

THE FIRE NEXT TIME

by Ray C. Stedman

I am greatly encouraged that the Apostle Paul had to write a second letter to the Thessalonians to explain his first letter to them. I have had to do that on occasion. Some of my writing is not always as clear as it could be and I have had to write a second letter. The apostle's second letter was written within a few months of the first, and in it he seeks to make clear what was still unclear to the Thessalonians.

Paul was still in the city of Corinth when he wrote this second letter. The year was 50 or 51 A. D. Timothy had been sent to Thessalonica to see how things were going in the church there. Upon his return to Corinth he had reported to Paul that the Thessalonian Christians were standing steadfast against great tribulation. Paul had written the first letter to praise and encourage them in that. But now some further word had come from Thessalonica, perhaps in a letter or a traveler's report. The apostle had learned that there was still a great deal of confusion in the church about the coming of the Lord. Some apparently had also protested that Paul's words of praise in the first letter were not really deserved. Thus the apostle writes back,

**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 the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring. {2 Th 1:1-4 RSV}

The opening two verses are the standard formula of greeting in 1st century letters. We open our correspondence today by saying "Dear so-and-so," even though we may never have met the person to whom we are writing. Paul's opening greeting is the same as in the first letter except for one thing. Here the apostle repeats twice the words "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This phrase lays stress on the source of a Christian's strength and endurance in times of pressure: It will come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

These also are difficult days. Some of you are going through tough times. Some of you may be struggling even this morning. I want to emphasize what the apostle underscores -- that is that the Christian's resource is "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The words of a great hymn say this so well,

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.

That is also what the apostle is saying to the Thessalonian believers.

Next, Paul defends his previous words of praise for the Thessalonians' spiritual vitality, saying, "We are bound to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is fitting." Here he declares that the words which he had addressed to them in his first letter were not based on mere courtesy or convention but were based on fact. He recognizes that, though the Thessalonian church was under great pressure, their faith was growing and their love was increasing. Those are the marks of a basically healthy church, and that is why the apostle boasted about the Thessalonians to other churches.

But there is something missing here. In the first letter Paul speaks of their "work of faith," their "labor of love," and their "patience of hope." Here he refers to their faith and their love but does not say a word about their hope. That indicates the problem that this letter was written to correct. Paul has learned that they are still confused and uncertain about the coming of the Lord. Their hope is not clear. I find many in the church

have the same problem today. Believers do not have a clear view of what they are waiting for. Paul writes to correct that in this letter. He knows that if these believers do not have hope it will ultimately undermine their work of faith and their labor of love. History has borne that out in many congregations. When hope is lost, faith and love are soon lost as well.

The second division of this opening chapter gives both encouragement and warning. The apostle has already referred to their patient endurance in persecutions and afflictions and now goes on to comment on that.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering -- since indeed God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, {2 Th 1:5-7a RSV}

We do not know exactly how they suffered. Some had probably been arrested, thrown in jail and beaten. Perhaps their homes had been confiscated and heavy fines had been levied against them or normal privileges of citizenship had been denied them. In all likelihood they were undergoing the same trials as Christians today who are living under Communist dictatorships. But whatever form this persecution took, the apostle says -- and do not miss this -- their endurance in the face of tremendous pressure was evidence that God was at work among them! You cannot endure, you cannot hang in there, unless you are being strengthened by the Spirit of God. That is painfully obvious on many sides today. People who are put under pressure give up very easily unless something is strengthening them. But the Thessalonians were enduring, and that, says Paul, was evidence of God's working among them.

He goes on to point out three things about their suffering:

First, God was using it to prepare them for the kingdom reign they would shortly share with him. He was making them "worthy of the kingdom of God." Actually this should be rendered, "revealing that you are worthy." God is revealing by their endurance in suffering that they are worthy of the kingdom of God, having been made worthy by faith in Christ. The fact that they could stand up under pressure was evidence that they had been truly put into the kingdom of the Son of God's love and taken out of the kingdom of darkness and of Satan.

