

Your Faith is Not in Vain (2 Thessalonians 1:4-12)

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I'm grateful for the sermon Josh preached last Sunday on the first four verses of 2 Thessalonians as we continue our study of the two letters Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica. We're preaching them together because the theme of the second is similar to the first, namely, living with the end in view – how should we think, feel, and act today in light of what God is going to do in the future? In 2 Thessalonians in particular, Paul immediately cuts to the chase and explains the urgent importance of the issue. Thessalonians, you must live with the end in view.

Why? Because Paul learned from his friend Timothy's recent visit to Thessalonica that the young church had discovered something – following Jesus is hard. It's hard for all sorts of reasons. In their case, however, it was hard because they were being persecuted and afflicted on account of their faith. Sometimes I hear someone say how much more opposition there is to Christianity in our culture today than there was 25 years ago or 50 years ago. Truth be told, following Jesus has never made anyone popular. It didn't make the Thessalonians popular in the 1st century and it won't make you popular today.

The knife edge of the world's antagonism to the claims of Christ may have been hidden by American cultural traditions in the 1950s, but the underlying opposition to Jesus' rightful authority as our Creator and the exclusivity of salvation through faith in Christ alone has never been well received. Why not? Because Jesus violates our modern sensibility that we are in charge. The world hated him accordingly and should not be surprised when, as a result of choosing to follow him, we experience the same.

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you..." John 15:18-20

When we hear the word "persecution," our minds easily go to some other people in some other place where it's illegal to be a Christian. Maybe you think of a story you read on the news where someone was physical attacked or beaten for owning a Bible or sharing their faith. The kind of persecution our brothers and sisters in places like Afghanistan, China, or North Korea experience is certainly worthy of our



attention and prayer. But if that's the only category you have for persecution – some other people in some other place – you are cutting yourself off from the hope and help God wants to give you for the different, but no less real, persecution we experience as Christians right here in our own community.

Is following Jesus illegal in Richmond, Virginia? No. Thank God. But is the truth Jesus lived and spoke and the truth we live and speak as his followers broadly welcomed or broadly opposed? It's opposed, right? It's always been. There's a faith-undermining, joy-robbing, kind of persecution and affliction we experience as Christians as a result, regardless of the legality of our chosen religion. It's the not-so-subtle sense that we're the odd man out. We're the strange ones who need to get with the program.

Everyone else is going along, seemingly having a generally good time, and you're over here denying yourself and fighting to steward your money, conduct your relationships, select your entertainment, direct your sexuality, choose your words, and reorder your affections in accordance with an old book. Seriously? I mean, props for embracing the golden rule and all. But let's not get too radical or intolerant. Last I checked, the world keeps right on going the way it always has. So you do you, I do me, and everyone can be happy, provided you stop taking the whole faith in Jesus thing so seriously.

If you're a Christian, I seriously doubt anyone stuck a gun in your face this week on account of your faith in Christ. But I am 100% certain you felt, on some level, the sense of being an opposed, unwelcome stranger and exile in a world that doesn't want God to be in charge. In the midst of that kind of creeping sense of alienation and the spiritual suffering that goes with it, where will you turn for comfort? Where will you turn for assurance that your faith is not in vain? Paul's answer in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-12 may surprise you. You need to take refuge in the coming judgment of God.

For all the details in these verses, the main point is quite simple. The coming judgment of God ensures that our faith is not in vain. We serve a God of justice who will not be mocked forever. He's too jealous for his glory. And when we're tempted to give up, tempted to call it quits and go back to doing life our way because it's easier, we need to remember at least 3 things about the justice of God and the future judgment it entails.

1) ENDURANCE IN SUFFERING DISPLAYS GOD'S JUSTICE

The first phrase in verse 5 reaches back to verse 4. “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God...” What evidence are we talking about? Verse 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.*” How is “steadfastness and faith” in the midst of “persecution” and “affliction” evidence of the righteous judgment of God? It doesn’t feel like that in the moment.

What does it feel like when you’re suffering on the path of obedience to Jesus? It feels like something has gone terribly wrong. If God is real and if everything he’s promised in his Word is true, then how come the more I try to do and say what Jesus tells me to do and say, the more difficult my marriage gets, the harder parenting becomes, the more my mom thinks I don’t love her, and the more the other guys on my sports team maintain their distance, leaving me socially isolated and tempted to compromise my faith to make a friend? Staying the course, continuing to follow Jesus, feels like getting hit in the face and then popping back up and saying, “Please sir, may I have another?”

