knowledge of the situation doesn't hinder his need to pray for the Thessalonians. This is something that we in the reformed church need to hear today. Our theology of the coming of Christ and His return, God's perfect sovereignty to drive us to our knees instead of driving us to indifference, our understanding that the Lord will come in glory to complete the good work in us should leave us with a greater passion to seek out the responsibility that God has given us to pray for the poor, the suffering, the hurting, and those in need of the same encouragement in Christ that we have been given.

Not because it's a magic spell or an incantation, but as J. I. Packer puts it in his book *Evangelism in the Sovereignty of God*, "The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God's hand but a humble acknowledgement of helpless dependence." What we do every time we pray is to confess our own impotence and God's sovereignty. And what does Paul pray for? He prays that God would make them worthy of the calling He has called them to and to have the resolve for every work and good by faith so that Christ would be glorified in them.

Now, if you've been tracking along when we were talking about the context of the church of Thessalonica, you might be saying to yourself, why does Paul pray for this? Out of all the things to pray for, why this? After all, Paul knows about the persecution. He knows that they're going through immense suffering and pain. He knows that their theology is out of line about the day of the Lord. He knows that they're immature and that they're idle. Why does Paul choose to pray for this in verses 11 and 12?

Tim Keller in his book on prayer writes this. We'll have this quote up on the screen.

"It is remarkable that in all of his writing, Paul's prayers for his friends contain no appeals for changes in their circumstances. It is certain that they lived in the midst of many dangers and hardships. They faced persecution, death from disease, oppression by powerful forces, and separation from loved ones. Their existence was far from secure than ours is today. Yet, in those prayers, you see not one petition for a better emperor, for protection from marauding armies, or even for food for the next meal. Paul does not pray for the goods we would usually have near to the top of our lists for requests."

Now, not that it's wrong to pray for those things in our lives to be sure. But that's not where Paul is hopeful for his community. Paul is hopeful for the day in which Christ would be glorified in them, through their resolve to live rightly and believe rightly about the things of God according to the power of His Spirit working in them, that when this prayer is answered, Christ's name would be praised for the goodness in their life. The word "glorify" loosely means to "make famous." Christ would be made majestic, marvelous, famous when they view him.

So, let me ask you as you meet in your community groups, in your prayers for others in the mornings when you're about to step out the door, right before you eat, are these the kinds of prayers that you can pray for the people of God? Not just merely for circumstances to be taken away or for homework

assignments to be finished, or for finances to move from red to black. But that whatever circumstances whether good or plenty, need or want, we have the name of Jesus Christ glorified beyond our circumstances. This is the great hope for us, is it not? This is the thing that we cling to, not that our lives would be comfort, but that we would be comforted knowing that our lives are living for Christ and His name.

I'll close with this. Yesterday, I had the somber joy of attending a funeral of one of my professors at the seminary where I trained to be a pastor. His name was Dr. Howard Griffith. He was the pastor of systematic theology. He was a man who, when I was sitting in his classes not knowing much, coming from a completely different theological tradition than the one here, a man who lovingly, patiently, faithfully told me about God's unfailing covenant, the richness of the triune God, the joy of the sacraments of baptism, the Lord's supper, the hope of the church, and the end times. He is perhaps one of the big reasons I stand before you today as an ordained minister in our presbytery.

When I was at his funeral, he's probably the only man I know who in his final days read books on the council of Trent and the theological implications of Martin Luther. How's that for spending your last days? And as I looked at the generations of people in this packed sanctuary speak of the impact that he made in their lives, the truths of God, the heart and love of a pastor he so clearly demonstrated, the technical prowess of a scholar. His final words that he recorded for a training video for a reformed theological seminary – which is online, you can actually see this today – speak to me about what it means for Christ to be glorified in us. So, I want to read you his words.

“The Lord Jesus will come again in glory, gather His saints to Him, raise them from the dead. In raising them from the dead, He will bring about the whole renovation of the cosmos. The first things have passed away. The Lord will bring to final fulfillment everything that He has now begun in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are already alive from the dead. In Christ, we are already justified. In Christ, the power of sin has already been broken. Only in billions and billions of creatures made in the image of Jesus Christ is the fullness of the image of God that can be fully expressed. Raising up His church, billions and billions that no man can number that will show the glory of the triune God as the image of Him. That will be us.”

As God's image bearers, we glorify Christ to one another and to each other. And in this community, with a hope and a resolve beyond the circumstances of life and pain that we feel and the sufferings that we face, you are a picture of Christ in ways that give us an unspeakable joy. This is the great hope that we have, not that we would live forever, not that we would be rich in this life, not that we would remain without disease or suffering, but that one day Christ will come with His army of angels. Christ would complete every good work in us. Christ would be revealed in glory and we would sing forever to His name forever and ever, halleluiah, amen.

This is our hope. So, whether you come here today exhausted and worn out, or it's hard to pick up your sword, the hope we can rejoice as fellow believers is that we are redeemed by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and He gives us a future end of the story to look forward to. It's this hope that we'll rejoice and sing about here after we pray. So, why don't we do that right now? Let's go ahead and pray to Him.

Father, as we live in this tension of the already and the not yet, Lord, we confess it's hard to know, to trust, to believe. But Lord, let this word remind us this story isn't over yet, that Christ will come. And that as we wait, you say and you proclaim this amazing news that somehow, in some way, we who live in sin, we who stumble and fall, we who struggle will somehow image Christ in His glory to one another and to the world. May this humble us, may this comfort us, may this give us hope. Lord, thank you for your word and your encouragement here today. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.