

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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[0 : 00] So I'm back to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1, page 989. Page 989. While you're turning there, let me tell you a little story. Many, many years ago, nearly the quarter of a century now, when I left school, I went to Kenya for a year to teach in a little school in a village pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

And what struck me, well lots of things struck me I suppose, but the first four Sundays I was there in the local village church, I think it was three of the first four sermons, all preached by different preachers, no kind of common text or series, but they were all in heaven.

They were all in heaven. I remember as an 18-year-old thinking, I've never heard this before, I've grown up in my church all my life, I've never heard this kind of thing, why? And my reflection then, and I still hold to it now, nearly 25 years later, is that I actually was so comfortable in this country, in this life, that we don't think about heaven, the second coming, and all that kind of stuff at all. Whereas when you live in a rural village in Kenya, where the cattle are the only thing you have, and where they're dying around you, as they were the year I was there, then actually, you're looking for something better.

You're looking for something better. You know something is wrong. I was reflecting that again the other week at the prayer gathering, hearing the goulas from Nigeria, telling us all about the refugees they're looking after, who fled Boko Haram.

[1 : 28] Think about it when we look at the news. See the atrocities committed by IS, and all that. There is something wrong with this world. There is something better coming, for those who are in Christ.

But I think the danger I face, and I suspect many of us do, because we live in a part of the world where when we get thirsty we can turn on a tap, where we can vote in our elections, and not fear being shot for voting the wrong way, except by certain factions of the media possibly, we get so comfortable, we actually just forget that there really is more to life than this.

And also, living in a culture that is pluralistic, where everyone believes that if there is a God, then it doesn't really matter how you worship him or her or it, providing your spiritual, that's okay, all paths lead to the same thing.

In that kind of atmosphere, although in our heads we know that is wrong, I wonder if actually in our daily lives we can grow to accept it, just because it's the air everyone breathes.

And I wonder if those are also reasons why Two Thessalonians is not a book that's preached on very often. And I've discovered in preparing it, it's not a book that has commentaries written about it very often either.

[2 : 47] I have four commentaries written by two different people. I guess they did well getting money to doing it twice in two different series, but anyway. And one of the books Paul let me actually only does one Thessalonians, not two.

So there's a poverty out there. But anyway, here we go. The background to this little church is they were suffering persecution. You heard that in reading from Acts. We looked at the church being planted.

Thessalonica was a big city in the region. It was the capital city of Macedonia. It was a free city in the Roman Empire. So they had a certain amount of freedom. Which is why when Paul and Silas turn up preaching Christ is Lord instead of Caesar is Lord, the political leaders get a bit upset and the crowds get violent because they're worried that some of their privileges might be revoked if it's thought that Caesar is no longer Lord in this city.

And so it seems that the persecution whipped up by the Jews, who didn't like what Paul was saying, is being mainly carried out by the authorities and by those who are scared of the status quo being

lost in the city they're in.

Now Paul had to leave quite quickly. He'd already written one letter to them dealing with certain aspects of the second coming and various other things. And now he writes a second letter to them. We'll see in chapter 2 it's partly because they're confused about the day of the Lord and so he's putting them right.

[4 : 14] But he's also writing to them because they are suffering. They are suffering. Life is hard for them. But as Paul writes, he wants them to know that the Lord is a just judge, that what they're going through will not be overlooked.

And because the Lord is a just judge, Christians, including them and us, can depend upon him in the midst of their trials. Now what does it look like for Paul to depend on the Lord as he hears these dear young Christians suffering?

Well it means thankfulness, confidence and longing. Thankfulness, confidence and longing. But before we look at those in detail, can you look at verse 2 and verse 12?

See how this starts and ends. It's all bracketed by the same thing. Verse 2, We will all grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And you look on to verse 12.

How does he end? Praise all this according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fundamentally, this is about grace. It's about God's unmerited goodness to the undeserving, to his undeserving people.

[5 : 25] That's the key to endurance in trials and afflictions. God's grace. Not Britain determination. Not kind of British stoicism that just tries to ignore things and get on with it.

But God's grace. We can see why Paul prays with confidence that the Lord, his gracious God, is also a righteous judge. How do you start to pray?

How do we start to pray for our brothers and sisters in Nigeria? How do we start to pray for Christians we know who are struggling here in this country? I don't know about you, but I tend to want to go straight to the problem.

Straight to what the issue is. But how does Paul begin? Look at verse 3. We are 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. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God. Paul starts with thankfulness.

