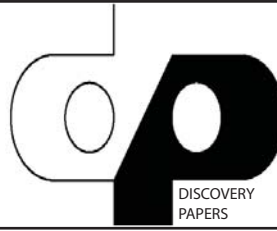


TENACIOUS THROUGH TURMOIL

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
10th Message
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2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

I've recently discovered cinnamon Altoids. I thought the company only made peppermint ones, so I was really excited to find these because I'm a huge fan of cinnamon. I was looking at the case the other day and noticed that it said, "Since 1780." That got me to thinking about the history of this curiously strong mint, so I did some research.

These mints were first made during the time of King George III. For those of us who have forgotten some of our history, that's the king that we declared independence from. That's how old Altoids are. They have gone through at least five changes in ownership, starting with a British confectioner Callard and Bowser until today when they are owned by Wrigley, which itself is owned by Mars.

The famous metal tin that they are sold in was actually a fairly recent innovation. Altoids were sold in cardboard boxes until 1918. Now these metal tins are almost as useful as the mints themselves. I found a list of 22 things that you can make out of an Altoid tin, ranging from an emergency candle, to a mini computer, to my favorite: a fireball shooter.

Throughout all of these changes, one thing has remained the same: the recipe. Altoids use the same recipe today for their standard mints that they've been using for 235 years.

This morning we are continuing our series in the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians called *Between the Times*. We've been working our way through these books since February and we have three more weeks after today before we finish them. We've been observing that these books are written to a people trying to live in between the major events of the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus.

Last week we finished 1 Thessalonians. This morning, we're looking at the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12. We began this series by reading the story of the founding of the Thessalonian church in Acts 17. Reading that story,

we noticed that the beginnings of this church were extremely uncertain. The apostle Paul had to leave quickly because of persecution from city leaders. He didn't know whether the young church would survive.

All throughout 1 Thessalonians, we heard his relief and joy that they made it as a church. Now, as we get to 2 Thessalonians, we hear a slightly different tone. The apostle is not just glad that they survived; he's glad that they are continuing strong after going through so many trials. He opens this letter praising their tenacity. He says that they have been Tenacious Through Turmoil.

He is proud of them for hanging in there for so long. He's especially proud because it hasn't been an easy road. They have faced challenges: persecution and abuse, theological and lifestyle questions. They have stayed faithful through everything. But staying faithful through persecutions can get tiring. When you are being mistreated by others for no reason, you want relief. You want the suffering to end.

To give them comfort, the apostle promises them that their tenacity will pay off. There will be an end to their suffering. The ones causing them pain will be judged. This passage uses some very strong language about the judgment of God. In fact, these verses are some of the clearest statements about the eternal judgment of God found in all the letters of the New Testament.

This is what people refer to as "hell" and these passages address it very clearly. I don't actually like the term "hell" because it sounds like a place and I'm not sure that's the best image. But these verses definitely describe the eternal judgment of God. That raises a lot of questions. The doctrine of eternal judgment is one of the hardest things to grasp in our particular culture. We'll talk about why that is true a bit later. Many people have questions about this idea.

We'll address some of those questions, but we also want to keep in mind the purpose of this passage. It was written as a comfort to a young tenacious church who was being persecuted. So this morning, we're going to try and balance the theological issues that

are raised by this passage with the pastoral concern of how to stay faithful when things are challenging.

We can use some encouragement to be tenacious. Following Jesus in Silicon Valley is no easy task. It's not difficult in the same way that it was for the Thessalonians, but it is challenging. How do we keep at it? What do we do when we're discouraged? How do we stay tenacious through turmoil? Let's read this passage and see if it can help us.

Celebrate Tenacity

The letter begins, as most of Paul's letters do, with an introductory greeting and an encouragement to his readers. We've already seen from 1 Thessalonians that the apostle thinks pretty highly of this church. That continues as this new letter opens.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³We 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. ⁴Therefore 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.

The apostle Paul has already expressed quite a bit of thanks for the people of this church in his previous letter. It's very typical for him to open a letter with an expression of gratitude for the people that he's writing to. But the particular reasons that Paul gives for his thanks are unique to this letter. He says that their "faith is growing abundantly" and their "love ... for one another is increasing." He is thankful for their faith and love.

Faith and love are both external realities. They are both about doing. A growing faith is not being more and more convinced of the truth of the gospel. It's not an intellectual exercise. In the same way, increasing love is not a stronger and stronger feeling for another person.

