

Three Hopeful Things

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Why 2nd Thessalonians now? That's a question you might be asking yourself as we begin this new sermon series. What could this ancient little book possibly have to offer me right here, right now? The answer, I believe, is a lot.

The Christians to whom Paul was writing were believers who were struggling to follow Jesus in the midst of very difficult circumstances. Their beliefs ran counter to those of the culture around them. They were, consequently, facing persecutions which made life very hard for them. As you can imagine, these believers wondered why God would allow them to suffer in these ways, and they struggled to find hope and joy through these difficulties.

It's into such dark times that the apostle Paul pens this important little letter of encouragement and hope—a little letter to embolden the church to live faithfully and joyfully in the midst of tumultuous times.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

⁵ All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be

marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

¹¹ With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. ¹² We pray this 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.

As Paul starts to encourage these struggling believers, he reveals three things to them—three things to lift their spirits: (1st) he reveals how he **thankfully boasts** about them; (2nd) he reveals that there's a **future justice**, which is certainly coming; and, (3rd) he reveals the **focused prayer** which he prays for them.

1. A thankful boast (vv. 3-4)

You know this seems almost like an oxymoron; doesn't it? Thankful boasting? Yet, nothing could be more appropriate than for Paul to thankfully boast in the faith of the Thessalonians because their faith, in the midst of trials, is bringing God glory and honor and praise. In fact, their faith is evidence of the Lord God's work in them. That's why Paul thanks God (v. 3) and, yet, boasts about the believers (v. 4).

Usually the object of your boasting would be the object of your thanksgiving; wouldn't it? I mean, if you're boasting about your favorite musician's songwriting and singing, then you'd be likely to thank her if you ever met her; wouldn't you? That's usually how it works. You thank the one whose attributes you're thankful for. You thank the one who displays the gifts you're blessed by. Unless you're a believer; unless you're a follower of Jesus Christ.

In that case, you recognize that a greater hand is at work through those gifts. You recognize that God is the giver and sustainer of them. This is why James writes in the New Testament: "Every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17)—*is from the Lord*. This is the Christian view of things.

Yet, rather than being a discouragement to the believer, it's an encouragement. It never leaves believers feeling worthless—as if we couldn't accomplish anything on our own. *Never!* Instead, it reminds us that our heavenly Father is working in us.

And, this is a really essential thing for us to remember in the midst of uncertain times in our lives. So, Paul reminds the Thessalonians as well as us that our perseverance and faith through trials is proof that we're children of God.

You know, this church has experienced difficulties and uncertainties recently. So allow me to boast in those of you who've stayed through them. Your perseverance and faithfulness are super encouraging to me. This little church continues to minister in the heart of Andersonville through your faithfulness. Thanks be to the Lord God! Thanks be to Christ *because* it's proof that God is working in you.

2. A future justice (vv. 5-10)

What do you think of judgment? You probably have negative ideas about it. Yet, when God is the one who judges, Scripture speaks in exceedingly positive terms about his judgments. Justice is always done when God is the judge. Simply consider what today's passage says about this.

God allows for the Thessalonians to face trials and persecutions for their faith. Is this a just judgment? Is God right in allowing this? Paul says yes and yes.

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering (v. 5).

Friends, believers can often take a rather unbiblical view of pain and suffering. We can assume that pain and suffering, in this lifetime, are simply for the unfaithful or the reprobate—that the Lord would never allow his devoted followers to suffer unless, of course, they've done something wrong.

That, however, is simply not the way it works. Believers aren't always healthy and wealthy; nonbelievers aren't always sick and destitute. Just read the book of Job in the Old Testament; it is designed to put such simplistic thinking about these things to death once and for all. In fact, the biblical narrative tells Christians to expect pain and suffering as they follow Jesus; doesn't it?

- Paul and Barnabas encourage all believers to remain faithful in the middle of trials and tribulations by saying—“*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22).

- And, James (the brother of Jesus) tells us that persecution is for our good—
“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).
- And, what about Jesus himself? What did he say about pain and suffering? Our Lord was straightforward about it—*“Whoever wants to be my disciple must...take up [his or her] cross and follow me”* (Mark 8:34).

Friends, if you are a follower of Jesus, the Lord has good purposes for you—even and especially in trials. They are disciplines which bring us to Christlikeness. They are exercises which burn away spiritual flab. (Even during this Covid-19 trial, the Lord has been at work knocking down our idols so as to gather his people nearer to himself—in order to grow us and to strengthen us as his followers.)

