

THE THINGS YOUR HEART NEEDS TO HEAR A Sermon on 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

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Introduction

In this lesson, we are continuing our study of Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, picking up at verse 5 of chapter 1 and working through verse 12. In our first lesson, we learned that at the time they received this letter, the church which Paul planted in Thessalonica was a young but maturing church. It was also a church under attack and persecution, infiltrated by false teachers who were misleading the people, especially with regard to the matter of Christ's Second Coming.

Paul had already written to them previously, and that prior letter had stimulated some response from the Thessalonians, but not enough to satisfy Paul. So he wrote them this second letter to stimulate a further, fuller response. Now, while the main issue in this letter is found in 2:1-12, concerning the "man of lawlessness," Paul makes the most of the opportunity by spending some time to encourage the church in those matters in which they had been faithful and, at the end of the letter, to rebuke those who had disregarded his instructions thus far. In this study, we will look at Paul's words of comfort to this suffering young church.

First Move

In these opening paragraphs of his letter, Paul wanted very much to encourage and strengthen this church which was undergoing so much hardship and difficulty because of their faith. In doing so, he said three main things to them, by way of encouragement:

- 1) God is just.
- 2) Jesus is coming back to administer God's justice.
- 3) We are praying for you.

Those are the three main encouragements Paul wanted to give the Thessalonians to build them up, to urge them to "keep on keeping on" in faith, love and perseverance. Let's look at each one of these encouragements in turn.

Paul's first encouragement to them was "God is Just." We see this especially in verses 5-7a:

“All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.”

Here, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God is right and true, and that his actions toward them are just. And in making that assertion, Paul used three phrases for support. First, he said that “all this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.”

Now when Paul said, “All *this* is evidence,” the obvious question would have been, “What is ‘this’?” And the answer is that the ‘this’ of verse 5 refers to the perseverance, faith, persecution, and trials of the Thessalonians catalogued in verse 4. As Stott has pointed out, when Paul said these things, he simply echoed the teaching of Jesus that “suffering was the unavoidable path to glory, both for himself and for his followers” (see Mark 8:31ff.). Paul’s reasoning, then, was this: the fact that God was allowing the Thessalonians to suffer for his name was evidence that he was preparing them for glory, that they would be considered worthy. To use Stott’s words, “Their suffering was itself evidence of the justice of God because it was the first part of the equation (suffering) which guaranteed that the second part (glory) would follow.”

The other side of this evidence that convinced Paul that God was working in the Thessalonians was the fact that rather than growing bitter and angry as a result of their hardship, they were in fact growing in faith, in their love for one another, and in their ability to endure and persevere. Both their suffering and their response to suffering were clear indicators that God had “counted” them worthy – not “counted” in the sense that they had earned their worthiness, but rather in the sense of their being declared worthy, as evidenced by their suffering and their godly response to it.

The second and third phrases which Paul used to support his assertion that God is just are found in verses six and seven: “He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you”; and “give relief to you who are troubled.” In other words, one day God will balance the books and reverse the present state of affairs.

Of course, it takes more than the naked eye to see these realities, doesn’t it? It takes the eyes of faith to see beyond the limits of this life to the day when final justice will be rendered. It takes maturity and discernment to look past the reality of God’s people being oppressed and imprisoned and tortured in various places. It takes discernment to look past that to the truth that God is just and right, that God is not idle even when he is not intervening, that the temporary victory of God’s enemies is just that – temporary.

To be sure, this is not to say that we cannot pray for or expect God’s protection in this life. It is not to say that God will not or cannot intervene here and now. In the Scriptures we have examples of God doing that quite clearly,

e.g., in the story of Esther, or with the account of Daniel, or numerous other examples. However, the reality of living in a fallen world, of living in the time of the “now and the not yet”, is that the shadows of deliverance and salvation we see here and now will be nothing like what we can expect when Christ returns. And it is that certain, unqualified, final and complete ministration of justice to which Paul points the Thessalonians. They could see the inklings of his justice now. The evidence of his work within them was clear, whetting their appetites for the feast of justice and mercy that Jesus will bring when he comes in glory.

I have to tell you, that speaks to me. I don't know about you, but sometimes I read about the suffering and injustice in this world, I read about what is done in this country and, more severely, in other countries of the world, and I am deeply disturbed. I get angry, and my blood pressure goes up – I want so much for God to let *me* be in charge of the justice department.

I call it “justice,” but if I'm honest, what I really want is revenge. My desire to “see justice” done is often simply me expressing the hate I still have in my heart, or a way of turning attention away from my own sin and failure.