Evidence of the righteous judgment of God? I keep on loving him and he keeps on treating me like dirt. Where’s the “righteous judgment” in that? Friend, when you endure suffering at the hands of others for the sake of following Jesus your very act of endurance – the steadfastness and faith Paul commends in the Thessalonians in verse 4, proves something.

It proves, it demonstrates, it makes an undeniably loud statement that God is on your side and his power will ultimately triumph. The sustaining grace at work in your life, the supernatural help God is giving you to keep going when it would be easier to call it quits and avoid the affliction, shouts to the world that righteousness will prevail. It’s a vindication in advance from the Lord.

Your suffering for his sake may not go away anytime soon. But your steadfastness in the teeth of affliction, the very fact that you keep on loving him and loving the people around you when they’re making it so hard should convince you and the watching world that your faith is not in vain. Supernatural perseverance on the part of a suffering Christian is a living and breathing invasion of the justice of God in a world of pain. The Lord sees you. The Lord is with you. And he is upholding you in the midst of it because you have chosen a path that is pleasing to him. It is not easy, but it is glorious because he is using your suffering, even now, to bring you to himself.

Don't miss what Paul says in the middle of verse 5. Your suffering isn't pointless. It isn't futile. It has a purpose. It's accomplishing something incredibly good and beautiful in your life. "...That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God." By "considered worthy" Paul doesn't mean we earn God's love or acceptance by enduring persecution. God isn't sitting up in heaven saying, "Let me see how much you're willing to put up with for my sake and then I'll decide if I want you."

No, the only way we enter the kingdom of God, the only way we experience his redemptive rule as redeemed sons and daughters of the King, is through trusting the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus brings us in through his life and death. We don't bring ourselves in. And yet, we must not forget what necessarily confirms the authenticity of our faith. It's suffering. Why? Because we follow a suffering Savior. If you think you're following Jesus, but you never experience any opposition, resistance, or affliction as a result, it's quite possible you're not following him at all. You're simply using him whenever it's convenient.

I'm not saying that a life that is largely free from major troubles is necessarily ungodly. I am saying that far from calling into question the truth of what we believe or the glory of the life we have chosen as Christians, suffering actually confirms it. 1 Peter 4:12-14 says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

Your endurance in affliction on the path of obedience is evidence of something – the righteous judgment of God – and it is effecting something, namely, it is confirming that you are indeed on the path to glory and proclaiming the worth and value of the kingdom of God in the process. Don't miss the final phrase in verse 5. "...for which you are also suffering."

When we obediently endure affliction, we're not ultimately suffering for our own sake, as if the only benefit is a greater sense of personal assurance that God considers us worthy of membership in his kingdom. We're suffering for his sake. "That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering." So how does that work? In what sense are we suffering for the kingdom of God?

We suffer for God's kingdom in the sense that our obedient endurance declares that the joy of knowing and following Jesus is infinitely superior to the joy of having an easy or trouble-free life. No one bats an eye if you "choose" Jesus and it never costs you something. But if you "choose" Jesus and then your roommate watches you restrain your sexual desires to honor God's good design for sex in marriage, that will raise eyebrows. That suffering, and the mockery and embarrassment that often come with it – What? You're a virgin? How quaint." Shouts to the world that Jesus is better and in so doing, you display the justice of God. You hold forth to the world what GOD says is true, and good, and right.

In both what it evidences and effects, our endurance in suffering displays God's justice.

2) JESUS' RETURN GUARANTEES GOD'S JUSTICE

I can imagine the Thessalonians listening to Paul's letter as it was read to them. Take heart, guys! Your steadfastness and faith in suffering is evidence of the righteous judgment of God. God's on your side. It's proof that you're part of his kingdom. And it's even now testifying to the supremacy of his worth. So all together now...one...two...three...let's go suffering!

Not so fast. All of those promises are encouraging, but there's one thing I still haven't heard you say, Paul. Is it ever going to end? Is following Jesus always going to be hard? Will my life as a Christian always be more difficult and painful than the life of a non-Christian? No, friend. The justice of God we display through obedient suffering is more than a spiritual principle or a divine idea to which we hope the arc of history bends. There is a point in time, an actual day in human history, when it will fully come to pass in a final act of divine judgment.