[6 : 24] Because he's depending on the fact the Lord is a righteous judge, he can start with thankfulness. Thankfulness for God's work in them. The three things specifically he's thankful for. Do you notice that? He's thankful for their faith.

Their faith is growing. Verse 3. And that's an answer to prayer. Back in 1 Thessalonians 3.10, he said, We pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Guess what? The Lord was going to answer that prayer but not the way Paul wanted. Paul didn't get to go and see them face to face again. But the Lord is abundantly able to increase people's faith even without Paul's visit.

So the heart of Paul's prayer was answered there. Despite the affliction, the Lord was able to increase their faith. And part of that is because faith is like a muscle.

If you want your muscles to grow, what do you need to do? Go to a gym. Exercise them. Do whatever it takes. Faith grows as it's exercised. As the Thessalonians had to lean more and more on God's promises.

[7 : 33] As they saw more and more of God providing and protecting them in terrible circumstances. So their faith increased. So Paul is thankful that this righteous judge, the Lord, is working in them to increase their faith.

And secondly, their love is increasing. Verse 3. Again, it's something else Paul had prayed for back in 1 Thessalonians 3.12. He prayed their love for one another would increase. And so it is.

The Lord is using these trials to deepen their love. And of course the church, this church, the church in Thessalonica was not a special interest group. Strangers chasing restless dreams, now one in Christ alone.

People from different socio-economic backgrounds in Thessalonica. Read us some who were wealthy of the city, like Jason, in whose house they no doubt met. Some who were lazy and didn't want to work and were sponging off others, and yet loving each other.

They were Jews and Gentiles together, loving each other. And that love growing more and more in affliction. You see, the Lord was at work. There's a third thing he gives thanks for as well.

[8 : 38] Look at verse 4. It is right for us, therefore, therefore, therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and afflictions you are enduring.

Now, how do you think Paul was boasting about them? What do you think that means? Do you think that meant he went to the latest church planting conference, so, look at that church in Thessalonica I planted. They're great. Look at them. Oh.

No, of course not. He's saying, look at that church. Look how the Lord is sustaining them in the midst of all they're going through. His boasting is actually a form of thanksgiving to God.

He's encouraging others. Praise God for what he is doing amongst these people. And what is steadfastness amongst trials? Well, last Sunday evening when I got home after the evening service, I found we had a leaking a drip somewhere in our house or a leaking toilet.

So I went to our stopcock to try and turn all the water off so I could fix it. And of course I couldn't. Partly kind of tense saying weakling. But it was steadfastness under that pressure. It would not budge.

[9 : 46] And so is with the Thessalonians. They would not budge under all that pressure. See, steadfastness is hope made visible. Steadfastness is hope made visible.

Because they trusted that Jesus Christ was coming back one day, they would not budge in those trials. And that was God's work amongst them. So there are three things that Paul is thankful to God for.

Their faith, their love, their steadfastness, which is hope in action. And you can see why Paul thinks it's worth giving thanks to God for this if you look at verse 5. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God.

Now that sounds weird to us, doesn't it? You're suffering and this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God? Well no, that's not what Paul is saying. Paul is saying this growth, this growth that you're experiencing in faith and love and endurance, all that under pressure is a sign of the righteous judgment of God.

That you may, he's letting you go through all this in order that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you're suffering. In other words, God is using all this to strengthen your faith, to deepen your love, to strengthen your hope so that he will consider you worthy.

[11 : 06] Not because you've done things that are worthy but because he has made you worthy.

So on that last day the whole world will see that his judgment is righteous. And you see here, God is working through this suffering, through the trials and afflictions they're going through.

Paul uses both those words earlier. Persecutions and the afflictions you're enduring. Persecutions, obviously, specifically directed to these Christians. Afflictions, that can be any of the sort of suffering we go through as human beings of living in a fallen world.

Death, disease, unemployment, etc. God uses all these things for the good of his people in Thessalonica. That's how powerful God is.

He takes what Satan does. He will let Satan do things but only insofar as he will use them to achieve the opposite of Satan's purpose. Of course, the great example of that is the cross, isn't it? Herod and the, well, the Pilate and the Jewish leaders conspired to kill off Jesus. Satan thinking that was a great victory and yet it was the very act by which Satan was defeated.

[12 : 17] God will use all that Satan throws at his people for God's glory and for his people's good. and Paul rejoices and is thankful, therefore, that he's depending on God's righteous judgment.

Well, not only is he thankful but also he's confident. Let's look at the second point now. You look at verses 6-10. He is confident in God's vindication. He's thankful for their spiritual growth rather than their material comfort.

