

Suffering . . .In Light of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

In his book *Approaching Hoofbeats* Billy Graham writes,

For Paul the Christian life was one of suffering. The same could be said of a multitude of Christ's followers, many of whom were killed for their faith. So when Christ said time after time that one must "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" He was indicating that it is not easy to be His true follower. The apostle Paul warned, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (1 Timothy 3:12). He offers no cheap grace, no easy life. As someone has said, "Salvation is free but not cheap."

Charles T. Studd was a famous sportsman in England, captain of the Cambridge XI cricket team. A century ago he gave away his vast wealth to needy causes and led the "Cambridge Seven" to China. His slogan was, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me. then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."

A generation ago, Jim Elliot went from Wheaton College to become a missionary to the Aucas in Ecuador. Before he was killed. he wrote, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

The Christian faith brings its own "blood sweat and tears" to those who would follow Jesus Christ. Christ calls us to discipleship. When we come to Him, He takes away one set of burdens-the burden of sin, the burden of guilt, the burden of separation from God. the burden of hopelessness. But He also calls upon us to "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29). It is not a yoke that is too heavy for us to bear, for Christ bears it with us: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Nevertheless. Christ calls us to follow Him regardless of the cost, and He has never promised that our path will always be smooth. There is no life that is without its own set of burdens. I have chosen Christ not because He takes away my pain but because He gives me strength to cope with that pain and in the long range to realize victory over it. Corrie ten Boom said, "The worst can happen but the best remains."

In our studies of 1 Thessalonians we come today to the topic of suffering, which we will examine in light of the second coming of Jesus Christ. We will look at verses 5 through 12 of chapter 1. This passage divides into two sections, which I have entitled, first, God will judge the afflictors (verses 5-9); and secondly, God will bless the afflicted (verses 10-12).

Having founded the church in Thessalonica in 51 or 52 A.D., the apostle Paul traveled on to Corinth and from there wrote both his first and second letters to the Thessalonians. In this second letter Paul has three main objects in mind. First, he encourages the Thessalonians in their faith, love and courage; secondly, he instructs them concerning the second coming of Christ: and thirdly, he rebukes those among them who viewed the impending second coming as an opportunity for idleness.

In verses 1 through 4 of chapter 1 we found Paul exhorting the Thessalonians in three areas: he thanked God because their faith in their heavenly Father was greatly enlarged; their love toward one another was growing; and their courage in the face of their enemies was persisting. These new Christians were suffering persecution from both the Jewish and Gentile communities because of their faith in Jesus the Messiah. In the section we will look at today, however, Paul will show that God would use that persecution and affliction they were enduring to produce spiritual maturity and future blessing in their lives; and, further, he would eventually deal with those who were afflicting them.

In the first section, verses 5 through 9 of chapter 1, Paul shows that

I. God will Judge the Afflictors 1:5-9

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may 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 shall 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. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

First, Paul establishes for the Thessalonians that the God whom they worship is a righteous Judge. Paul says, "This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering." God is at work among you, he says.

Scripture everywhere declares that God is a righteous Judge. Many like to think of God as merely loving and gracious, that he is a helper and comforter in time of need. But he is more than these things. He is also the righteous Judge of the universe. That is what Abraham declared when Sodom and Gomorrah were coming under judgment: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25). The psalmist wrote, "Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is Thou who dost possess all the nations (82:8). Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, ". . . fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (12:13, 14). Paul himself wrote in Romans, ". . . God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ" (2:16). Thus all through the Scriptures, God is portrayed as a righteous Judge. This witness to his character confirms his moral perfection, his righteousness, justice, wisdom, power and knowledge.

Having established this characteristic of God for the Thessalonians, Paul now proceeds to show them what God was doing in and through them through the persecution and affliction they were experiencing: He would use it to bring them to spiritual maturity, he says. Trials bring us closer to God. They force us to examine ourselves to see if we are harboring sin, and lead us to confess our sin to God and to our fellow men.

Paul himself had experienced God's work in his own life at a time when he felt he was coping well with his problems. When he suffered so severe a trial he no longer considered himself adequate to handle it, however, he confessed in his letter to the Corinthians, ". . . we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death. . ." (11 Cor. 1:8-10). Paul knew that the righteous Judge was at work in his life through that trial, a trial so severe that despite his intellect, his background, etc., he was helpless to face it alone. Through it Paul learned the great lesson in life: that we should "no longer trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

Persecution and affliction, therefore, are, in Paul's words, "a plain indication of God's righteous judgment." On the surface it may have appeared to the Thessalonians that God was not a righteous Judge, that he was not at work on their behalf, yet the very fact that they were enduring and bearing up courageously under persecution and affliction was clear evidence that God was at work in them. Their attitude as they endured suffering was proof that God was their strength, their courage, wisdom and fortitude. Jesus told his disciples, "A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecute me, they will persecute you." Writing to the Philippians, Paul said, 'conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the sake of the gospel: in no way alarmed by your opponents_which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake . . . "' (Phil. 1:27-29).

