

2 Thessalonians

Introduction

Russ Kennedy

Sometimes the Bible and the lives it describes are so distant from us and so difficult to understand. Some of this is cultural. But some of it is more. The men and women who were Christians in Bible days lived under a pressure and persecution we can hardly comprehend. We live in a time and age and place that is soft and easy. Sometimes the greatest spiritual stresses we experience is whether or not we are going to return the two cents of extra change we got at the check-out line.

Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica brought help and hope in the midst of the persecution and problems they were suffering. But it did not immediately solve all their problems. Some were seeing the present trouble as having eschatological (prophetic) implications. This was reinforced when, it seems, the church received a letter claiming to be from Paul, stating that the Day of the Lord was actually present.

The result was a confused and discouraged church. They were not dealing with the undisciplined members who were abandoning their responsibilities. Paul learns that there were people who were not submitting to the authority of the Word. In this church, Satan was working to devour them (1 Peter 5:7-8) and to deceive them (2 Corinthians 11:3).

In response to all these needs, Paul wrote this letter from Corinth around 51AD.

We may not be suffering today in the same way they were in their day, but we still face tribulation and trouble which tests the limits of our (admittedly) small endurance. Our ears are filled with all sorts of triumphalistic teaching in prophecy. But the greatest need addressed by this book is our lack of practical submission to the Scripture. O, we acknowledge it as the Word of God for our theories, but not for the day-to-day grind. We have all sorts of things that work better.

The message to us is that the second coming does not excuse us from our labors and encourages us in our trials. So let us listen carefully to these words of the Spirit in the Word that we also "might be worthy of the kingdom." (2 Thessalonians 1:5)

Inspiration for the Discouraged

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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War can bring almost endless, relentless pressure. Even to civilians. The bombing of London was largely designed by the Germans to break down the will of the British to resist. Much of our strategy in the Gulf and in Yugoslavia was much the same.

But life can bring us much the same. Most of us will not face the pressure of persecution. But maybe we will face the long, relentless pressure caring for an invalid spouse. (Story of Herbert Lockyer).

Yet, how prevalent discouragement is among us and how much it affects us.

Paul opens with their most pressing need, the persecution they were experiencing because of their faith. So there is encouragement for us in the midst of our difficulties. We might not identify very closely with persecution – but many of us are enduring afflictions that weigh in heavily on our spirits.

The Encouragement of Praise

(v.3-4)

How we need, in the midst of difficulty, to hear words that encourage us. Paul praises them by noting how God had answered his prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13. For what God is doing in them in the midst of their extremity, he is very thankful.

The Obligation of Thanksgiving

(v.3)

What interests me here is the sense of *obligation*. He saw thanksgiving for people's spiritual growth as a necessity. Is this our view? Do we observe spiritual growth in others without responding in praise to God?

¹ 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.

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. 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.

For a Growing Faith

Paul begins by considering the vertical dimension in their faith in God. If Paul could give thanks for their growing faith, then the church could give evidence of it. Now what would that be? How can Paul say that their faith is "greatly enlarged" (NASB)? There are two ways in which our faith can be enlarged.

Our knowledge of God and the Word is growing.

Through attendance to the means of grace, our understanding of truth which elevates our affections and directs our wills, grows.

Our trust in God and reliance on His Word is growing.

Through application of our growing understanding, we are ever more trusting in the providence, provision and purifying purposes of God.

For an Increasing Love

That leads us then to quite naturally consider the second element, the horizontal dimension with men. There is an abounding or overflowing of their love. Again, we must ask ourselves how he knows this to be true? The larger testimony of Scripture indicates how a true and growing love is expressed and evaluated.

In sacrificial deeds.

Where there is no sacrifice, no giving up of self for the other, there is no love. We may say we love God, love our spouses, love our church – but if we are not willing to sacrifice self (with all its possibilities), then our love is diminishing, not growing. The growth of their love was evident for it was measurable in deeds done solely for the benefit of the one loved.

In Biblical submission.

The second exhibition of growing love is in increasing submission in the roles and to the authorities God places in our lives. Again, we may say we love God – where there is little submission, there is little love. Wives may say they love their husbands, but this must be exhibited in growing submission.