Now he's confident in God's final vindication. In order to encourage these brothers and sisters, he doesn't just give them platitudes, rather he paints a picture of what is coming.

He shows them what the future holds in God's providence and its vindication. Look at verse 6. All this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God since indeed 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 when the Lord Jesus is revealed with his mighty angels.

See, Paul's arguing that their spiritual growth is a sign that one day God is going to put everything right. And we need God to put things right, don't we? We need there to be a just God.

[13 : 35] We long for that. We long for those who are afflicting in so terrible ways in Nigeria or in Syria or in many other places on the earth.

We long for that to be put right, don't we? If we don't long for that to be put right then we don't really understand how deep human depravity is. People who say I don't like the idea of a God who judges obviously have never really suffered.

They've never really seen injustice. When someone we love is afflicted and hurt we naturally want justice for them. I don't know if you remember back in 2009 Abdul Basid Ali Al-Maghrabi was released from prison in Scotland.

The man convicted of Lockerbie bombing. And on his release from prison in Scotland on compassionate grounds because he was suffering from cancer apparently well they then went home to a hero's welcome in Gaddafi's trip to Libya.

But there was outcry in the US. Understandably those who'd lost relatives from Lockerbie bombing wanted justice to be done and couldn't see how justice was being exercised with this man going home to a hero's welcome.

[14 : 44] We can understand that cry can't we? Yet there is a God who will judge justly. He is fair.

All the words here point to that fairness. That word vengeance in verse 7 has at its root in the original language the word righteous just. In verse 9 it talks about suffering the punishment being paid back.

Actually that's the words used there are not hitting someone back in anger rather it's the just retribution a judge orders for after carefully evaluating all the evidence.

God's vengeance is absolutely fair. When's it going to happen? Verse 7 it's when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire.

Revealed. Like he's there behind the curtain. Like actors on the stage who are there already when the curtains pull back. Like a statue that's just waiting to be unveiled at its opening ceremony.

[15 : 47] So the Lord Jesus is there there is nothing left on his to do list now for God's great plan except to return to be revealed on that last day. And what's he going to look like? He comes with his mighty angels.

The power of IS the power of oppressive governments in the Arabian Peninsula. They look so mighty now but wait till they see the Lord Jesus with his mighty angels.

It will be a fearful thing. The flaming fire. You know what it's like to stand next to a bonfire? A big one. And the heat makes you go back and the brightness makes you cower.

So it will be terrifying when the Lord Jesus is revealed. And what's going to happen? Well there are basically two types of people. Those who get repaid with vengeance and those who get reward.

So who gets the vengeance? Look at verse 8. Vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's two different types of people.

[16 : 47] Those who do not know God. Now we might automatically think of other atheists like Richard Dawkins or the big criminals, the child abusers, the mass murderers, the evil oppressors in other nations.

Christians, they obviously don't know God. And yet, every human being should know God, does know God, but suppresses that knowledge of God.

That's Paul's verdict, the Bible's verdict on human beings, Romans 1.19. What can be known about God is plain to them. Because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world. in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. So everyone on the planet could know this God who is there. But everyone on the planet naturally suppresses that knowledge with exchange the truth and glory of God for a lie.

That is a diagnosis of where we all are as human beings. And it's only God's grace that breaks through that. So who is it who doesn't know God? I think about my neighbours.

[18 : 07] I think my neighbours both sides. Lovely people, nice law abiding people, talk to them very easily, we get on very well. And yet the truth is, they do not know God.

They do not know God. The day the Lord Jesus comes back will be a tragic day at the moment. But there's also another category of people, subcategory I suppose, they don't know God either.

How does Paul go on? They do not know God and do not obey the gospel. Where are we? Verse 8. Do not obey God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

So the gospel, what's the gospel? The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord. That's the message Paul had preached in Thessalonica. That this Jesus is king and he's coming back. And he's a good king.

He has died to win you for himself. He has died to take the punishment you deserve, we all deserve, for rejecting the God who made us, the God who is there. And he's coming back.

[19 : 09] And the gospel is the announcement that you can be reconciled to this God by bowing to King Jesus, by trusting that his death is sufficient to procure you forgiveness with the holy, righteous God.

But the gospel is not merely an invitation. And it's certainly not just a choice in the great supermarket of religious beliefs. The gospel is a command.

Repent and believe. So ultimately there are only two types of people. There are those who do repent and believe and those who don't. Those who obey the gospel and those who do not. And Paul says this warning is coming on those, this judgment is coming on those who have not accepted, who have not obeyed that message.