Peter also touched on the theme of suffering in his letter to the Christians in Asia Minor: '. . . you have been distressed by various trials, the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable,

even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise anti glory anti honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ . . ." (I Peter 1:6.7). Peter held Jesus as the Christian's model. Even in the midst of the mockery of our Lord's trial. Peter said, he never opened his mouth "but kept entrusting himself to him win`, judges righteously

Thus the Thessalonians were suffering persecution and affliction SO that they might be declared worthy of the Kingdom of God They endured not hy their own efforts or strength, but hy the power of Christ working within them. Dietrich Bonoeffer said, "When God calls a man, he calls him to die:' this attitude toward the Christian life can only come by the power of Christ working from within.

Paul then turns his attention to the factions in Thessalonica who were causing pain and suffering to the Christians in that city. and declares to them what God's righteous Judgement on them will be. This is the law of "What goes around comes around.' Here we will see that the persecutors of this world will suffer hereafter, while the Christian sufferers of this world will rest hereafter. Verse 6:

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 .

The apostle is repeating the principle contained in the promise which God made to Israel through Moses upon their entry into Canaan: ". . . if you will truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries" (Exodus 23:22). Proverbs counsels, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the Lord, and He will save you" (Prov. 20:22). Writing to the Romans, Paul quoted Deuteronomy, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, hut leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19). The Thessalonians could rest in the knowledge that their merciful Father also was a righteous Judge who would render judgment on their behalf. That too is our hope today when we are persecuted and afflicted--that judgment for the wicked and relief for the righteous will follow in due course.

The word "relief" which Paul uses speaks of relaxation and rest for the children of God. These twin concepts of relief for the righteous and judgment for the unrighteous are repeated in Psalm 93:

**Blessed is the man whom Thou cost chasten, O Lord,
And cost teach out of Thy law;
That Thou mayest grant him relief from the days of adversity,
Until a pit is dug for the wicked.
For the Lord will not abandon His people,
Nor will He forsake His inheritance.
For judgment. will again be righteous;
And all the upright in heart will follow it.**

Following his inspired word on the reasons behind the persecutions and afflictions which the Thessalonians were enduring, Paul, perhaps sensing a little impatience in his spiritual children, now proceeds to speak on the "day of the Lord," placing God's timetable before them. Verse 7b:

. . . when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, . . .

That will be the day when Jesus will again appear on the earth for the specific purpose of bringing judgment upon the nations, as well as establishing his righteous rule on earth. The prophets looked forward to that day. Amos saw it as the day when God would avenge his people, and judge Israel's sin. But he also saw that day as a time of hope when God would usher in a new age with his Messiah Jesus. Isaiah also saw the "day of the Lord" as the day of judgment as well as restoration for the remnant of Israel. Malachi stressed the unbearable judgment and purging as well as the healing and joy that day would bring.

The New Testament also makes frequent mention of that day. John identified Jesus as the Judge promised by God in Daniel 7. Jesus himself spoke of- the "day of the Lord" in Matthew: "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,

and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:41, 42).

The "day of the Lord" is not actually limited to a day, but rather is a period of time, the first event of which will be Jesus' invisible return to earth to gather his people. On that day he will come 'like a thief in the night' (Matt. 24). Then, at the end of the tribulation period, he will return in a visible manifestation. That is when the whole earth will see him coming with his saints and angels in flaming fire to judge the living and the dead and set up his divine rule on earth.

Revelation 19 gives a graphic description of this event. Rev. 19:1 1-16:

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God.

And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses.

And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "King Of Kings, And Lord Of Lords."

In verse 8 Paul declares the price tag for those who are afflicting the Thessalonians, those who refuse the gospel of Jesus Christ:

. . . dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, . . .

Our Lord will deal out retribution, Paul says. The righteous, wise, all-knowing God will render to every man and woman what he or she deserves. He will reward good with good, evil with evil. True justice finally will be served - if not here, in the hereafter.

In this context, Paul says that retribution will be paid to one group with two problems "those who do not know God" (that is, those who do not know God personally, those who have heard of him but do not want to know him); and, secondly, "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (that is, those who have heard the good news but have refused to repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord).