The justice of God has a finish line. The justice of God has an end point. There is a coming day when those who presently afflict others will be afflicted and those who are presently afflicted will find rest. The righteous judgment of God will prevail and in verses 6-10, Paul makes at least three points about that coming reality.

First, God's judgment is PERSONAL. Notice Paul doesn't say, "Those who afflict you will be afflicted," as if the winds of fortune will eventually shift and dish back on your enemies' heads all they have mercilessly poured out on you. What does he say? Verse 6, "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..." It couldn't be more



personal. Christian, your enemies are his enemies. He takes it upon himself to give your enemies what they deserve and to give you what you deserve.

Oh that we might have the humility to allow God to be God and stop trying to do his job for him! How tempting it is to try and give those who hurt us just a little taste of their own medicine by taking matters into our own hands or demanding the governing authorities do it for us. Governing authorities God establishes and the sword they wield on his behalf are a gift when they exercise their power in keeping with his word.

But our hope for justice doesn't ultimately lie in a legal system or a human court of law, as much as it is good and right for us to benefit from them and advocate for their improvement. Our hope for justice lies with the Lord. Christian, he is your defender. He is the one who upholds your cause. Don't hope in the justice of men. Hope in the justice of God for he will personally ensure that his righteous judgments come to pass.

His justice is both completely proportional and entirely fair. It is not capricious or uncontrolled. The simple repetition of the word "afflicted" assures as much. God will personally "repay with affliction," those who presently afflict his people. And God will personally "grant relief" to his people who are presently afflicted. That's good news when you're suffering at the hands of wicked men. The Lord is on your side, your enemies are his enemies, your suffering will not last forever because his justice will prevail.

Second, God's judgment is FULFILLED IN THE FUTURE. This may be the hardest part of the whole equation for us, brothers and sisters. We're happy to wait for God's justice to prevail, for you know, a good 5-10 minutes. But then when it seems like the wicked continue to prosper and we continue to suffer, all bets are off. Hands that once came to God with a tearful cry for mercy in the midst of injustice begin to shake in anger at the Lord, convinced he's failing to do what he's supposed to do.

What's the problem? We forget that God does not yoke himself to the time we think is best. He tells us to trust him and wait for the time that he says is best. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." So when will God's righteous judgment finally come to pass? Verse 7,

“...WHEN the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire...”

Throughout the Bible, the presence of God is symbolized by fire. Fire symbolizes God’s absolute holiness, a consuming purity that destroys all who arrogantly set themselves in opposition to the Lord. Friends, that’s exactly what Jesus will be like when he returns. On that day, what will he do? He will (verse 8) “...inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

It’s two ways of describing the same group of people. They are people who do not know God in the sense that they refuse to believe and trust in him as he has revealed himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, they’re not Christians.

You cannot know God apart from Jesus, friend. The Christ of Christianity is not one expression of the “knowledge of God” among a multitude of equal expressions. Unless you have repented of disobedience of God’s law, placed your trust wholly and completely in the Savior who lived, died, and rose from the grave for the forgiveness of your sins, and submitted every area of your life to his rightful authority, the “god” you think you know is a god of your own imagination. If you want to know the one true God, the only God, you must come to him as he has revealed himself in Jesus.

And if you do not, if you think you know better, don’t really need him, or your life does not reflect a pattern of obedience to the truth of the gospel, you should be absolutely terrified of dying. Why? Because after that day, it will be too late. For the judgment of God against your sin isn’t just personal or fulfilled in the future. It is eternal.

Third, God’s judgment is ETERNAL. Verse 9, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Whether we know God or not, whether we’re following Jesus or not, isn’t an intellectual issue or a religious issue. It’s a moral issue. Failure to submit to his authority deserves “punishment.” Why? Because God created us, and as his creatures, we are accountable to him for what we do with the gift of life he has given us.

And what will the punishment every person who rejects Jesus consist of? “Eternal destruction” – the exact opposite of the eternal life God freely holds out to us through faith in Jesus. Friend, if you die apart from Christ, you will not vanish. You will not disappear. Nor will you be annihilated. You will wake up to the terror of an eternal night of pain and torment under the wrath of God.