Now that flies right in the face of all our culture holds dear, doesn't it? I wonder with some of the proposed hate laws whether I could even be arrested for saying this sort of thing in years to come if it was public on the internet.

It goes deeply against what our culture holds dear. And yet it is true, it is reality. It is not loving to shy away from it. It would not be loving to tell someone that there's nothing wrong when actually they've got a cancer that could be treated.

[20 : 31] It would not be loving for doctors four years ago to say to me, you're alright, you'll be fine, when actually my kidney was failing. That would not be loving. The truth is loving. And the truth is God is a righteous judge.

And one day Christ will return and repay those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And what's that punishment look like?

Well, let's read down to verse 9. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might. See, it's not annihilation.

It's not just game over, that's it. It is eternal destruction. Now, do you catch that? That's the opposite to eternal life. When Jesus talks about eternal life, eternal life is not just a quantity of life, not just life that goes on forever, it's also a quality of life.

It's life as it's meant to be, knowing the living God, enjoying a perfectly restored creation, enjoying a perfectly restored relationship with God and with other people. That's eternal life, it's a quality and a quantity of life.

[21 : 41] So what's eternal destruction? It's exactly the opposite, isn't it? Yes, it's a quantity that goes on forever, but it's also a quality of life, if I can call it that.

Everything good, everything worthwhile, everything beautiful, everything right, everything we long for and live for, gone for all eternity.

Suffering instead. That's what they get. That's what those who are outside Christ get. Eternal destruction.

What's the reward in contrast? Christ? What can the Thessalonians, those who've trusted Christ, look forward to? Look at verse 9 again. They will suffer the punishment, eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all those who believed.

Glorified in his saints and marveled at. What does it mean for Jesus to be glorified in his saints? Jesus is glorified already as the risen one. We will be glorified with him one day.

[22 : 53] But this isn't something we look at, it's something we experience, glorified in his saints. Think for a moment about a light bulb. What happens when you switch on a light bulb? You see, that's true.

What happens to the actual light bulb itself? When a good old-fashioned light bulb, there's a little filament in there. And as the electricity passes through the filament, it heats up and gives off light. It is transformed in that moment. That is what happens when Jesus is glorified in his saints. It's as if we as all little light bulbs light up with his glory.

John Calvin put it like this, the Lord Jesus in no sense reserves his glory to himself, but possesses it only in order to radiate it to all the members of his body. those who are being shut out will see the afflicted, now glorified saints with Christ glorified in them.

And what will we do? Well, Jesus, we marvel that. That's what he says, isn't it? Verse 10. Jesus comes to be marveled at. What was the last thing you marveled at? What was the last thing you marveled at?

[24 : 03] Might have been a good movie. Might have been a beautiful view. Might have been some great music. A fine meal. That's wonderful. He told other people about it. As human beings, we were made to marvel.

We were made to marvel. That's why we have taste. That's why we have eyes that can see color. God made us to marvel. And that ability to marvel will be exercised to its fullest extent when the Lord Jesus comes back.

At that point, all those other pleasures that we have enjoyed, right pleasures that we've enjoyed in this life, will almost be eclipsed by marveling at him in his glory and power and still bearing the marks of the cross which he bore for you and for me.

Well, it's going to be marveled at and glorified in his saints. Who's this happy ending for? Well, the end of verse 10 reminds us, doesn't it? This is for the Thessalonians, because our testimony to you is believed.

Our testimony to you is believed. Do you notice the word Paul uses there? Our testimony? That's a legal word, isn't it? It's a testimony of a witness, a court of law. The gospel message is not a philosophy, it's not a religious teaching, it's not an idea to choose, it is a witness to events.

[25 : 29] It's a witness to what God has done in history through the death and resurrection of his son. And the Thessalonians believed that message, they believed that testimony, they obeyed the gospel, they repented and believed.

And so this is the happy ending that awaits all who do that, all who believe, who respond to that testimony and believe it. See, Paul depends on the fact the Lord is righteous judge and so he's confident of that vindication that is to come.

The question for me is am I confident of that? Question for all of us, isn't it? Do we see how the confidence in that future vindication changes everything for Paul, changes everything for Thessalonians?

It changes what is of ultimate importance. He isn't praying for their comfort because being comfortable isn't very important now because we're going to be comfortable for all eternity. He's not even praying for justice for them now because actually that's not ultimately important because there will be justice one day if that's coming.

So he doesn't pray for justice. He doesn't encourage them with prostitutes, rather he encourages them with his great news that vindication is coming, that God is a righteous judge, Jesus will come back.

