

Justice Delayed

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to go back for a little while to look at the first chapter of Second Thessalonians. And I think sometimes truth is so huge, it's so monumental that it should stop us in our tracks and it should really shake us sometimes out of our complacency and maybe even bring us up short.

I wonder when the last time it was that we... You opened Scripture, I opened Scripture and it brought us up short and it really shook us a little bit. I think maybe a passage like the one we read tonight might do that.

Because I know we all love a letter, don't you? Don't you love a letter? Maybe people don't give letters anymore. But if it's not a circular or something from the bank or something trying to sell someone, it's great to get a personal letter, isn't it?

It's beautiful. And imagine getting one from God. And yet that's exactly what really was happening for the Thessalonian church and for us as well when we look at God's Word, we're getting a letter from God.

And so Second Thessalonians was written to a new church in Thessalonica and the Word that was written to them, written by Paul the Apostle, inspired by God, was for them.

[1 : 15] But it's also for us because it's the living Word of God. And the great thing, even in this first chapter, is that God gives them lots of encouragement.

He says that they're persevering, really, they're a young church, young Christians, they're persevering well. They're growing in faith and love. And he boasts about them to other churches that he goes to meet with.

But also, he says they're believing some wrong things. Now, you'll need to apologize. I'll need to apologize rather. You don't need to apologize. I'm going to use my old Bible tonight, which is kind of earmarked and old and I'm very familiar with it.

I'm just happier looking at it. I just find it easier to find things in it. It's what's called an old Thompson Chain Reference Bible, which is a great thing. If you can ever get a Thompson Chain Reference Bible, get one, because it will take you through lots of different themes in the Bible.

But in chapter 2, verse 2, he says to them, you know, don't become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter, saying that the day of the Lord has come. In other words, they were listening to some wrong teaching.

[2 : 25] And then in chapter 3, verse 6, he says, you know, keep away from every brother who is idling and who's not living according to the teaching. So some people were living in a disobedient way within the church. So he brings both encouragement and he also brings some rebuke to them.

And it might have been quite uncomfortable for them to read that. Imagine the first time that they got together and this is an exciting letter from Paul and Paul reads it out, the church leaders read it out and there's good things, but there's also some quite really challenging things.

I wonder, I wonder what Christ would write about St. Columbus. I wonder what he would write.

When he would write about us together as a church, encouraging things, hopefully, and maybe challenges as well.

Or maybe if he wrote to you as an individual, what do you think would be the things he would encourage you about and maybe even challenge you about? Sometimes think as leaders, we're kind of afraid of all that side of things in church.

We're afraid of being honest as leaders in the church with one another and also with the church.

We're afraid because maybe people will become very defensive if we say anything that's challenging.

[3 : 39] And I think individually together we might be quite slow at being honest with one another as brothers and sisters and letting God's word speak into our lives.

Are we afraid if we say anything to one another that they'll just walk away and never come near us again? This passage certainly rebuked me. I don't know if in the short time you've had to read it, it's challenged you.

It's challenged me about my own complacency spiritually and also my fear of persecution because it speaks about this early young church being persecuted.

And that can be difficult. And yet he does it in love and he does it in grace.

So I want to look at this chapter and God really, He kind of obliterates three presumptions that sometimes we have about the Christian life. The first is that young Christians will, people young in the faith, there may be any Christians, but maybe particularly young Christians will never survive persecution.

[4 : 41] So maybe we think that we can't tell, we can't invite people to Christ and then encourage them to become Christians and then tell them that if they do so they're going to get persecuted for their faith because they're never going to survive that.

They're just going to walk away and say, well, it's far too difficult. That's clearly not the case here. This is a young church, they are young Christians and yet God is delighted with how they're persevering and keeping going and more so that their faith and love is increasing.

So that's one presumption that sometimes we have. The other presumptions that we might have is that it's okay to change God's truth, to make it easier and more acceptable to live by.

That's what was happening in this church when they were hearing a prophecy and a letter was changing God's truth, in some way it would make it easier for them to carry on as believers, but all it was doing was encouraging idleness and careless living.

And the other presumption I think that comes through this whole letter is that sometimes we think might is right. So we had all these people who were against this young Thessalonian church, pushing against them to persecuting them in all the strength of the society and the people around them and the church was very weak.

[6 : 00] And it seemed that the persecutors were the powerful ones and the Christian gospel and the Christians were weakened and were weak. That is also not the case.

I think it's easy for us to drift towards thinking like this, that we think that if we are persecuted as Christians, our faith will be destroyed and we will crumble and the church will collapse.