What a great word this is, especially for young people today! Your holding out against the pressures of drug traffic, sexual promiscuity, etc., to which you are exposed is evidence that God is at work in your life.

Second, God was using their suffering to reveal the condemnation of the world. He is going to "afflict the ones who afflict them." Hebrews 11 is the record of the great heroes of our faith, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Sarah and other Old Testament worthies. But there is another group also, whose names are not given, and here is what is said about them:

Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with a sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- [then it adds this word] of whom the world was not worthy -- {Heb 11:36-38a RSV}

God's standard of value is quite different than society's. You may not be anyone in the eyes of the world, but if you are standing steadfast in your Christian faith in the face of trials and struggles you are someone in the eyes of God and at the revealing of Jesus that appraisal will become evident to all.

Thus, Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is going to even the score: "... God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted." It is encouraging to know that Hitler and Stalin and other mass murderers will eventually get their comeuppance. God has not forgotten their terrible deeds. He will afflict the ones who afflict God's people and bring rest to his own. I like that word "rest." The word really is "relief." In the Greek, it is *anesin*.

What do you do when you have a headache? You take an Anacin and you get relief. That is what this is describing.

God will bring a great sense of relief. So how do you spell relief? It is neither R-o-l-a-i-d-s, nor A-n-a-c-i-n, but J-E-S-U-S! When Jesus comes, there will be relief, visible on a world-wide scale.

On our recent trip to Israel we visited the great memorial in Jerusalem that the Jews have erected to recall the Holocaust. There, the terrible, hideous tortures to which the Jews were subjected -- the concentration camps, the gas chambers of Buchenwald and Auschwitz and other places -- are well remembered. The whole record, the newspaper reports, the fearsome scenes which the Allies found when they liberated these camps, etc., are all on display, a testimony that none of it will ever be forgotten. But what is even more touching is the new memorial that has been erected to the children of the Holocaust. Visiting this memorial was one of the most moving experiences of my life. The hall is almost totally dark, lighted only by a few candles, but there are hundreds of mirrors that reflect the candles so that the impression given is of thousands of candles burning. There in the gloom I felt as though I was standing at the judgment bar of God! Hidden voices endlessly call out the names of children who were tortured and murdered by the Nazis. It is Israel's way of saying that these children will never be forgotten. Not one injustice, not one humiliation, not one act of pain or torture will ever be forgotten. God is telling us the same thing here. He will bring affliction to those who afflict, and rest and relief to those afflicted.

When will that be? Paul goes on to tell us:

... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion 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 in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. {1 Th 1:7b-10 RSV}

This event is the climax of the whole series of events which Scripture calls the *parousia*, the "presence" of Jesus. The first letter makes reference to the initial event of that series in these words from Chapter 4:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. {1 Th 4:16-17}

That introduces the *parousia*. Jesus comes suddenly, like a thief in the night, and removes the treasure from earth. But he does not take those believers off to heaven. We know from this and other scriptures that our Lord will remain on earth with his transformed people. But he will be invisible, behind the scenes, much as he was during the forty days following his resurrection. He will be directing the events that are taking place on earth during the great tribulation. Then, after the tribulation, he will manifest himself, "unveil" himself in open glory -- "in flaming fire," as it says here -- accompanied by his angels of power, to judge the world and begin his earthly reign of a thousand years. This agrees exactly with our Lord's own words uttered on the Mount of Olives shortly before his crucifixion, as reported by Matthew:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; {Matt 24:29-30 RSV}

That occurs after the tribulation, and that is what Paul is describing here. This is also what John the Apostle saw, as he writes in the first chapter of Revelation:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. {Rev 1:7 RSV}

These all refer to the same event.

Here in Second Thessalonians, the apostle is describing true events that will take place at that time.

Here, in Second Thessalonians, the apostle is describing two results that will take place at that time:

- First, the judgment of the rebels of earth; and
- Second, the presentation in glory of the believers in the Lord.

This, by the way, is the same time of that event that is described in Matthew 25 as the great judgment of the sheep and the goats.

