

## When the Roll is Called Up Yonder

2 Thessalonians 1.5-12

We hear a lot about ‘justice’ today, but the harder we try to achieve it, the more we fail! In a world shrouded in sin, Christians look for Jesus’ return. When He comes, His righteous judgment will render rewards and retribution to every person.

## 1. God’s Righteous Judgment for believers (5, 7, 10)

- Counted worthy of the Kingdom (5)
- Relief from suffering (7)
- In the presence of the Lord (10)

## 2. God’s Righteous Judgment for unbelievers (6, 8-9)

- Those who persecute now will experience tribulation (6)
- Eternally separated from the presence of God (8-9)

## 3. How Should We Then Pray? (11-12)

- That God will count us worthy of our calling (11)
- That our lives would bring glory to Christ (12)

1 Thessalonians 1.3-12

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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A recent report from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimated that nearly a million Christians have been

martyred around the world in the last 10 years. That may be hard for you to wrap your brain around, so I brought this month's copy of the Voice of the Martyrs magazine to put a human face on that number. A young Nepalese Christian woman was beaten and forced to move because she converted to Christianity. A former Colombian rebel who became a Christian is being hunted by revolutionary forces. Three Laotian families were expelled from their village because of their faith in Christ. An Islamic sheikh in Kenya is encouraging Muslims to kill Somali refugees who are becoming Christians.

The 2000 years since Jesus ascended to heaven are filled with stories like these. The book of Acts records the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and says that there were many more. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* chronicles thousands who died for their faith. In the last century many millions have died for their faith, and today persecution continues. We don't think of it, because by God's grace, we've lived our lives in a bubble of freedom, but that bubble is bursting. Christians are facing increasing persecution in America.

That is precisely why the message of 2 Thessalonians is so important for us to grasp, and embrace, right now. Last week we began our examination of this epistle by focusing on Paul's opening comments, where he praises the Christians in Thessalonica for their vibrant faith, in the face of virulent persecution. He concludes in v5 by making the radical statement that their suffering is an indication of God's righteous judgment. How can unjust persecution possibly be 'righteous'?

The biblical answer is that God is a righteous Judge, and His righteous judgment for Christians and non-Christians will be finally realized at the second coming of Christ. In these verses, Paul gives a graphic contrast between what will happen in the end to Christians who suffer for Christ now, and what will happen in the end to unbelievers who persecute Christians now.

God's Righteous Judgment for believers (5, 7, 10)

- Counted worthy of the Kingdom (5)

God's righteous judgment for believers who now suffer is stated in v5: *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.* In v11, Paul prays for the persecuted Christians to remain strong in the face of their trials: *To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling...*

What does it mean to be counted worthy of the kingdom, or worthy of our calling? We must not lose our bearings here. Paul is talking to Christians, urging them to bear up under persecution. He is *not* saying that telling them that unless they suffer persecution for Jesus, they won't go to heaven. And yet that is precisely what some say.

John Piper is a prominent pastor and author, but when he addresses what it means to be *worthy*, he writes this:

*In justification, faith receives a finished work of Christ performed outside of us and counted as ours – imputed to us. ... In final salvation at the last judgment, faith is*

*confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved through that fruit and that faith. . . These works of faith, and this obedience of faith, these fruits of the Spirit that come by faith, are necessary for our final salvation. No holiness, no heaven. So, we should not speak of getting to heaven by faith alone in the same way we are justified by faith alone.*

You're probably thinking, "Wait a minute! Did he say we don't get to heaven by faith alone?" Here's another quote by John Piper:

*"How can a person be right with God" The stunning Christian answer is: sola fide – faith alone. But be sure you hear this carefully and precisely: He says right with God by faith alone, not attain heaven by faith alone. There are other conditions for attaining heaven, but no others for entering a right relationship to God. In fact, one must already be in a right relationship with God by faith alone in order to meet the other conditions.*

I'm not picking on John Piper. Sadly, this gospel of good works is preached by many today. Let's get our bearings: Jesus gave His life for us so that we could receive the free gift of eternal life. We give our lives for Christ so that we will receive rewards when Jesus returns.

Paul is not threatening the Thessalonians with hell if they don't suffer for Christ: He is encouraging them to remain strong by reminding them that God is a righteous judge, and He will recognize them as 'worthy' when He comes in His kingdom.

- Relief from suffering (7)

A second way that God shows Himself to be a righteous judge is by giving Christians who suffer now relief from suffering in the end. Verse 7 says: *...and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire.*

Those Christians being mistreated in Thessalonica, and any Christians who face persecution for their faith today, can look forward to a day when they will have rest from their trials.

When? When is Jesus going to be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire? At His second coming (Rev. 19.11-21), when He returns to reign for a thousand years. In this life, these Christians faced trials for Christ. In His kingdom, they will receive honor.

- In the presence of the Lord (10)

The final evidence of God's righteous judgment for faithful Christians is in v10: They will be in the presence of the Lord...*when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed – for our testimony to you was believed.* Let me make a simple suggestion: If this world gets you down, and you begin to despair, read the last four chapters of the Bible – Rev. 19-22. Sometimes it helps to know how the story ends, and what God has in store for Christians who suffer for Christ now.

## 2. God's Righteous Judgment for unbelievers (6, 8-9)

- Those who persecute now will experience tribulation (6)

God's righteous judgment is also displayed in what lies in store for those who persecute Christians now. In v6 we read: *For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you...*

This reflects God's sovereign law of retribution, called *lex talionis*. We see it in the Old Testament in 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' The punishment matches the crime. Those who unjustly afflict Christians now will be afflicted when Jesus returns.