When we still lived in Pennsylvania, my youngest four children all ran track. They were part of the Hershey Blaze Track Team. At one meet, Esther was supposed to run her first ever mile. She was excited about it. She, however, was also excited about eating a hotdog right before the race. Well, as you might imagine, that hotdog didn't feel like such a good idea after her first couple of laps. She began to fall further and further behind. And, with just a little over a lap to go, she asked her track coach if she could quit. He, in turn, looked over at me for the answer. (I really liked him. He was a really great coach. And, this exemplifies why.)

Well, I said I thought she needed to finish what she'd started. And, he agreed. We made her finish the race as well as she could. You see, we wanted her to grow. We wanted her to learn how to finish what she'd started and persevere through pain. The two of us weren't against her. We were for her. We wanted her to become better than she was. And, so we made her run that last, very difficult lap.

Friends, God's work on us (thru trials and difficulties) is something like this. He's after what's best for us. I like the way James Grant Jr. puts it.

God has designed suffering to work for us and not against us. He has designed it to change us, to consume our dross and refine our gold. He will supply his

*all sufficient grace through the fiery trials of life, and those trials are actually evidence that God is for us and not against us.*¹

Friends, whenever you face trials, whenever you are struggling in this life, stop and consider how God may be refining you through your difficult experiences. Consider how God is making you more like Jesus, even in *this* strange season.

Well, there's another side to the just judgments of the Lord in today's passage. There will be a reckoning for those who oppose God. And, this justice is in the future. Nevertheless, it is certain. No injustice will escape the Lord's righteous judgments. Here's how Paul explains it.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you.... This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord... (vv. 6-9).

These are hard words for us. We see this kind of judgment as harsh and ugly. Yet, in many places around the world, these aren't *hard* words but *welcome* words. There are many places around the globe where this kind of judgment is embraced while the idea of God's grace and mercy is what seems unfair and is quickly rejected. (Remember for example that in Jesus's culture it was the idea of the Lord's mercy which was objectionable to the religious authorities, while his judgment upon sinners was widely assumed and affirmed.)

And, friends, this should highlight something for us—something very unique about the gospel. The gospel of Jesus will always challenge the wisdom of the world. It will always challenge our human assumptions in some way. You may like Jesus as the Lamb—forgiving and gracious. Or, you may like Jesus as the Lion—powerful in judgment. Yet, the Bible says he's both of these. We cannot preach one of these without the other. We cannot put God in a box.

When Jesus returns, there will be judgment for all those who set themselves in opposition to him. He will be Lion. Those who rebel against the kingdom of God,

¹ James H. Grant Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation*, 159.

those who oppose the gospel, will be brought to justice. There will be consequences. And they will be appropriate and fitting because “God is just” (v. 6).

However, even as Paul is writing about this future judgment of the Lord God, he’s giving his life to the preaching and administration of another kind of message—another kind of justice. He is pouring out his life to reach the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. You see, the Lord offers his justice in two ways. We can (at the end) stand under his judgment for the sins and evil we’ve committed, or Jesus can (at the cross) stand in our place. The choice is ours.

3. A focused prayer (vv. 11-12)

In light of all this, look how Paul now prays for the Thessalonians.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this 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 (vv. 11-12).

I used to take trips across the country with my friend Tyler during the summer. We had a Honda Civic, whatever money we’d scraped together from waiting tables, and a paper atlas of the United States. Basically, we would string our route together by locating cities where we knew somebody well enough to crash on his or her couch for a few days before heading on our way.

One of us would drive while the other navigated that paper atlas of the U. S. But, here’s the thing. We were hopeless unless we knew where we were headed next. We couldn’t drive with any purpose unless we knew the destination.

The apostle Paul just reminded the Thessalonians and us about the destination. He has just explained where believers are headed—to a glorious and eternal reunion with our triune God. He is our destination. His glory is where believers are headed. This is good news. This is encouraging. And, it helps us know how to live right now; it helps Paul know how to pray.

- Paul prays for God’s continued work in believers—making them “worthy of his calling” (v. 11).

- He prays for believers to participate with God in his sanctifying work—that God might “bring to fruition” the believer’s “every desire for goodness and...every deed prompted by faith” (v. 11).

Paul knows what to pray for now because he knows where we’re heading—to a time when Jesus will be glorified in us and we will be glorified in him (v. 12). To a place where perfect justice is done. To a place where we’re all able to boast with thanksgiving of God’s goodness in us.

To a marvelous new place...where the “old [sinful and fallen] order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Amen. Come Lord Jesus!