And then I remember the Cross. I remember that I once identified myself with the enemies of God, that I was one of the ones that was probably causing someone else to turn to God and pray for justice. But instead, I received his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness. And so, when I think about it a little harder, I realize that it's alright to feel upset and troubled by the evil and unjust actions of those around you. And it's alright to pray that God would intervene. But my prayers for God's justice now, and in the future, ought to be qualified by the Gospel. That is, when I pray, I ought to pray that God would give relief to the troubled, that he would change the hearts of the trouble-makers, i.e., that he would save them. And then, for those who will not be saved, I can pray that God would intervene, that they would know his justice. When the knee will not be bowed, when the heart is hard, when God's name and God's people are being slandered and mocked and destroyed, we ought to pray, with fear and trembling and great humility, for the awful justice of God.

Second Move

So, Paul's first major encouragement to them was “God is just.” His second major encouragement to them, as we've already seen, expanded on the first: “Jesus is coming back to administer God's justice.” That is, after describing the fact of God's justice, Paul reminded them of the agent of God's justice, the one through whom that justice will be meted out: Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord, the Judge of all the earth. Now, just as with the previous assertion, Paul gave several other statements which helped flesh out some of the details of this very encouraging news of Christ's Return.

First, notice what he said about the manner of Christ's return: "from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels" (2 Thess. 1:7). In other words, this will not happen in a corner somewhere. It will be loud, splashy, publicly acknowledged by all. It will certainly *not* be the case that Christ some people fail to notice Christ's return. There will be no doubt in anyone's mind, Christian or pagan, that the Lord, the Judge of the whole earth, has returned in glory to administer the justice of God.

This, of course, reveals the deception of such groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses who, on several occasions now, have made predictions about the return of Christ and, when it didn't quite turn out the way they expected, tried to "spiritualize" his return and re-define it in some other way foreign to the teachings of Scripture. But Paul would have had none of this. The only return of Christ Paul knows about is one that is "from heaven with blazing fire with his powerful angels." The only return of Christ the New Testament knows about is a real, bodily, globally acknowledged, don't-touch-that-dial, sit-up-and-pay-attention-I'm-talking-to-you return of Jesus Christ.

Second, notice not only the manner of Christ's return, but also what the return of Jesus Christ will mean for the wicked:

"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

Now, there are several things I want to draw your attention to in these verses. First, I want you to notice the beginning of verse 8: "He will punish." That is, when Jesus comes back, when his court is in session, it will not be a sham. It will not be a mockery of justice that takes place on that day. There will be no plea-bargaining, no time off for good behavior, no meaningless judgments, no delivering of a sentence with one hand, and then in the next breath suspending it. That will *not* be happening. Jesus will punish. Our God is a punishing God.

Contrary to liberal theology which denies things like the wrath of God against sin, and universalism which denies that God would send anyone to hell, and contrary to the opinions of many others who also claim to be Christians, God *is* a punishing God. And the reason he is a punishing God is that he is a just God. His justice is all wrapped up in his ability and willingness to call evil what it is, and then to do something about it. A God that will not call evil what it is, who turns a blind eye when the wicked take advantage of the weak, a God like that would hardly be worthy of the name.

If you allow the idea that God is a punishing God to fall by the wayside, you will soon discover that you also have to let go of the idea that God is just, at least in any meaningful sense. And when you let go of the idea that God is just, you call into question how loving God truly is, and thereby you call into question

whether or not you can actually know anything about this God. When you deny that God is a punishing God, the whole ball of string begins to unravel.

The next thing I want you to notice is that the punishment is described as an “everlasting destruction.” They will be “shut out ... from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” Now, in recent years, some evangelical Christians have wanted to take passages like this to mean that hell is not a place of torment in which people dwell forever. Instead, they argue, at the last judgment the wicked are simply destroyed, annihilated. And it is not difficult to understand the motivation for seeking such an understanding of Scripture. After all, the eternal, unending judgment of God is, I must admit, something of a mystery for me, at least.

But the important thing in understanding the Scriptures is that you handle the Word of God accurately, as Paul instructed Timothy (2 Tim. 2:15). It is vitally important that you do not engage in the practice of twisting the Scriptures, making them say things which they clearly do not, just because you are not personally comfortable with the particular truth in question.

So, while I understand the sentiment behind the view that hell is annihilation, I cannot accept the forced interpretations you have to adopt in order to hold this view. There are a number of passages in the Scriptures which simply do not make sense if hell is annihilation only. Indeed, just looking at the passage before us this evening, it would seem that the most sensible understanding is that hell is not annihilation. If it were, then why wouldn't Paul have simply said in verse 9, that “They will be punished with destruction.” That would have been clear. But if hell is only destruction, then it seems strange to qualify the word “destruction” with the word “everlasting.” Indeed, is there any other kind of destruction? And why add the phrase “shut out from the presence of the Lord.” This seems to imply that there is an existing, conscious soul involved who is being shut out, eternally, from God's presence.