We may be... You know, you hear it quite a lot, people are afraid of persecution in society because then the church will stumble and struggle and fail.

Think again. That has never been the case. I think it's also challenging to say that the truth or it's also, I think, something we often are tempted to think that the truth is too demanding.

So let's make it more acceptable. Jesus, we want Him to be fluffy and warm and easy and it's easy to be a Christian, ignoring maybe the ethical or the moral imperatives of the gospel.

[7 : 03] Or easy, maybe we don't say much about business ethics or loving our enemies or sex within the parameters of marriage only. We don't deal with issues as we should maybe about the damage and the danger of pornography or misogyny or opposing gender idolatry.

We mustn't allow our Christian faith to take offense or be offensive in the society we live in.

Christians, let's just keep silent, let's take it easy, let's just be bland.

Then others might believe and be attracted to what we have. Think again. Because the principle that we recognize gently here but right through history is that it's always false teaching.

It's abandoning the revealed truth of God that destroys Christians and weakens the church. It's never persecution. Persecution throughout history has strengthened the church and more people have become Christians in such times rather than when the truth of God is diluted and abandoned in order somehow to appease an opposing world.

And that's when we see the strength of the gospel and gospel truth. So there's two things in this passage that we're going to look at with that background.

[8 : 32] The first is two important truths. The first is that God is right. And the second is that God is just. So God is right. In verse 5, all this is evidence that God's judgment is right and as a result will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering.

God is right. And what Paul is saying here is that he's just spoken about the persecutions and the trials that this young church are enduring. And he's saying that that persecution is inevitable.

It's absolutely inevitable. God is right in His judgment that when He says that we will be persecuted as Christians, that is exactly what will happen.

They hunted down Jesus and He was faced with the reality of evil and sin, hunting Him down. They crucified the perfect Son of God so all His followers will also be persecuted, maybe in different ways, maybe not in such overt ways.

[9 : 40] But we know that if we stand up for Jesus, we will find opposition and trials and persecutions. And it's interesting in Acts chapter 5 and verse 41, where the apostles were persecuted in the very early church.

The speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name. So right from the beginning, the church of Christ and Christians will be opposed.

You will be opposed. You'll be opposed in your workplace. You'll be opposed with the belief system that you have, with the truth that you profess and with the exclusivity of the gospel that you follow. As you confess Jesus and as I confess Jesus, it's like walking into a COVID deniers dinner party flashing a vaccine passport.

[10 : 46] You're going to have a hard time if you do that. And obviously this is much more serious and much more solemn.

But as a Christian, if we are conf... I'm not talking about flashing our Christianity in some kind of arrogant way, but if we are professing Jesus Christ, please don't be deluded to think you will not find opposition.

God is right in saying what He is saying here. That persecution is inevitable, but perseverance is invaluable.

And He speaks in verse four about this young church, how they're already... They're persevering. They're keeping going in the faith and persecutions and trials.

Now it's very interesting here, I wonder if I asked you what you thought about perseverance or how you would describe perseverance, how would you do so?

[11 : 39] We usually think of dogged determination, don't we? To just keep on going, to plow on something like, I've got to finish this horrible, ugly green bottle of medicine.

I've got to persevere with it because I'm sure it's doing me good. Now you're climbing a mountain and it's absolutely chucking it down this way and it's steep. You don't have the right shoes on. You're desperate to get to the top. You're persevere and you'll just grit your teeth and get to the top. We often think of that in terms of describing perseverance as doer resistance, just hating every minute in a sense of what we're doing, but having to do it.

Now the interesting thing here in Thessalonians is that perseverance is kind of a byproduct because what he's really delighted about is that they're growing in faith and they're growing in love for one another more and more.

So it's tremendously positive, this perseverance. It's not a negative thing. It's not a doer thing. It's that they're growing deeper in their faith despite the opposition and the difficulties and their great growth and their love for one another, for their brothers and sisters and for their enemies.

[12 : 57] There's this great shalom in their life, this great peace and growth. They're not being the judge and jury of those who mock them, who deride them, who hate them, nor are they secretly longing for their destruction.

They're growing in love and commitment and in perseverance. God is right in saying that persecution is inevitable.

He's also right in saying as Christians as we look to Jesus, our perseverance will be absolutely invaluable and it will be a growing, not in gritting our teeth, but it will be a growing in faith and love. So if your faith and if my faith never rocks the boat, those around you, if it never causes some kind of friction at one level, another persecution, or if your faith journey is one that's full of bitterness and a miserable and loveless hanging on, if God and your God is a mean-spirited father that you're just clinging onto, I question what road you're on.

