

2 Thessalonians 1:1-9

Last Judgment, Nov. 12, 2023

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

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. 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.

Everyone likes a good old-fashioned story about vengeance. Shakespeare's famous work "Hamlet" is all about vengeance, but if you aren't familiar with Hamlet, perhaps you've seen "The Lion King," which is inspired by Hamlet. When Simba returns after all those years and confronts his evil uncle Scar, finds out what he had done, and overthrows him—that's vengeance. And it's not just a petty vengeance, it's justice. Scar had done evil, killed the king, and receives what he rightfully deserved. Or think about the movie, "The Princess Bride," one of my personal favorites. Remember the vengeance plot in that one? "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

One thing all these classic stories of vengeance have in common is that there is patience first. In them we find that old adage is true: "Revenge is a dish best served cold," meaning, after a long time. Inigo Montoya waited in patience for many years, practicing his sword fighting in order to defeat his enemy. Simba needs to leave and grow up into a full-grown lion before he's able to defeat Scar.

And we see the same sort of formula with God as we continue to wait for Judgment Day. In the words of our theme: **God Has Patience. God Will Have Vengeance.** But there is a big difference between God's patience and the patience in these classic vengeance stories, in that God is not waiting with patience trying to wait and plan His way of getting back and getting justice. God could have done that immediately! No, His patience is about something else.

You know, there's an argument that you hear all the time from the mouths of atheists who think that this is the ultimate proof that God doesn't exist. They'll say, "If there's a good God, why is there suffering?" "Why is there childhood cancer, why are there terrorist attacks, why do innocent people suffer if God exists?" You've maybe even wondered that yourself at times. People do evil things all the time and get away with it. Why? Maybe some of you remember our Bible Study last year on Habakkuk; that was the crux of his complaint against God. ***"Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth."*** (Habakkuk 1:3-4)

Is this proof that God doesn't exist? In our text, Paul says it's proof of the opposite! Paul's writing to these Thessalonian Christians who are suffering under a great deal of persecution, and he says in

verse 5, ***"This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God."*** And the ***"this"*** that he refers to is found in the previous verse, ***"All your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."*** What is more unjust and evil than Christians being persecuted and killed for their faith?

You know, this complaint that atheists make today is really similar to something that people used to say to *God's* people long ago. In the ancient world, there really weren't such things as atheists. Everybody believed there were gods, just most people believed in the wrong god, which isn't all that different from not believing in God at all. There was one man named Sennacherib who was the emperor of Assyrian Empire, the greatest empire on earth at the time. And maybe you remember this from our Bible Study on Isaiah; at the height of his power, Sennacherib brought 185,000 soldiers and surrounded Jerusalem. Imagine that number, that's four times the size of the capacity of Busch Stadium. How would you feel if you were in Jerusalem looking out at that force?

Then King Sennacherib sends out his emissary to cry out to Jerusalem, ***"Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, "The LORD will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?"*** (2 Kings 18:32-33) Sennacherib wasn't saying that the LORD didn't exist, but that He wasn't strong enough or didn't care enough to help. People said the same thing to Jesus as He hung on the cross: ***"Save yourself, and come down from the cross! . . . He saved others; He cannot save Himself."*** (Mark 15:30-31) And I'd imagine the Romans said the same things to Christians like the Thessalonians as they threw them to the lions to be eaten: "Where is your Jesus now? You say your God stopped the mouths of lions to save Daniel, lets see Him do the same thing now!"

They were all missing a few things—Sennacherib, the mockers at the cross, the Romans, atheists today—one thing that they are missing is that they don't understand evil. Atheists today in their attacks against God are really saying that there shouldn't be evil, that a just God should get rid of all evil. But I don't think they know what they are asking! God did that, didn't He? God responded to evil once by sending a global flood in which millions perished. That was God's response to evil! Before the flood, we can read God's thoughts: ***"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."*** (Genesis 6:5) And God destroyed all, minus eight souls—Noah and his family. But even *after* the flood, when it was only the immediate family of Noah left, *again* God declared, ***"The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."*** (Genesis 8:21)

Jesus identified the same problem once, saying, ***"For out of the heart come evil thoughts."*** (Matthew 15:19) There is evil; *evil* in this world comes from us! And as long as there is a single man, woman, or child in the world, it will be *filled* with evil. So, when people say that God should get rid of evil, what they're asking for is that God should get rid of us. Snuff us out. That He should *not* have spared Noah and His family, that He shouldn't have shown mercy to Adam and Eve but ended it all right there. But God didn't do it. Not because God didn't want to get rid of evil, but because **God Has Patience** first. Right from the moment of the first sin, God had a plan. To bring vengeance, to bring justice, but to do so with grace. Not to end our race, but to save our race. He told Adam and Eve how He would send His Son into the world, and then He *waited!* He waited for 4,000 years, and through that time He gave more details about where He would be born, about how He would die. And then God waited. He

waited through all those years as His people faced persecution and injustice and heartache, and He kept showing them that promise. He kept calling them to patience. And then, one night, something entirely new came into this world. For the very first time, a child was born with no evil at all. There was nothing evil in His heart but only good.