Now, of course, on the other side of the argument are those who ask the question, “But why, then, does Paul use the word destruction?” I think that's a fair question, and I do not have a good answer except to say that perhaps Paul was simply wanting to use a word which would adequately describe the severity and finality of hell, a word that was stronger than the word “punishment.” But even though we cannot be sure why Paul chose this particular word, it does not mean we cannot have some certainty about Paul's meaning, or at least what he doesn't mean.

Besides this, we must also remember the most essential principle of interpretation: “Scripture is its own best interpreter.” That is, when several passages of Scripture speak to an issue, we have to factor all of them into our theology. In the case of eternal punishment, we cannot base our idea of the last judgment on this passage alone. We also have to consider passages such as Luke 16:19-31 and Matthew 25:45-46, as well as others, which make it

abundantly clear that hell is not a place where souls are annihilated, but where souls suffer under the terrible judgment of a Holy God.

The last thing I want you to notice about Jesus' response to the wicked is the criteria for judgment: "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now, Paul's language here is interesting. He first talks about "those who do not know God," and this is a crucial distinction as a criteria for punishment. On more than one occasion I have heard people ask, "What about the innocent person in the jungle somewhere who has never heard about Jesus? Is God going to judge that person for not responding to a Jesus he has never heard of?"

The short response to this is two-fold. First, Romans 2 makes it clear that there are no innocent natives, in any jungle, anywhere on this planet. All people have the "law" written on their hearts and break the very law they know. Second, as this verse alludes to and as Romans 1:18-23 and Psalm 19 make abundantly clear, God has not left himself without a witness. The creation itself – the universe, the stars, the moon, etc. – all reveal the truth of the existence of God, such that people everywhere are without excuse. To be sure, people who have not heard of Christ will not be judged for that. But while they will not be judged for rejecting God the Son, they *will* be judged for rejecting God the Father. When the verse says, "He will punish those who do not know God," that word "know" is not simply talking about "knowing about" God but knowing God deeply, personally, relationally. Those who have turned from that, who have not wanted or sought that relationship with their Creator, will be judged.

Notice that Paul also talked here about people "obeying" the gospel when you might have expected him to talk about "believing" the gospel. What does it mean to obey the gospel? Well, at the heart of our response to God's saving work are two things: repentance and faith. These are responses of obedience. That is, our response to the gospel involves first admitting we are sinful people and asking for forgiveness, and second placing our trust in Christ's work on the cross, rather than in our own works, to make us right with God.

So, when Paul talked about those whom God will and will not punish, he referred to those who have obeyed the gospel. It's not enough that you have been within in earshot of the gospel, i.e., have gone to church. It is not even enough that you can explain the gospel. The issue when Christ returns will be whether you have obeyed the gospel, whether you have been genuinely converted, whether you have been broken by your sin, whether you have sought repentance, whether you are actually trusting in what Christ did and not what you do. Those will be the indicators of whether or not you know God or merely know about God.

At the end of the day, the main thing being said here is that unbelief has consequences. Saying no to God is not like saying no to anything else. There are lots of things you can say no to which will not have any real effect upon your life.

But God is not one of them. Saying no to God is like being on board a sinking ship and refusing a life preserver, like being sick and refusing a procedure that will save your life. Unbelief has consequences – eternal, unending, unrelenting, awful consequences. And that means it matters very much when your friends and family refuse to obey the Gospel. It means that we must not ever communicate to our family and friends, by our actions or lack thereof, that it is no big deal. It is a big deal – it's the biggest deal of all.

Imagine a person standing on the side of an old country road. The person standing there knows that just around the corner is a bridge that has been washed out and that cars coming down the road are in danger of going over that bridge, to their doom. Down the road comes a car, and the person standing there just smiles and waves and watches. And as the car goes around the corner, the person on the side of the road hears the screeching of tires and slamming of brakes, hears the car go over the bridge, hears the subsequent explosion, hears the screams. What kind of person would just stand there?

On another country road is the same situation. The bridge is out, a person is standing on the side of the road. Only this time the person on the side of the road is holding a sign that says, "Bridge Out." A car comes along and the driver slows down, reads the sign, and rolls down her window.

"Are you sure the bridge is out?" she asked.

"Oh, yes ma'am, I'm sure," says the man.

"But if the bridge were out, surely there would be some official signs here. Besides, I just used that bridge yesterday," she says confidently. "I think you're crazy."

And as she begins to pull away, heading toward her destruction, the man standing there just smiles and waves and says, "Well, everybody's got a right to their own opinion, I guess. Have a nice day." And the car pulls away, turns the corner, screeching tires, terrible explosion, lots of screams.

Now, both of those are ludicrous situations. You'd like to think that you would never be either type of person on the side of the road. You'd like to think that you would say something, and that when you did you would communicate that it really mattered whether people responded positively or not. We'd like to think that none of us are capable of such callous disregard for others.