A growing faith and increasing love is about devotion to God and willingness to sacrifice for other people. The Thessalonians are becoming more and more committed to the kingdom of God over and above the kingdom of man. They are growing in their

ability to notice others and take them into account. They are more willing to give something up for the sake of another person.

What's remarkable is that the Thessalonians are growing in these areas even though those things are costly. The people are not being treated well. They are prejudiced against. They are being persecuted. But even while others are treating them poorly, they are growing in their devotion to God and their willingness to love each other. Because of that Paul then praises their "steadfastness and faith." Their faith and love has grown even amidst suffering.

That's tenacity. Even when it has been hard, even when they have suffered because of it, they have believed in God and they have loved one another. What you celebrate reveals what you value. We celebrate our movie stars and athletes because we value entertainment. We celebrate national holidays because we value patriotism. We need to value and celebrate tenacity. Celebrate tenacity.

Our culture tends to prefer dazzling to tenacious. We are often more easily impressed by the person who becomes a billionaire by age 30 and retires than by the person who works faithfully for four decades. We tell more stories about dramatic overnight change than someone who walks faithfully with their creator for half a century.

But there is something incredible about tenacity and longevity. It's actually one of the things that drew me to this church when I was in college. I remember attending a men's retreat and marveling at these people who spoke of being faithful in terms of decades instead of months. We have an incredible collection of people at this church who been faithful over the long haul. I might be so bold to say that it is one of our strengths. I think we tend to be more tenacious than dazzling around here. I'd say that's a good thing.

Here's what makes tenacity so remarkable: it can't be faked. These days people talk a lot about authenticity. If you want to find real authenticity, look for someone who has stayed consistent for three decades. Authenticity in the moment isn't that hard to fake. Dazzling sometimes looks pretty authentic. It's easy to seem sincere. But tenacity takes time. You simply can't do it quickly.

It's like pouring honey. You just have to wait for it. Have you ever tried to pour a lot of honey at once? You can only squeeze the honey bear so hard—it doesn't work to squeeze it harder. If you try, then

chances are that the top will come flying off and large globs of honey will drop everywhere. It'll be a huge mess. Honey just comes out slowly. You have to learn to live with that.

Tenacity is the same way. So when we see it, we need to celebrate it. Commend it in others. Listen to them. Learn from them. Celebrate tenacity.

Tenacity Comforted

The problem with staying faithful for a long time is that it can get really tiring. How do you stay faithful when you're discouraged or confused or hurt or disillusioned? How do you stay when you're suffering persecution?

The apostle comforts these tenacious believers by telling them that they won't suffer forever. Things will eventually be put right. Justice will come. Keep in mind that these are meant to be words of comfort as we look at **2 Thessalonians 1:5-10**.

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—⁶since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and 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 ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when 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.

This section begins by speaking about the righteous judgment of God. Here is the issue: the suffering that these believers are experiencing has called into question the character of God. Why would God allow them to suffer if they are doing what they are supposed to do?

The question that these Thessalonians are asking is, "How could a loving God allow evil people to keep persecuting them?" They are asking the question that many of the psalmists ask. The question that Jeremiah asks in Jeremiah 12:1, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?"

The apostle answers this question by saying that this will not last forever. There will come a day when justice will be delivered. These words are meant to comfort them and to assure them of the character of God. A loving God won't let evil people get away with their evil forever. This discussion of his righteous judgment is meant to vindicate his character.

The irony of these words which were written to defend the character of God, today cause a lot of people to question the character of God. They were asking how God could let people suffer. We read these words and ask why a loving God would inflict vengeance.

The difference is that most of us are not suffering. Mostly, we are not being persecuted. For people who are suffering to hear that evil people will be judged comes across as good news. For people who are not suffering, those same words sound deeply disturbing.

The problem is that there are aspects of justice that we are uncomfortable with. In particular, we don't like the idea of punishment. On a fairly broad level, we are deeply uncomfortable as a culture with the idea of punishment. We can't understand how the love of God goes together with the wrath of God. The idea that some people might experience eternal punishment is really difficult for people in our culture to understand.

So we're going to ask three questions of this passage. Why does justice involve punishment? Who gets punished? What is the extent of the punishment? Those are some of the questions that disturb us on a deep level and they are all addressed by these words.