- Eternally separated from the presence of God (8-9)

But far worse is the punishment for rejecting Jesus Christ: Eternally separated from the presence of God. There is no dodging this in vv8-9: *...dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power...*

The idea of an eternal hell is considered passé by modern theologians, but not Scripture. Cults and isms have done away with hell except for the very worst sinners. Former megachurch pastor Rob Bell says unbelievers can accept Christ after death, meaning virtually no one goes to hell. To tell you the truth, I don't like it, but that doesn't make it untrue!

Both here, in the teaching of Jesus, and in the prophetic teaching of Revelation, it is clear. This should motivate every believer to tell others about Jesus.

Having encouraged the Thessalonian Christians – and us – by highlighting God's righteous judgment, Paul ends with a prayer. It is a prayer that I would encourage every Christian to *personalize* for yourself. It has two parts:

## 3. How Should We Then Pray? (11-12)

- That God will count us worthy of our calling (11)

First, pray that God will count you worthy of your calling. *To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power...*

This isn't a prayer that God would give us a break, or cut us some slack, or let us off easy. Just the opposite. It is a prayer that God would find us to have been faithful when we stand before Him. It is a prayer for Him to strengthen us as we stand strong for Him.

When I was in Bible college, I put off studying until the night before a test. I'd try to cram everything in my brain. In class, the teacher would pray that God would help us remember what we'd studied. I usually did poorly. Why? Because I wasn't *worthy of my calling* as a student. I was not faithful in my study. And when we stand before Jesus being counted worthy will depend on whether or not we have lived our lives for Him. He will give us the strength to do it; we just have to want it.

- That our lives would bring glory to Christ (12)

Secondly, pray that your life would bring glory to Christ. I love Paul's two-sided prayer here: *...so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

When we live our lives before the world humbly for Jesus Christ, two things happen: Jesus is glorified – He is 'magnified' in our lives: Others look at us, and are drawn to Jesus Christ by what they see. Second, we are glorified in Him – that is, our lives are enhanced because of our association with Him and our faithfulness to Him. We get the best life now, and the best in the life to come.

I began by talking about suffering Christians around the world, and mentioning some that are highlighted in the Voice of the Martyrs magazine. These people are facing persecution, but as you read their stories and look at their pictures, something stands out: They are not defeated. In fact, they are often overflowing with joy. They have been chosen to suffer for Christ, and they seem to know that because God is a righteous judge, they will one day be counted worthy of the Kingdom. And they're right.

So I invite you today: Live your life for Christ, and look forward to His return.

Piper quotes:

In justification, faith receives a finished work of Christ performed outside of us and counted as ours — imputed to us. ... In final salvation at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved through that fruit and that faith. . .

These works of faith, and this obedience of faith, these fruits of the Spirit that come by faith, are necessary for our final salvation. *No holiness, no heaven.* So, we should not speak of getting *to heaven* by faith alone in the same way we are justified by faith alone. (John Piper, "Does God Really Save Us By Faith Alone?" Accessed <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>, Oct. 3, 2020.)

"How can a person be right with God?" The stunning Christian answer is: sola fide – faith alone. But be sure you hear this carefully and precisely: He says right with God by faith alone, not *attain heaven* by faith alone. *There are other conditions for attaining heaven*, but no others for entering a right relationship to God. In fact, one must already be in a right relationship with God by faith alone in order to meet the *other conditions*. [John Piper, Foreword to Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan, 2015), 11.]

Scriptures re. God's righteous judgment:

Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law; you grant him relief from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not reject his people; he will never forsake his inheritance. Judgment will again be founded on righteousness, and all the upright in heart will follow it. (Psalm 94.12-15)

Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy. (Psalm 45.6-7)

The prophet Isaiah told of a day when "the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field." (Isaiah 32.15-16)

## Digging Deeper

1. We pick up Paul's thought at v5: The context is the faithfulness of the Thessalonian Christians in the face of persecution (3-4). In the rest of this chapter, Paul's focus is on God's 'righteous judgment.' Events in their lives seemed *unjust*, but Paul reveals that God is *just*, a fact which will be demonstrated in the future. Read verses 5-12. When will God's righteous judgment finally be realized? How is that time described?
2. Contrast the experience of those who are suffering persecution for their faith in Christ now with their experience in the day of God's righteous judgment (verses 5, 7, 10). Read Jesus' words of encouragement to His disciples in John 14.1-3. Consider the faith of OT saints described in Hebrews 11.13-16. How can we cultivate this kind of focus in our lives?
3. The subject of hell is unpopular today: People prefer God's love to His punishment. But both show His righteous judgment, and we are dishonest if we don't share the 'bad news' as well as the 'good news.' In verses 6 and 8-9, what sobering truths about the future judgment of unbelievers are revealed?
4. The idea of eternal hell is offensive to many people today, who think such an idea is beneath a loving God. Cults and religions have largely done away with it. Former megachurch pastor Rob Bell says unbelievers can accept Christ after they die; in effect, virtually no one goes to hell. Many evangelical scholars do not believe in an eternal hell anymore. It just isn't popular. Frankly, I don't *like it*, either – but that doesn't make it untrue!

The question is, but what does the Bible teach? Luke 16.19-31, and Revelation 19.20; 20.10-15; and 21.8 must be considered. John Lennon invited us to 'Imagine there's no heaven...no hell below us, above us only sky.' If there's no eternal hell, is there an eternal heaven? As you contemplate this issue, think about Jesus' command: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16.15).