But, have you looked in the mirror lately?

Paul's words here say loudly and clearly: Belief in God does matter. Belief has consequences. Unbelief has consequences. But judging from the state of the church, judging from the pattern of most Christians' lives, the question must be asked: Do we really believe it? Are we acting like people who believe that all around us are those who are heading for eternal punishment? Does our life show

that we actually, really believe in a literal hell? Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps one reason why the world doesn't believe in the reality of hell is because, from where they're standing, it doesn't appear that we believe in it either?

After Paul spoke of the manner of Christ's return, and of what Christ's return will mean for the wicked, he also mentioned what Christ's return will mean for believers. These verses indicate that, for God's people, this will be a time in which God will be "glorified" and "marveled at" by those who believed. This will be a time when all of God's people – past, present and future – will rejoice and give thanks, enjoying the presence of the Lord.

But notice that God will not only be glorified "out there," as if he were appearing on a stage and were simply standing and cheering in the audience. No, Paul's words here are very specific. He says that when Jesus comes, Jesus will be "glorified in his holy people." As Stott points out, this is not simply saying that we are like mirrors which will reflect his glory. We are more like the filament inside an incandescent light bulb that, when the switch is thrown, is changed and transformed so that light shines forth. So it will be for believers. Christ will transform us when he comes, as 1 Corinthians 15 teaches – we will be changed in a moment, into his perfect likeness, sharing in his glory, shining forth and demonstrating his glory, even as we marvel and wonder at him.

Third Move

Finally, and very quickly, notice Paul's third great encouragement to the Thessalonians. Not only did he encourage them that God is Just and that Jesus will come again to administer that justice, but he also encouraged them with the reminder and assurance that Paul and others were praying for them:

"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this 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 Thess. 1:11-12).

Now, as usual, there are several things worth pointing out here. First, notice that, although Paul has already told the Thessalonians of his assurance that "they will be counted worthy," he nevertheless says here that one of his prayers for them is that "God may count [them] worthy." Why would Paul pray for God to do something if he were already sure that God would do it? The simple answer is that assurance is no reason to stop praying for anything, but is rather a reason to pray with even greater confidence and greater persistence about it.

I hear this sort of thing said all the time with regard to the sovereignty of God: “If God has foreordained everything that happens, why should we pray?” And the answer is that God’s foreordination includes both ends and means. The answer is that we pray because God uses our prayers, because our understanding of what God is doing is not infallible, because prayer grows us and changes us. There are all sorts of reasons to pray for things, even things of which you are already assured, as Paul so clearly models here.

Second, notice Paul’s language in verse 11: “that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” I think that’s remarkable language. Here Paul shows his understanding and expectation that God’s purposes do not simply happen *to* the Thessalonians, but rather they are worked out *through* the Thessalonians. This brings to mind Paul’s teaching to the Philippians: “work out your salvation ... for it is God who works in you.” In fulfilling his purposes, God doesn’t bypass our hearts and our minds. Instead, he works in and through them, prompting us through the working of his Spirit. And that means that when we are seeking God’s will, we must not bypass our hearts and minds either but, instead, search them carefully as we search the Scriptures, seeking a point of resonance. What an encouragement for the Thessalonians to know that Paul, God’s Apostle, could see the hand of God at work in and through them, this young, fledgling, struggling church!

The third thing I want you to see is Paul’s example of encouragement. Notice what he does here: 1) he tells them that he is praying for them; and 2) he reminds them of important truths that they need to hear. What a great ministry this is. This is something that is so much more than a simple “hang in there,” or the slap-on-the-back, grin-and-bear-it sort of encouragement that Christians give each other all too often. This is more than glibly passing out some “conventional wisdom” or “my father always told me...” sort of statements. This is encouragement with teeth in it. A substantial encouragement, a meaningful encouragement, a costly encouragement, bringing the timeless truths of God to mind and encouraging people by your prayers for them and by the awareness of your prayers for them.

I had a person tell me recently, who is going through some real trials and heartache, that over the past number of weeks he has been told by countless people that they are praying for him. And he said to me, “I can’t tell you how encouraging that is. I can actually feel their prayers. I really do feel that I am being held by their prayers.” That’s encouragement.

Now does this mean that we can’t or shouldn’t do other things to encourage? Of course not! By all means, be creative in how you encourage others. But what I am saying is this: at the very least, when you think about encouraging a brother or sister in the Lord, take Paul’s example to heart. Remember the great blessing you can be to them through things like praying for them, telling them you are praying for them, praying with them, and reminding them that God is just and that Jesus is coming back to make things right. If you

do these things, you will have one of the greatest and most important ministries a Christian can ever have: the ministry of encouraging the saints.