First, will come the judgment. The apostle puts it very plainly. Our Lord will come "inflicting vengeance" upon two classes of people: "those who do not know God," and, "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." Notice carefully the two classes. Class one is the millions who never have heard of Jesus.

I suppose there is no question asked of Bible teachers more frequently than "What happens to those who never hear?" Here is the answer: They will suffer the vengeance of the Lord.

Many of you are asking, why? If they have never heard the gospel how can God justly judge them? The answer is: "... because they have rejected the revelation of God in nature." No one lives in total ignorance of God. God is revealing himself all the time, both in our own human nature and in the world of nature around. This is clearly described in Paul's letter to the Romans.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; {Rom 1:19-20 RSV}

We have difficulty with that concept. There is something in all of us that rejects the thought of punishment. Like children, we do not like the idea of having to face the consequences of our own choices. But that is what Paul is talking about here. God has revealed himself clearly to everyone that he is God. He is in charge of the world. Every single force at work in the universe comes from his hand and is under his control. Anyone who thinks of the strange and wonderful workings of his or her own body is aware that they did not put that marvelous machinery together! An intelligent Being has done this. Yet the whole thrust of society today is to eliminate God from his creation, to give no recognition to the fact that he is behind all things. Certainly there is no attempt to be thankful to him. That is why Paul levels this charge against the whole world in Romans.

And it is not merely primitive savages who fail to recognize God or be thankful to him. People all up and down this sophisticated Peninsula are doing this too. There may be some here this morning who have not recognized the God who is there. This does not mean that when they do recognize there is a God that they are automatically redeemed. It still remains true that no one can come to the Father except through Jesus. Our Lord himself said so. But what it does mean is that if they recognize the revelation of God in nature and begin to seek him, God himself will take the responsibility to see that they hear of Jesus. That is why he sends missionaries out into the world. Many have left this church for that reason.

The second category are those who have heard the gospel, but have rejected it, and thereby turned their backs on the offer of grace. There are millions like that all over the earth, and thousands like that in churches across our own land. They have heard that if they surrender their lives to Jesus, if they recognize that they are not their own, they have been bought with a price, they will be redeemed; they will be changed; they will be saved. But they have not done that. They have heard, but they have turned their backs and walked away time and time again. They have never surrendered their will to Jesus. That is what Paul is describing.

What happens to them? How plainly the apostle puts it:

They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, {2 Th 1:9 RSV}

Exclusion! Banishment! Separation! But not annihilation! Some claim that what these verses mean is that when people die their existence also ends; that they go out like the light of a candle and they are no more. But Scripture never describes it in those terms; rather, it speaks here of "eternal destruction." The word is

"ruin," the loss of everything that makes life worthwhile; the trashing of life.

Some folks like to make jokes about hell, but I want to tell you that when you read the Scriptures you discover that hell is no joking matter. Jesus himself is the One who speaks of hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. Some say they do not mind going to hell. They say, "all their friends are going to be there." They speak of hell as if it were one great Animal House, with a fraternity party going on forever, where you just waste yourself and no one can stop you or say anything against what you are doing. That is never the picture that Scripture gives. C. S. Lewis has put it well:

"In hell, everybody will be at an infinite distance from everybody else."

Loneliness and emptiness! The Apostle Jude describes those in hell as "wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever," {Jude 1:13b RSV}. Those are very sobering words. In connection with that, I would like to quote from an excellent message on hell which was preached by a young pastor who preaches to some 10,000 people, many of whom are not Christians, every Sunday morning in a church near Chicago. Here is part of that sermon:

"One writer calls it the bottomless pit. And that conjures up dreamlike feelings of falling away -- falling, falling, falling. You've all had dreams like that, where when you woke your heart was beating because you were falling. Picture in your mind hanging over a precipice, and God is hanging onto you, and you're hanging onto him. And you decide you don't need him anymore. So you let go. But the moment you let go you know you made a mistake. You're falling and every moment you fall further and further away from the only source of help and truth and love, and you realize you made a mistake and you can't get back up and you fall further and faster and further and faster into spiritual oblivion, and you know you're going the wrong direction and you'd give anything to go back but you can't and you fall and you fall and you fall and you fall. How long? Forever. And all the while you're falling you're saying, "I'm further now, I'm further. I'm further from the only source of hope, truth, and love." In hell there is never the bliss of annihilation. You'd give anything for annihilation, but it's unavailable, only the conscious continuation of emotional anguish, physical anguish, relational anguish, and spiritual anguish forever."