[26 : 43] Now does my life show that same confidence? If I knew the car bomb had been placed under my neighbour's car and I saw Alistair or Jeremy heading out to their car, I would go and tell them, don't get in.

Yeah, I know something even more devastating, don't I? And so do you. And we know something that's coming. The reason I'm preaching through two Thessalonians is I need it.

I am so complacent. I need God to work in my heart that I will live in the reality of this just judge, this gracious judge that through his son has redeemed me, is a just judge who is one day coming back. Well, Paul is thankful, Paul is confident, and Paul has this great longing, very briefly, verses 11 and 12. And his longing is expressed in his prayer for Christ's glory, verse 11.

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 59] See, the whole purpose of what he's praying for is that Christ will be glorified. Paul is aligning his prayers with God's great goal. This is where history is going. History does not end in the glorification of science and Darwin being proved right.

It doesn't end in global peace worked out by some political solution. It ends with Christ being glorified. That is the goal to which the Heavenly Father is working. Every knee will bow down.

Every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. As God said through the prophet Isaiah back in Isaiah 42 verse 8, I am the Lord, that is my name, my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

So Paul is aligning his prayer with the way history is going. He's praying for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what is that going to entail in the lives of the Thessalonians? What does it entail in your life and my life?

Two things specifically Paul is praying for. Verse 11, to make you worthy of his calling and fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. To make you worthy of his calling. [29 : 04] What has God called Christians to? He's called us from sin and futile ways, from being his enemies, to being his children, royal children, children of the king.

He's called us to a new life. He's called us to be part of his new creation. Paul's praying that we'll be made worthy of that. When a footballer or a rugby player gets selected for a team, they want to play in a way that is worthy of that calling they've received, haven't they?

How much more should we pray that the Lord will make us worthy of that calling? We might not live for comfort or for pride or for material success or for the praise of others or for human achievement or for God's achievement of grace to be seen in our lives.

That's the first thing, to make us worthy of his calling. Secondly, Paul prays that God may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. Eternity, Christ completely changed our orientation life, doesn't it?

1 Thessalonians 1, we read that Thessalonians turned from worshipping idols to serve the living God. When that change happens, it gives a new set of priorities, new sets of goals, new sets of ambitions, new desires.

[30 : 16] God works into his spirit. So Paul's praying that all those good desires that are being brought by faith, every act that is based on our faith in Christ, that God will fulfill it.

I don't know what you're like, but my life is paved with good intentions. There are so many emails I've sent, so many cards I've sent to write to people I don't do. I'm hopeless. Paul doesn't want our lives to be just littered with good intentions that have failed.

He prays that God, by his almighty power, the power by which he raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, will fulfill all his desires, every work of faith that comes into Thessalonians' hearts and minds. So that's how set Paul is on knowing that the Lord is a righteous judge who will put everything right one day. He's praying these things will happen now, that even in the Thessalonians' lives in those days, Jesus might be glorified, and even more so on that last day.

So Paul, trusting the Lord's great judge of the Lord, being a righteous judge, prays with thanksgiving, prays with a confident expectation, and prays for the Lord Jesus to be glorified.

[31 : 32] Now in a very different time, when life is so relatively comfortable for us, it's so easy to neglect those eternal realities, isn't it? So easy. I wonder how prayers are shaped, how prayers are shaped like Paul's.

Or I wonder if we're generally praying for people to get jobs, which is good, for people to get well, which is a good thing to pray for. Are we working on that level, just the level of comfort, or are we looking to the Lord, the righteous judge?

I'll close with this quote which I was struck by a few years ago. At the height of the Arab Spring, back in 2011, when President Mubarak was just being ousted in Egypt, and they were wondering what was going to come next.

The General Secretary of the Egyptian Bible Society said this, I personally believe that greater freedom in society, while certainly welcome, would not necessarily result in deeper faith.

I was just thinking, what do you really want? Do you want an easier life? Freedom? Well, it might be good, it might not. He carried on. Working under tighter constraints in a more Islamic Egypt may actually make Christians more committed to their faith and their Lord.

[32 : 45] For example, in spite of the remarkable freedom in Western countries, it is not necessarily easier for Christians there to be on fire for the Lord. Let us never forget the Apostle Paul's deepest journey was to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing his sufferings.

We often want the former and forget the latter. It is so right, isn't it? We want the former, the power of the resurrection, but not the latter, the sharing of his sufferings.

But the Lord is a righteous judge. Let's depend on him. Let's look for his vindication, not our own comfort. Let's pray. Let's pray.