God's own Son, our Savior, was born a man, and He lived a holy life, and He taught and performed miracles, and then He died innocently for you and me and for all people upon that cross. He suffered patiently as God poured out His wrath upon Him, and then He rose from the dead. Having accomplished all that God had sent Him to do, He then sent out His apostles and He said, *"Go and tell all nations."* (cf. Matthew 28:19-20) You see, that's what God's doing now. For 4,000 years God had patience as He waited to bring His Son *into* the world, and now for the last 2,000 years God has waited with patience to bring His Son into *all* the world. To proclaim His Gospel to *all* creatures, so that *all* His people might hear and believe and be saved. That is why God is waiting!

He has patience in order to save. And so we can have patience too. That's Paul's message to the Thessalonians and, likewise, also to us. You suffer persecution *now*, but be patient in faith and in hope. Your persecution does not happen because God does not exist or care, but because He *does*. Because He is using you to bring His good news to the world. God has patience, so we should be patient too. And we don't need to seek out revenge for any wrongs, because vengeance belongs to God. And God will repay. **God will have vengeance.**

Paul describes this starting at the end of verse 7, ***"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."*** You think Sennacherib's army surrounding Jerusalem was a terrifying sight? God says He'll come with the angels, not little cherubs with harps, but angels with flaming fire. And those who have rejected Him, who have despised His patience—they will see God. And they will see something terrifying. The Bible tells us that on that day ***"they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us,'"*** (Luke 23:30) because it would be better to be crushed to death than to face God's wrath. It will wash over the face of this earth as a consuming fire, burning and melting and destroying everything. And there is nowhere to hide! Nowhere to hide except . . . in the wounds of Christ Jesus.

Notice what Paul writes, that this judgment will be on those ***"who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."*** That last phrase strikes us as a little odd, doesn't it? Obey? When you hear the word "obey," it's not the Gospel that you think about but the Law. "Obey the commandments. Do this, and you will live." That's what the Law says, and that's what it sounds like when you hear "obey." But Paul is using a little bit of beautiful irony here. To obey the Gospel is to do what the Gospel says, and what the Gospel says is, "You don't have to do anything." Paul puts it like this in Romans: ***"To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."*** (Romans 4:5) What he means is you don't need to do anything. That's what faith is! It is *not* work, but only trust.

In another place, the Jews ask Jesus, ***"What must we do to be doing the work of God?"*** Jesus

answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” (John 6:28-29) The only work that is required of you to find peace on that day is the work of faith, which isn’t a work at all, but simply a trust in the works of Christ. And faith isn’t even something that you work in yourself, because *Christ* works faith in you! That’s why Paul says in our text, **“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers.”** He doesn’t say, “Hey Thessalonians, thank you for your faith!” He doesn’t compliment *them* on their faith, He thanks *God* for their faith!

God rewards us for what He does. This all is the upside-down nature of the Gospel. God flips everything on its head. The Gospel is the declaration that sinners are no longer sinners, because the sinless one died. The dead live, because the Living One died. Therefore, they who die live, and they who live die. The first are last and the last first. The weak are strong and the strong weak. The foolish wise, the wise foolish. God humbles Himself and thus is glorified. He *loses* on the cross and so conquers; dies and so lives. He takes *your* place beneath the wrath of God, so that you have peace.

And so as terrifying as this picture of vengeance is, Paul doesn’t say it to *terrify* the Thessalonians. You know, we’ve already thought about the burning wrath poured out on the earth, but even worse is what’s said in verse 9: **“They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord.”** It’s hard for anyone to imagine what that is like, since even unbelievers receive the benefits of the Lord’s care and presence in this world, even if they refuse to acknowledge it. No one exists separate from the Lord’s presence right now, and so all people enjoy continual seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night. But that will come to an end on the Last Day, when many are *separated* from God forever. No relief to be found anywhere.

But again, this isn’t said to terrify the Thessalonians *or* us. Consider what Paul says in verse 6: **“Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted.”** God’s coming with His mighty angels is Him showing up at the last moment. You know how that happens in all the movies, in all the stories. The hero is in trouble, and right at the last moment someone comes in to save the day, the cavalry comes riding in. Jesus is the cavalry, and He comes to save you at the last moment to grant relief. So that sadness that we feel, the troubles, the persecution, when we cry out, “It’s not fair!”—God knows! He’s coming. He says, **“I am coming quickly.”** (Revelation 22: 12) He comes with vengeance to destroy evil, and He does it *for you*. He will remove all and every evil from your life forever.

On that day, there will be many who think they haven’t gotten a fair shake. Who will point to their works, like they did in our Gospel reading, “Look at all the stuff I did! I did more good than bad, didn’t I?” But those who trust in their works are those who do not know God at all. Because Jesus prays to the Father and says, **“This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”** (John 17:3) To know Jesus is the only way to know God, and to know Jesus is to know that you cannot save yourselves. It is to know that you are evil. It is to know that Jesus is your only hope. It is to know that His forgiveness is your only salvation.

This is what Paul points you to now in the midst of your troubles. In the midst of persecution, have patience. Because **God has patience now**, but **God will have vengeance**. Vengeance to deliver you to His perfect kingdom of joy, where there will be no more evil. So have patience. Amen.