Anticipating the judgment to come, the prophet Isaiah wrote in his final words (Isa 66:24), “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” Hell is not a joke. It isn’t a religious scare tactic. It is a consequence of the very justice of God.

The Bible does not tell us all the details we might want to know about hell. We do know it is a place of eternal punishment. Why? Because the measure of punishment we deserve is determined not by how we compare to our fellow man. It is determined by the glory of the one we have offended. Our Creator is infinitely glorious and thus the punishment our sin deserves is infinitely great.

Notice, in part, what the punishment of eternal destruction consists of – being forever separated from the presence and glory of Jesus. Does that surprise you? Do you read that and think to yourself, “I can imagine something worse?” If you do, friend, I warn you. You are speaking the words of an idolater. For the degree to which you think there is something more devastating than losing the joy of knowing God is the degree to which you are chasing or have settled in your heart for an inferior pleasure, a false god that will inevitably disappoint and ruin you. There is no anguish in hell greater than the anguish of eternal separation from the light of God’s face, from the only glory that can satisfy your soul.

No one else ultimately can. You were made to know him. You were made to enjoy him. Every other pleasure in this world pales in comparison to him. Do not destroy your soul by rejecting what is infinitely satisfying. Turn from your sin and come to Jesus. Trust him to save you, to restore the relationship with God that your sin has broken. For if you do, friend, on the day he returns to execute the righteous judgment of God, you will not be filled with terror. You will be filled with joy.

Look at verse 10. When Jesus returns, Paul assures the Thessalonians, he will not only inflict vengeance on his enemies and the enemies of his people. He will come “to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed...” Think about that. Jesus be glorified in “his saints,” in his people, when on that day

he finally removes every last trace of sin in us. We will become the perfect image-bearers of God we were made to be. The revelation of Jesus Christ will also be the revelation of the sons of God.

That is a work Jesus himself will do in us, brothers and sisters. And yet, on that day, we will not be passively standing by. We will be actively “marveling” at the majesty and splendor of our Savior. We will be preoccupied with seeing and enjoying God. I love that picture because it reminds me the choice between heaven and hell isn’t just a choice between life and death in some sort of abstract sense. It’s a choice between infinite joy and infinite sorrow. If the great sorrow of eternal destruction in hell is separation from Jesus the great joy of eternal life in heaven is being with Jesus

The justice of God has a finish line. The justice of God has an end point. Jesus’ return guarantees God’s justice – a day when the wicked will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. The coming judgment of God ensures that our faith is not in vain.

CONCLUSION

I say our “faith” is not in vain because it is only through faith, or trust in Jesus, that we can be assured of eternal life on the day of God’s judgment. Hence, Paul reinforces in verse 10 the necessity of believing the apostolic testimony about Jesus. Yet his confidence for the Thessalonians future glory, in contrast to the future destruction of their enemies, is not in the strength of their faith. It’s in the power of God to keep them faithful in following Jesus to the very end.

Verses 11-12, “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...” Paul’s prayer reflects the Lord’s priority for us as we walk the path of obedience suffering. It’s not passive endurance. There is a form of “holding on” until Jesus vindicates us in the end that ignores his active purpose and goal for our lives in the middle. Our present suffering on the path of obedience to Jesus is hard, but it has a purpose far greater than spiritual survival.

The Lord is even now mightily at work in your life, Christian, making you more like Jesus. God has effectually called us to receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Christ. And while we wait to enjoy that gift in all its fullness, the Lord prepares us for the final day, he makes us worthy of his calling, by making us more like himself –



not just despite our suffering, but through our suffering. As that happens in the present, brothers and sisters, Jesus is glorified in us and we are glorified in him. All of that – the power of God that keeps us faithful on the path of obedience to Jesus, even in suffering, is a gift of his grace.

May Paul's confidence for the Thessalonians' perseverance in the faith, even in the teeth of opposition and affliction, remain our own. Our God is mighty to save. The coming judgment of God ensures that our faith is not in vain and it is the very power of God himself that sustains and grows our faith, day by day, until the day he brings us home.

Don't give up. Don't grow weary. Your endurance displays God's justice. Jesus' return guarantees God's justice. In Christ, we have all the hope we need to persevere. May we remain faithful to trust and obey the Lord, brothers and sisters, even as we wait for him, knowing he will most certainly remain faithful to us.