The Opportunity to Testimony

(v.4)

Their walk with Christ gave Paul opportunity to boast about them to other churches. We know that Paul did this in order to encourage other churches in their difficulties or to motivate them to complete ministries they had committed themselves to.

There is a connection between our endurance with our hope.

Because they were suffering, then their endurance and faith grew. If Paul gave thanks for their faith and love, then what is this but another way of expressing *hope*? Faith is seeing with our understanding the realities of spiritual truths so that we embrace them no matter what the cost or circumstances. In hope, we patiently endure until that which we have understood by faith becomes a reality.

There is a connection between patience and suffering.

Since tribulation exercises and thus develops endurance, we will be soft in our faith and fading in our endurance *unless God brings affliction and suffering in our lives*. This is the underlying reason for the easiness of our modern Christianity. We come to comfortable buildings to hear motivational messages and it rarely costs us anything. In fact, let it cost us something, and we will often simply not come. What would a church think of us today when their very existence was threatened by the might of the Roman empire, the power of the local government and the animosity of the pagan and Jewish cults around them? We know little of

this. We are not pure enough in our walk nor powerful enough in our witness to incur the real and visible anger of the lost.

Now we may trivialize the depths of their suffering by drawing parallels with our own perceived suffering at the brutal hands of our past abuses and our present afflictions. I fear when we do that. What they are commended for is a patient endurance rooted in faith in the midst of a very real fiery furnace. So we rather than being excused from class for the course of Suffering 101, we are exhorted to endure in the light of their graduate level experience of suffering. *If our own experience of affliction and stress and discouragement is trivial in comparison, then how much more disastrous is our lack of determination and endurance.*

The Encouragement of Promise

(v.5-10)

There is no encouragement like knowing when and how our problems are going to come to an end. In the light of the present suffering and persecution, what are the future prospects? How and when will all this come to an end? And will it come to an end that satisfies the justice of God that is reflected in our own sense of justice?

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.

The message of these paragraphs speaks these words clearly into our own life situations: "What you are going through will end well."

The Righteousness of God

(v.5-7a)

Here is the foundation on which their faith and hope and encouragement rests: *God is a just God who will do justice.* It rests on His unchanging *character.*

It is right of God to use suffering as a measure and means of making us worthy of His kingdom. So the suffering in view here is what comes to us because of seeking God's Kingdom first. If the sovereign crown of Christ came through the suffering cross of Christ, then it is right to endure affliction before expecting glory.

It is right of God to bring about the end to suffering that is consistent with His character; that is to say, He will repay with the wicked affliction and relieve the believers of their afflictions. What God will do in the day of His wrath will be a just and righteous vengeance. God has the right to punish those who have continued on in unbelieving sin.

So what we are going through will end well because *God is just.*

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

(v.7b)

Here is the breath-taking prospect which is the end of history. *Jesus will be revealed from heaven.* He will be accompanied by the spectacle of His mighty angels. He will come in

flames of fire to destroy the wicked and this cursed earth from which will emerge a new heavens and new earth.

So what we are going through will end well because *Jesus is coming*.

The Retribution to the Unbeliever

(v.8-9)

In that day, God will deal out the retribution that will be the just reward and wages of sin in the unbeliever. This is where you will stand if you are not quickened by the Spirit of God to see your sin and sinfulness and to feel its offense against God. If these words do not awaken a holy fear in you (even you who claim to have fled to the safety of the cross) then either your heart is dead to the life of God or hardened to the love of God. It is not possible to hear these words with believing hearts and not gasp with the horror of it all. But what is said here is flowing out of the justice of God on the day when the glory and power of Christ are unfolded for all to see.

The Condemnation of the Lost

(v.8)

Did not know God. Here are those who suppressed the knowledge of God in creation, conscience and culture who never heard the gospel. There is sufficient revelation to ensure the justice of their condemnation for they will be without excuse.

Did not obey the gospel. Here are those who heard and consciously rejected the gospel. The hearing of the gospel carries with it an obligation: the obedience of faith. So the gospel is not only to be believed, but also obeyed. In fact, it is only truly believed when it is obeyed.

