

The Paradox of Christian Suffering

Call to Worship: Psalm 147:1-6

1st Scripture: 1 Peter 4:12-16

2nd Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-8

Hymn Insert- *10,000 Reasons*

Hymn #80- *How Firm a Foundation*

Hymn Insert- *Battle Hymn of the Republic*

Introduction:

Paul opens this second letter to the Thessalonians by, once again, giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians, especially because of their exceedingly growing faith and their abounding love toward each other, all in the midst of ongoing persecutions and tribulations. To this end, they were a model church and Paul's boast among the churches of God, as they manifested Christian patience in such a profound way.

This morning, we continue on into verses 5-8, as Paul pulls back the curtain for the Thessalonians, so they might be encouraged by what their present, very difficult circumstances actually entail. To be sure, none of it was in vain. There was a glorious end to their story, and he wanted to remind them of that end. And as we peer in from the outside, we will behold the blessed paradox of Christian suffering, so that we can be right headed in our trials and afflictions, rather than losing heart and growing weary in our service to Christ.

I. The Paradox of Christian Suffering

Right from the outset then, we note that verses 5-8 are an opening up of what verse 4 entails. When you consider the reality of verse 4; when you are actually living what is described there, it can be very easy to lose sight of the blessed purpose that is hidden behind the ongoing persecutions and afflictions. The fruit is yet to be seen; they are still in the wine press, as it were, feeling the crushing pain. And so, the blessed results were yet to be experienced, requiring a thorough reminder of what these things meant; that God was sovereign even over these sufferings (which were not letting up), and that a wondrous purpose was being accomplished by God, even in the wicked intentions of their persecutors. When suffering long, one can begin to question a legitimate purpose behind that suffering, and so, Paul reveals the glorious paradox of Christian suffering, and how it is actually a means to the glorious end of eternal peace. Indeed,

the way to eternal peace, only comes through suffering. A reversal must begin at the opposite spectrum, before it comes to its opposing destination.

Paul states in verse 4, "so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God *for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure...*" And then he adds the following revealing statement about their enduring those persecutions and tribulations, "which is manifest (plain) evidence of the righteous judgment of God..."

Now, how exactly was the Thessalonian's enduring of the persecutions and trials that they were facing, plain evidence of the righteous judgment of God? What does Paul mean by these words? Does he mean that their suffering was evidence of God's righteous judgment against themselves? Of course not! What he means then, is that it is manifest evidence of God's righteous judgment against those who are persecuting them. Those who have rejected the Thessalonian's witness (evidenced in their persecuting them) have rejected God, and in doing so, they evidence God's righteous judgment upon them. One of the signs of God's judgment upon a people, is their failure to give heed to the gospel. And by this means, when God exercises His wrath against them, how they have mistreated the people of God, stands to bear witness against them. And so, by enduring persecutions and tribulations, the Thessalonians were actually manifesting God's favor toward them and His righteous judgment against their enemies. Notice, how the rest of verse 5 and verse 6 confirm this:

"...that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you..." You see, there's the paradox. By way of suffering for their faith, the Thessalonians were actually receiving God's affirmation; they were showing themselves worthy of the kingdom of God. Their faith was affirmed and proven authentic, by means of their persevering through, and patiently enduring, tribulations for the sake of Christ's Name (As Paul also stated to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:12, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us." The Thessalonians were enduring!). And their enemies, were affirming the righteous judgment of God upon them, and God would soon turn the tables, repaying those who were causing tribulation, with tribulation. They were securing their own righteous judgment by means of their unrighteous judgment.

Again, notice how he further elaborates on this great reversal in verses 7-8, "and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

You see the reversal here? Those who are presently troubled are given rest later, while those who are troubling will be recompensed with tribulation. [Ex: The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus]. And when do the godly, who persevere to the end, enter the fullness of that rest (body and soul together)? When Christ returns, and is revealed from heaven!