What terrible thing must one do to merit such an end? Turning one's back on God's offer of grace, is the answer of Scripture. God does not want anyone to perish like that. He says so. And he has gone through terrible agony to keep it from happening. But no matter how much you dislike passages like this, two truths always emerge:

First, it is justice that is being carried out; not meanness, not cruelty, not capriciousness, but justice on God's part. It is his righteous reaction to cosmic treason on man's part. That is what turning your back on Jesus means: Treason against the King of the universe.

And second, it is self-chosen. It is what those involved have always wanted: freedom from God. Everything in their life has said, "I don't want God messing up my plans and telling me what to do." There comes a time where man says to God, "Thy will be done," or else God says to man, "Thy will be done." What you want is what you get! I do not like preaching like that but that is reality, and Scripture confronts us with reality at every turn.

But another result is given in Verse 10:

... when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. {2 Th 1:10 RSV}

That last clause, "because our testimony to you was believed," is simply Paul's way of expounding on the little word *all*: all who have believed. In fact the New International Version renders it, "this includes you because you believed our testimony." That is what Paul means. God will not glorify us because we have lived a good, decent life, or anything like that. Scripture never puts it on that basis. Rather, our glorification is based upon the fact that we have believed that Another did something for us. Another died in our place, and God has honored the death of that Other to such a degree that he offers to accept us, with our terrible record of failure and defeat, and to offer us an eternity of delight and glory with him. That is what the apostle is setting forth here.

He describes the glory of Jesus that will be seen "in his saints," and the way they cause people to marvel at

He describes the glory of Jesus that will be seen in his saints, and the way they cause people to marvel at what God has done in human lives. It is not Jesus himself and his glory that is described, but the saints reflecting the glory of Jesus. That is what causes the whole universe to marvel. That is what Paul is describing in this wonderful picture. The Apostle John says in his first letter, "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," {1 Jn 3:2}. That is what Paul calls in Chapter 8 of Romans, "the day of the manifestation of the sons of God," {cf, Rom 8:19 KJV}. When the curtain is lifted on what God has been doing with his people through all these years, how he has been changing them inside, at last the world will see what God has been accomplishing.

I remember singing as a young Christian,

Holy, holy, holy, is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them make the courts of heaven ring.
But when we sing redemption's story, they must fold their wings,
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.

There is a glory, a joy, that only the redeemed know. That marvelous manifestation of the grace and glory of God will be evident in those who have been changed by his grace. That is what this day is describing.

In this last section, Paul prays for the Thessalonians -- and for us -- in these words:

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and 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. {2 Th 1:11-12 RSV}

Paul is saying, "Hold fast. Keep steady. Remain faithful. You have the resolve to do so in the desire given you by the Spirit, you have the faith to do so in the basis of fact revealed in the Scripture, and you have the power to do so since God himself dwells in you." All this, "according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Granted that it may sometimes be hard.

Some of you are going through difficult times. It is not easy to stand for Christ in your family when perhaps some members are against you. It is not easy to be loving, winsome and warm toward those who are cruel and caustic toward you at work. This can be a tough, brutal, ruthless world; Scripture faces that. But what we are constantly reminded of is that the Lord Jesus is now being glorified when you hold steady, when you do not give up, when you do not allow yourself to fall into evil practices, but are able to say no and walk away from them. That is when Jesus is being glorified, says the apostle, and for which he prays.

And, says Paul, you also are being glorified! Inner changes are taking place in your life that you cannot even see. Others can see them better than you, but there are changes taking place. When the Lord Jesus shows us off before the whole world at the time of the unveiling of his presence, that glory that he has been shaping within us will blaze forth to such a degree it will make the whole universe gasp! What a hope! What a motivation to keep on keeping on!

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