I question if it's a Christian road. If that is the mentality we have, if there is no growth in faith and love, but it's a miserable, ugly determination simply just to hang on in there and when nobody ever opposes our faith or our stance for Jesus and we're faced with the consequences of that.

[14 : 44] God is right, but also God is just, and that's the second point here, and He speaks about that in verse 6 and forward.

God is not only right in what He says about persecution and what He says about perseverance. He's also just, He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well.

So brings us to that kind of reality in the New Testament of something that I think maybe we don't, maybe I'm kind of unique, uniquely weak or difficult to cope with, struggling with the second coming of Jesus and the perfect justice of God.

Well, yeah, I don't think we have any problem to hell in a handcart with all those who are deserving, but God's piercing grace into my own soul.

I wonder if we see and if we recognize the darkness and the deception that without Christ in my heart would rightly condemn me to everlasting destruction.

[15 : 56] Do I see that? I doubt it. Do you see that? I'm not sure. Do we honestly see ourselves in the way that Jesus Christ seizes?

If any of us I think could see ourselves as God seizes, I think our grip on grace would be much, much tighter than possibly it is, certainly mine would be.

So when we look at this, I want us to look at it with awe and with humility, but also with faith and try and grasp its enormity a little bit more.

Because what God is saying here is He's saying there will be a reckoning, but that reckoning will be reversed. Verse 6 and 7, He says, God is just, He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. He will reckon with those who are reckoning with you. And the picture here is very much that God is going to deal with those who have already acted in this life as judge and jury on the character of God and on the gospel of grace, who have deliberately opposed Christians and gospel truth and have reviled Jesus.

[17 : 09] And He says, those who have troubled Christians will themselves be troubled. And that word for troubled there is kind of the idea of being cornered or hemmed in or pressed against.

And they have used that in their life to hem and trouble and make life difficult for Christians. And He says they will receive that back from God.

The day of reckoning will be reversed. Those who have acted as judge and jury on Jesus and in the gospel and have lived without Him will face the judge of all creation.

And it will happen at the apocalypse of Jesus. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed, and that word there is just the word that we get apocalypse from, when He's revealed from heaven blazing fire with powerful angels.

And so we recognize that there is a day of reckoning for sure. And Jesus will come back. He's come once and He will return. Everything points to it, doesn't it? Everything in life points to a day of reckoning.

[18 : 20] Every day He finishes. Every year He finishes. Every life He finishes. This universe is finite, and it will finish. And it will finish in God's time when Christ returns on that day, when there will be an accounting for every living and dead.

So those who have judged Christ and turned their backs on Christ will not be on the throne on that day.

Jesus will be. And He says they will be rejected. He will punish those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of Jesus, the Lord Jesus in verse 8.

They will be punished with everlasting destruction, shout out from the presence of the Lord and of His majesty, of His power. Those who have persecuted God, who have despised knowing God, who have rejected the good news of God will experience God turning His face from them.

That's a very solemn truth. It's the opposite of what we looked at before. In the psalm we looked at, and in the Aaronic blessing that it spoke of, the Aaronic blessing which is the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord turn His face towards you.

[19 : 39] And we saw that that was speaking, a really big concept of speaking of God's blessing, true happiness, the blessing of His light, the light of His face shining on us, His favor that we find in Christ.

And here we have the opposite of His face turning against them in His act of judgment, unimaginable darkness.

If only they realized His love, His gifts that they've enjoyed every day, His grace and His rescue.

I can't conceive of that. Can you conceive of that this evening? I'm not sure I can. That darkness. Except to consider the wrath of God on His own Son in that darkness of Calvary from 12 to 3, which spoke in that first apocalypse of God's judgment being poured out on His Son that was due to us. He turned His face away from His Son as He bore my sins to rescue me from what I deserve. [20 : 58] But I can't fully understand. I would love to meet someone who understood that fully, but it doesn't stop us from seeking more faith and more insight and for the deception or the curtains to be lifted from our eyes to see that more clearly every day.

And I think on that day, those who have rejected Christ will know their abject weakness. You know, it speaks there, verse 9, about being shut out from the presence of the Lord, from the majesty of His power.

They will just sense that, that weakness. And they will know that they're shut out. They will understand that God was the source of their life and the source of the power that they had, the love that they enjoyed in this life.

They'll be shut out from sharing that or enjoying that and everlasting undoing. And I have to say, I can say that, but I can't comprehend it.

I can't comprehend that. But I believe it with all my heart because I trust God's Word and I trust what Jesus has done.