We continue to see why having a proper understanding of the return of Christ is critical here, don't we? It is there that we look for comfort, recognizing that whatever we suffer now, in this life, will spill over into a state of eternal rest then! When Christ returns, He will bring with Him that eternal state of rest and peace, which we presently yearn after and long for. Indeed, the whole creation longs for it, like a woman in labor, longing for the appearing of her child (Romans 8). Finally, what has been forfeited when our first parents sinned; that perfect state of rest, peace and joy, will be restored forever when Christ returns! And so, Christians are to meditate upon the return of Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of all things; the great finality and completion of God's plan of redemption, which has gone into effect the moment our parents rebelled against God, eating the forbidden fruit at the beginning.

O brethren, do you see the great encouragement here? Whatever your suffering might be right now, and whatever it will be in the days ahead, remind yourself that that very suffering is producing in you an eternal weight of glory! And when Christ returns, that work will be complete forever! Suffering, hardship, pain, death, sorrow, agony, anxiety, fear, despair...none of these terms have an existing, present relevance on that day. They will be obsolete terms; terms of the past, which have no experiential substance in the present. The way of suffering here, is a pathway to eternal rest. And that rest is just a few short steps in front of us; there is a less than microscopic dot that separates us from it, when we view it from the standpoint of eternity! The encouragement here ought to exhort us onward, to persevere, to press on, to endure, to continue forward, and to live now, in anticipation of it. And living in anticipation of it, entails what the Apostle John states in 1 John 3:1-3:

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. *And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*" Indeed, Christ's return will be a return that brings eternal rest to His people!

But again, Christ's return will not only come with rest for His people, it will also come with wrath and judgment for those who do not embrace the Gospel and know Him. Listen again, to those dreadful words, which will be further elaborated on in verse 9, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Lord Jesus Christ comes as a beloved husband and Savior of His church, bringing rest to His people, but He also comes as a wrathful judge and executioner of those who do not know Him in truth! This is not me preaching hell fire, this is me simply stating what is right here in the text. What a horrifying sight for the ungodly! One might easily dread being in a war, surrounded by the enemy, but at worst, that will lead to death. But to look up and to behold the wrathful Son of God, shadowed by legions of mighty Angels, knowing that you are not the object of His grace and kindness, because you have not sought Him out in this life...what a terrible reality! The wording is so strong and frightening..."in flaming fire taking vengeance!" A wrath like no other! What do you do when it is the wrath, not of men, not even of the fiercest of men, but of God Himself, the holy, eternal Creator and sovereign Lord over all things in heaven, on earth and under the earth? Revelation adds to the gravity of this terror, when it speaks of all who know not Christ, being trampled in the wine press of His wrath, with the blood of His enemies rising up to the bridles on the horses mouths! What a graphic description! Flaming fire, vengeance, crushing, trampling, blood squeezed out all over the place, like a grape, pressed in the wine press! It's nothing to look at, in some light, "no big deal" fashion! This isn't Hollywood! This is real!

And who are they who will face a wrathful Christ in such a way as this, wishing that somehow, mountains and rocks could fall upon them, and hide them from the wrath of the

Lamb? "Those who do not know God" and "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Notice, not simply those who are outwardly antagonistic against the Gospel, but those who do not obey the Gospel! You see, we are the creature, and God is the Creator. We are justly obligated to live in accordance with the Creator's will and standards. We belong to Him! And we are naturally in rebellion against Him because of the sin of our first parents. We bear the marks of the fall of man in our own hearts, which is revealed in our pursuing of lusts and in our lack of a desire to know God in truth. You cannot simply take hold of the blessed gift of life that God has given you, and do with it, whatever you please, whenever you please. At least, not without eternal ramifications. You must know God! You must worship God! It is right and proper and just and good to do so! But your sin tells you otherwise. Your sin compels you to be your own god and to worship other gods (which are no gods at all). It drives you to pursue independence from the will and design of your Creator. But God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ into the world to die for sinners, so that, by faith in Him, they might be reconciled to God; so that they might come to know the One, whom they have not known since birth.

If you reject Him again this morning, and die in that condition, you must understand that you will be the object of Christ's righteous, vengeful wrath! And you will have no one to blame but yourself, forever! Do you know God, this morning? Have you repented of your sins and is your trusty entirely in Jesus Christ, who alone can deliver you from the wrath and judgment to come? If not, seek Him now, before it is too late!

Amen!!!

The Lord's Supper!