The Condition of the Lost

(v.9)

The horrible consequence of your unbelief and condemnation is characterized.

As paying a penalty.

There will be a constant and abiding sense that you will be suffering simply what is richly deserved. There will be no appeals to injustice, no shaking of the fist against God. The astounding glory and holiness of God will so strike the unbelieving on that day as to bow their knees to Christ even as they are smitten with awful penalty of their punishment.

As eternal destruction.

Now the word here does not refer to annihilation, but to death as separation. It must not be argued that these words point to the final annihilation of the lost in cessation of being. No, that misses the point that the just penalty is *eternal*. There will be no end to it. Ages upon ages upon ages will roll and each millennium will be but a tick of the clock of hell's eternity. That you will suffer the everlasting torment of hell, as the penalty for a lifetime of sinning does not excise the justice of God, rather it exhibits the greatness of the glory you have sinned against.

As separation from the presence and power of a glorious God.

Eternal destruction is being shut out from the conscious presence and glorious power of God. Even today, you live your life against the constant background murmur of the self-disclosing presence of God for we live and move and have our being in Him. Though you may deny it, suppress it, alter it or openly rebel

against it, you cannot escape it. Then there will come a day when you will be confronted the possibility of the fullness of being sustained and satisfied with that glory and *you will be thrust away from it*. It may mean little to you today – but then it will be the very fiery agony of hell.

So what we are going through will end well because unbelievers will be punished.

The Results for the Saints

(v.10)

If we only had a dim sense of the brightness and the wonder of this day we would be like little children standing tremblingly on tip-toe waiting in shivering anticipation of the satisfying joy.

God glorified in us.

I have no words by which I can begin to express what this will mean. All the eloquence of human expression would be like a candle in the brightness of the sun. All the elevation of human expectation would be like a thimble of water in the vastness of the ocean. But only this I can say. Imagine your greatest joy, your greatest pleasure, your most satisfied moment, your highest ecstasy. Elevate it by the greatness of God and extend by the eternity of God and purify it by the holiness of God and you will still only be an infant pleased by the touch on the cheek. For this day every believer yearns with a sin-breaking power.

God marveled at by them.

What does this mean? We marvel at the intricacies of life systems and cellular structures and genetic codes. We marvel at the vast galaxies moving in the grand dance of the cosmos and the vast sea of stars. But what will it be to be amazed by God – to marvel at Him. I am sure that a great part of our astounded wonder at God will be in the satisfying greatness of His glory.

So what we are going through will end well because God will be marvelously glorified in believers.

Loved ones, what we are going through will end well. It will end well because of the just character of God, because of the coming of Christ, because of the punishment of you who do not believe and because of the glory in you who do believe. It will end well.

The Encouragement of Prayer

(v.11-12)

If this is how it will end, then how do we live now? This is the encouragement Paul offers by prayer. The assurance that it will end well should not suppress, but rather sustain prayer.

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.

The Petition for Gratification

(v.11)

Two petitions are offered here.

Made worthy of our calling. We have been called to His kingdom and glory. Are you thinking and living in a way worthy of that call?

Fulfill your delight (good pleasure, purpose) prompted by goodness and your work prompted by faith.

We must bend our knee like the bow and send the arrows of these petitions to hit straight and true in the target of God's glory.

The Purpose of Glory

(v.12a)

That we live worthy of God's calling and that God's power fulfills our delight in Him and our work for Him must be done so that the name of Jesus, that is, worth and value are magnified in us. And all our worth and value is in Him.

The Provision by Grace

(v.12b)

How do we patiently endure affliction till Jesus comes with a life worthy of magnifying Jesus? By the enabling power of grace.

Reflect and Respond

You who are suffering affliction for the sake of Christ as believers – take heart. It will all turn out well in the end. He will then repay the wicked and relieve the distress by amazing us with the intensity of the His satisfying glory.

You who are satisfied with passing pleasures and glittering prosperity – take caution. You are living a life unworthy of the kingdom and glory of Christ.

You whose only prospect is the retribution to be dealt out in the awful wrath of God – trust Jesus today and bow to Him as King.