

2 Thessalonians 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 June 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 Paul, Silvanus and Timothy To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

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. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering, 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 from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

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 may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The salutation with which 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 begins is almost identical to that of 1 Thessalonians, with the slight alteration of God the Father to God our Father, and the addition of from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of verse 2.

[1 : 50] This epistle was likely written fairly shortly after the first epistle. Paul still seems to be ministering with Silas and Timothy, the missionary team that first worked among the Thessalonians.

And the epistle is addressed from them. However, as in 1 Thessalonians, Paul is the actual writer of the epistle throughout. In verse 17 of chapter 3, I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write. Even though the letter is addressed from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy then, Paul is the sole author.

The main thing that changes from 1 Thessalonians in the introduction underline is the fact that the grace and peace aren't primarily from Paul and the other missionaries, but from God himself. As before, Paul moves from this to express their continued thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, now presented not in terms of their actual practice, but as their fitting response to what God has done and is doing in the Thessalonians.

[2 : 51] Their increasing faith and love for each other is evidence of the work of God's grace among them. The missionaries boast about the Thessalonians and all the other churches that they go to on account of the Thessalonians' steadfastness and faith through trial.

While some of the Thessalonians might be discouraged, Paul and his fellow missionaries cannot hold in the delight and the joy and the pride that they have in seeing the way that the Thessalonians are growing and prospering in their faith.

And like doting grandparents with pictures of their grandchildren, they can't help but go everywhere and show everyone and tell everyone about what God is doing among them. The steadfastness of the Thessalonians in affliction is evidence of the righteous judgment of God.

It is an anticipatory sign in the present of their future vindication. Their faithful suffering for righteousness' sake identifies them as those who are blessed, as those who will be vindicated in the day of judgment.

Persecution is the path that leads to the inheritance of the kingdom, and those who find themselves on it have cause to rejoice, for their vindication will come. They are suffering for the kingdom, which is itself a sign of God's grace.

[4 : 00] There is a paradoxical character to all of this. Suffering is not usually a positive sign, but for the Christian it can be. This evidence of their future vindication is also a sign that they are considered worthy of the kingdom.

This is not something they have earned, so much as a matter of grace. God has marked them out by suffering, graciously declaring them worthy of his inheritance. We might think about the reaction of the apostles to their persecution in Acts 5, verse 41.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. God's justice will be seen in the way that he will repay their persecutors for their evil, while rewarding the Thessalonians, the missionaries, and all suffering Christians with relief.

This will occur when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in fiery judgment, enacting divine wrath on all who do not know God, those who reject the knowledge of God that has been given in the Son, and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The language of judgment for not obeying the gospel may seem arresting to us. What does it mean to obey the gospel? The gospel is at heart the message of Christ's lordship and kingdom.

[5 : 14] To obey the gospel is to submit to this, to Jesus as Lord. And Paul alludes to Isaiah chapter 66, verse 15 here. When this time comes, those who disobey the summons to bow the knee to Jesus Christ will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, an exile from the presence of the Lord and of his glory.

They are confined to outer darkness, cut off from all of the blessings and the goodness of God's special presence. Once again, Paul is borrowing language from the Old Testament prophets. Here it's the language of Isaiah chapter 2, verse 10. Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord and from the splendor of his majesty. It's worth noting that Paul is taking up an Old Testament statement where the Lord refers to Yahweh, and he is relating it here to Jesus.

We should also consider the way that Paul frames eternal destinies here. The emphasis is not upon two places, heaven and hell, but upon two different relations in which people stand to the glory and presence of the person of Jesus Christ.

One party are brought into and vindicated in the presence and manifest and participate in the glory, and the other party is utterly cut off from them, experiencing absolute, utter and final loss.

[6 : 45] Heaven is, at its very root, not a place so much as the glorious presence of a person. Heaven is where we enjoy Christ, the new heavens and the new earth, where Christ is present with his people.

When Christ comes, he will be glorified in his holy ones. The church will display and reflect his glory, and he will be glorified in her, a people refined as gold through suffering.

Paul's constant prayer is that God will make the Thessalonians worthy of his calling. This way of describing things, of God making them worthy of his calling, makes clear that the worthiness is something that God produces in his people.

We will be judged according to works on the last day, but the works are ways in which God has conformed us to the judgment that he has made concerning us. The declaration of justification is worked out, to borrow an illustration from the early Luther, in some ways like a sculptor who declares the sculpture that he is going to produce from the block of marble before he has begun to fashion it.

The judgment is proleptic. It anticipates the way that God will conform us to that judgment. God calls us, and then he makes us worthy of his calling.

[8 : 00] The calling happens first, and then we are made worthy of what we have been called for. This process is one in which we are active as God's transforming power works in us and through us.

We are never the final source of the action though. The end of all of this is that the name of the Lord Jesus is glorified in us. We are his workmanship, and when people see us, they see what he has created in us.

And then we are also glorified in him. The grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ is that which governs this entire process of salvation, from beginning to end.

At no point does it rest upon anything other than God's unmerited goodness towards us in his Son. A question to consider. The letters to the Thessalonians should encourage us to think much more about Christ's final coming and the age to come.

How might Paul's teaching here change the way that we think about the new heavens and the new earth?