First, let's talk about what justice really means. The passage describes justice as twofold. "God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted" (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7). This is what the apostle Paul says that God views as justice. Justice means that evil is punished and victims are rescued. There are two parts to justice: the punishment of those who commit evil and the salvation of those who are victims of evil.

As a culture though, when we think about the injustice of the world, we tend to prioritize rescuing victims rather than punishing evil. Think about some of the issues of justice that people tend to talk about. We want to help lift people out of poverty. We want to rescue people who have been trafficked. We want to free people trapped by slavery.

Gary Haugen, the founder of International Justice Mission, one of our missionary partners, recently gave a TED talk where he brought up this very issue. His

made the observation that almost all of the world's efforts to end poverty are focused on helping the poor. But what about the people who are oppressing the poor?

He noted, "You can give all manner of goods and services to the poor, but if you don't restrain the violent bullies from taking it away—we are going to be disappointed by the long-term impact of our efforts."¹

There are two problems with only rescuing victims: the bullies will find new victims, and justice hasn't been completely served.

Someone used the analogy of people drowning in a river. A lot of the efforts around injustice have focused on dragging people out of the river. We stand on the banks of the river and we pull them to shore. We dry them off and warm them up and send them on their way. Then we rescue the next person.

What we forget is that there is someone upstream who is throwing people into the river. These people are not just the victims of some nameless evil. They are the victims of someone committing evil against them.

All of this is to make the simple point that justice is two-sided. Punishment is an important part of justice. There is no love without wrath. If God truly loves his creation, then he must be angry when it is defiled, hurt, abused, and destroyed. The wrath of God is good news. It means he really loves us. Love and wrath go together. The justice that God will bring involves two things: rescuing the victims and punishing the evildoers.

I can't understate how difficult it is for us, because of the culture we live in, to be convinced of this point. We are deeply skeptical of anger and punishment. Most of this is quite understandable because we have often seen anger become hatred. Punishment often becomes revenge. But anger not have to turn into hate. And the vengeance of justice is different than the revenge of passion.

People don't want to believe in a God who is wrathful. We are worried that the wrath of God will take things too far. We've certainly seen anger drive people to unhealthy extremes. We're worried that the same is true of God. Isn't punishing people who have done nothing more than chose a different religion a bit excessive? It seems like it goes overboard. But in asking that question, it is clear that we don't understand the nature of God and salvation.

That brings us to our second and third question. Who gets punished and what is the extent of their punishment?

This passage uses two phrases to refer to the kind of people that experience the punishment side of God's justice. "Those who do not know God," and "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." There is some question as to whether the apostle is referring to two different groups of people or using two phrases to refer to one group of people. For a variety of reasons, I think it is the latter. This is one category of people: those who do not know God because they have not obeyed the gospel of Jesus.

This passage is apparently talking about those people who have heard the gospel and have rejected it. These people have understood God's offer of reconciliation through Jesus Christ and have chosen not to receive it.

Notice the phrase "obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1:8). What does obedience to the gospel look like? It's not a perfect life. It's not even necessarily a well-lived life. It's not about what you do or how good you are or whether you deserve it. Obedience to the gospel is simply faith. It's the belief and acceptance of God's rescue through Jesus Christ.

So this passage directly addresses those who have rejected the gospel. That leaves open the very common question about the fate of those who haven't heard the gospel. What about them? Do they suffer this punishment as well?

These verses don't answer that question. They are limited to addressing the person who has heard the offer of forgiveness and turned it down. In fact, I'd say that most of the New Testament is addressed to that kind of person. Very few, if any, passages in the New Testament directly address the question of the person who has never heard the gospel. It's a difficult question. But I'm not sure the Bible directly addresses it.

Why would it? If you and I are having lunch on Tuesday of this week, I might email you to figure out where we're going to meet. But I'm not going to ask you about where I should meet my wife for dinner that evening. If I'm talking to you, I'm going to talk about my plans with you, not my plans with someone else.

The Bible is not a theological handbook designed to answer our deepest questions. It is God's revelation to us. The fact that we have it means that God is talking to us in it. That doesn't obligate him to tell us about his plans for everyone else.

As much as I'd love for there to be a great answer to this deep question, I don't think there is one. We simply have to trust in the character of God. Remember that this is the goal of this passage. The

point of this passage is to comfort tenacious believers with the promise that God will bring justice to the world. He's that kind of God. He will rescue his people and punish his enemies.