[22 : 22] So in closing, how do we respond to that? How do we respond to these things? I think we respond firstly by prioritizing prayer again and again.

We prioritize prayer always over and over. Verse 11, Paul says, 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 love.

That's the only place that I can go to to begin to help me comprehend the reality of what lies ahead, what we can't see, but what is there by faith we believe.

So the only place we can go for our faith to grow, where we can intercede for those who are lost, and especially our enemies. You know, Jesus says something impossible, doesn't he?

In Matthew 5, 44, he says, pray for those who are your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Love them. And that's the response that we're asked to make to those who persecute us. We're not to persecute them back.

[23 : 28] We're not to dam them. We're not to say, well, I can't wait till you get your comeuppance. We're to pray and to plead for them and to love them and to show them something completely different.

Those who refuse to love the truth, we are to plead and pray for them. So God takes me from this place, I'm going to keep on pleading that you and I recognize the importance, not just of praying alone, but of praying together.

He prays here to the church that we will grasp it and that we will see for the significance of what prayer is, not just for the select few, not just for the few who are committed, but to every one of us to recognize is everything.

Is everything in our Christian lives to not only just be praying alone, but praying together as a church, as this young church was? Do you ever try getting fit in your own?

Going to the gym in your own? It's a nightmare. You ever try learning a new language on your own without any help from anyone else? A nightmare. You ever try to build a house on your own?

[24 : 35] A nightmare. Great to do with other people. Great to be encouraged at the times when you want to give up, great to learn from others, great to hear what they are teaching us on all of these things.

And that's what prayer is, you know, when we struggle to carry on or understand or know what to do, prayer is there together that we encourage one another and we become encouragers of others. Verse 11, with this in mind, Paul says, we constantly pray for you. And if I flick forward to chapter 3, verse 1, he says, finally, brothers, I'm asking you, you pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread quickly and be honored.

Do you see that? There's that great corporate sense of praying for and encouraging one another, prioritized prayer is a response.

And also, as we do so, we experience true fulfillment as we entrust ourselves to Jesus, follow Him and believe in who He is and obey Him.

[25 : 42] It says, you know, that we will be counted worthy of verse 11 of His calling that by His power you may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

And he's saying there that there'll be true fulfillment in your life as you're motivated by the living God as you're acting with that motivation and prompting of faith that God's power will be in our lives and there'll be a worthiness in all that we do, we await a significance.

You know, we share in God's glory just when we live our ordinary lives for Him, ordinary lives that nobody sees or knows sometimes.

But it'll have the weight of the glory of Christ, He'll be glorified in us as we follow Him. By the choices we make and the actions we have, they'll have weight, they'll have significance because in Christ they'll be worthwhile and lasting and full, fruitful.

And we'll be held then, I think the other responses in the grip of His grace. We pray that verse 12, this is so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified you and you and Him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 09] That's always the most significant thing that we need to go back to again and again and again that we are saved by His grace. Who was it that wrote that great book in the grip of grace at Maxal Caddo?

I think it maybe was, in the grip of grace. A great title and a great reality that that's the kind of Christians we are to be in the grip of grace, that grace that is freely given to us in Jesus Christ, that grace that reminds us of this God, this sovereign blazing fire, God coming on that last great day with the powerful angels, the same God who was moved to become flesh in the womb of an unmarried teenager in the Middle East.

Die in a Roman tree and take the wrath of God to set us free from anything that would separate us from Him. How little I grasp the enormity of His grace and how it should motivate and give me courage and help me to not just hang on when I'm persecuted but to grow in faith and love and for that to be the kind of perseverance that enables me to believe in these solemn truths from God's Word.

So let's do consider these things, meditate on them, go home, spend some time thinking about these things. Don't just forget about it when the hour of worship is over.

But go back to that passage yourself and read it and pray over it. Pray this but it will take it and help you and especially pray that I'll have some kind of insight into chapter two for next week.

[29 : 02] Is that if this week was hard, next week's the man of lawlessness, so pray for God's Holy Spirit to guide and protect you all over this week.

Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would take your Word and that you would apply it to our hearts. May it not be a passive exercise that we're engaged in in church.

May it be something, may it be that we see and know this letter from You is just as real today for us as it was for the early believers in Thessalonica, the battles, the persecutions, the struggles, the temptation to change the truth, the temptation to be idle or be disobedient to what is revealed in Scripture and help us to encourage one another and build each other up.

And be honest with each other because we all struggle and we all find the Christian way at different times at battle. And yet Lord God, may we grow in faith and love as we understand and are just surrounded by Your grace and understand how great that grace is.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.