The apostle is here referring to those Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica who had persecuted himself, Silas and Timothy. He describes this persecution in I Thessalonians: ". . . hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always till up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost" (2:16). The penalty they would receive as a result was eternal ruin, not annihilation, but complete ruin, a resurrection to disgrace and eternal contempt they would find themselves, in Paul's words, "away from the presence of the Lord" (separated from life as life was intended to be lived). and "away from the glory of his power" (separated from the source of power which enables men to enjoy life eternal).

What is the apostle describing here? He is speaking of hell the place of eternal torment and misery. That is the final destination of "those who do not know God and those who after not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.' Let us not forget, however, that today is still the "day of salvation." In this age of the Spirit, the grace of God is still very much present with us. But let us not forget either that while the age to come will continue to be a revelation of the grace of God, it will give conclusive evidence that God brings every evil work into judgment, and that those who spurn his grace in this life will experience his wrath.

Tuvya Zaretsky, a member of the Jews for Jesus movement, recently wrote an article entitled "A Matter of life

and Death:' and spoke about his father who had died "without bowing his heart to the Savior":

Several months ago I spoke about our ministry to a certain group of pastors and lay leaders in the Boston area. One of the lay people who kindly came to hear about our work chose to take offense at a statement I made about my father. The day on which I was speaking would have been my father's 70th birthday, had he lived. I mentioned him in my talk because Christian friends often ask us about the reactions of family members of Jewish believers. Sadly I told the group that my father had died almost three years earlier, hating my profession as a missionary and dismissing my testimony of God's grace. anti that he had gone irrevocably into eternity without bowing his heart to the Savior.

He will be excluded from the presence of God for eternity.

So Paul is here emphasizing that God will judge the afflictors. Those who persecute and afflict Christians "will pay the penalty of eternal destruction." He has set in place spiritual laws which, when they are violated, result in terrible consequences. The apostle's first word of encouragement to those who are suffering for the sake of righteousness as they await the Lord's return, therefore, is, God will judge the afflictors.

His second encouraging word could be summarized,

2. God Will Bless the Afflicted 1:10-12

. . . when He comes to be glorified by 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 may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; in order 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 'day of the Lord' is a two-pronged affair: the first part of this day will see the judgment of the wicked, while the second part will bring blessings for the righteous.

When Jesus come Paul says, "he will be glorified in his saints:' Christians on that day will reflect something of the greatness and character of Jesus. As the apostle John wrote, ". . . when I e appears. we shall be like Him" (1 John 3:2). In the Upper Room Jesus prayed, '. . . the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as we are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me" (John 17:22, 23). On that day Jesus will return for his bride the church, and she will reflect his beauty, love, mercy, and tenderness.

Not only will Jesus be "glorified in His saints in that day:' Paul declares our Lord will be "marveled at among all who have believed Notice how the apostle contrasts the fate of the unbelievers of verse 8 with "those who have believed" (verse 10). Christians will "marvel," we will be amazed and overjoyed at his coming "all," says the apostle, Christians from every age, every nation and every race will be overwhelmed by the glory of Jesus Christ at his coming.

Finally, the apostle shares with the Thessalonians his continual prayer to God on their behalf: ". . . that our God may count you worthy of your calling. . . ." Christians should strive to live up R> their calling, Paul says, and thereby reflect glory on their Lord who redeemed them by his death. ". . . and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power. . . ."

If you desire to "let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven," then dip into your inheritance and live up to your calling, until you hear the final call to be with Jesus forever. Paul agrees with James that "faith without works is dead." To love God is to be involved in works in which we trust God for strength to accomplish all he desires to do through us.

A news story on the TV recently about a Polish family caught my attention. This family has a crippled son, and they are seeking medical help for him in a San Francisco hospital. But they have a lot of living expenses to meet and no means of paying them, so a phone number appeared on the screen for anyone interested in helping. I wrote down the number, not knowing what I would do about it. Finally, I thought of calling Ethel Smith, who has a wonderful ministry in our church with Polish families, and asked her to call them and find out their needs and get back to me. She called me back and told me they need a job and a place to stay in the city, and now we are seeking ways to meet those needs.

[Two weeks later the family came to Peninsula Bible Church and were surrounded by believers offering to help them. This story is not finished yet.]

What is the purpose of such good works? Paul's answer is, "in order that the name our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ."

Yes, Jesus Christ is coming again. As Christians, we need to know that suffering is part and parcel of our experience as we await his glorious appearing. In these verses the apostle Paul has reassuring words for us as we await that day. God will judge the afflictors, he promises; they will "pay the penalty of eternal destruction"; and God will bless the afflicted, glorifying us in Him; "according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Catalog No. 3997
2 Thessalonians 1:5-12
Second Message
Ron R. Ritchie
June 29, 1986

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