So justice has to include punishment. And that punishment is experienced by those who don't respond to the message of the gospel. The third question can be the most difficult. How are they punished? In simple terms, does the punishment fit the crime?

Once again, there are two phrases used to describe the nature of the punishment. It is described as "the punishment of eternal destruction" and "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

What do those phrases mean? There are a few ways that people suggest these phrases should be read. Are they different ideas? One single idea? The reasons are complex, but I understand these phrases to be essentially synonymous. They refer to the same thing: the eternal destruction is being away from the presence of the Lord.

This picks up on the theme of Isaiah 2 where the people of God are drawn into his presence and his enemies try to hide from his presence. It also connects back to 1 Thessalonians 5:10 which referenced the fact that believers will live forever with Jesus when he returns.

So, salvation means being forever in the presence of God. Eternal destruction means being separated from God.

That makes a fair amount of sense based on how God has described himself throughout the Scriptures. The nature of God is that he is the source of life. If God is the source of life, then being apart from his presence is to experience eternal death. Hell, if you want to use that language, is to be out of God's presence.

In that sense, the punishment of eternal destruction for those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus is simply God doing what he's done all throughout creation. He gives people what they choose. If you don't want the presence of God before he comes, you won't be forced to endure it when he returns.

Here is how Dallas Willard states it, "no one chooses in the abstract to go to hell or even to be the kind of person who belongs there. But their orientation toward self leads them to become the kind of person for whom away-from-God is the only place for which they are suited. It is a place they would, in the end, choose for themselves, rather than come to humble themselves before God and accept who he is."²

One of the problems that people have with the idea of God punishing evil people is that it seems like if God is loving, he should do everything he can to rescue people. It seems like he should just save everyone. But the God revealed in the Bible is radically committed to the free will of his creation. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we see God allowing people to make choices and live with the consequences. God doesn't force anyone to love him.

He has made himself available to anyone who would receive him. If people choose not to accept his offer of relationship, he will not force it on them. He will give them what they ask for. He will allow them to live apart from him.

Think of it this way. A man has a daughter. Let's say that daughter gets mad at him when she is 6 years old and yells, "I don't ever want to see you again." At that point, the man realizes that she is just angry and he continues to parent her, knowing that she will be helpless apart from him. Let's say that again, when she is 16 years old, she gets mad and yells, "I don't ever want to see you again." Once again, the man would probably give her some space, but continue to parent her.

Now let's say that she is 26 years old and she is angry at her father for everything about her childhood. She writes him a letter and says, "I don't ever want to see you again." The man is devastated by this. But perhaps he tries again. Maybe he waits some time and reaches out to her hoping that she will reconsider. Maybe she does. But now she is 36 years old and she is adamant. She says, "I don't ever want to see you again. You are dead to me. I refuse to consider you as my father."

At some point, this man, if he truly loves his daughter will give her what she is asking. He will let her reject him. He may hope that she contacts him. He may wish for it every day. But he will not call or email or show up on her doorstep. To do so would disrespect her wishes. It is up to her now. If this is what she wants, then she will never have to see him again.

This is what it means that God allows the punishment of eternal separation from his presence for those who refuse his offer of relationship through the gospel. He gives them what they want.

Let's go back to our three questions. Why does justice involve punishment? Because you can't just rescue the victims. Evil people will find new victims and justice isn't complete without their punishment. The wrath of God is good news. Who is punished?

Those who decline God's offer of new life and relationship through Jesus. What is the extent of the punishment? Being forever separated from the source of life. The punishment of eternal destruction.

Can we be comforted by these words? Instead of allowing these words to confuse us, can we recognize that they describe a God who acts in righteousness and justice? We may not be persecuted for our faith, but being tenacious does cost us. Injustice is not just an abstraction to us. It is real.

We need to be reminded that our God will bring justice. We can be comforted by that in our faith. And we can comfort those who are enduring injustice. Living between the times means that we comfort each other with the message that God will bring justice.

I was talking with someone recently about her job. She works for two different bosses who have positions at a similar high level in the company. One of her bosses is wonderful. This person is understanding, considerate, and respectful. She empowers her employees and sees her role as making them successful. The other boss is exactly the opposite. That person is self-centered. Everyone in the organization serves that person's needs. Boundaries and preferences are not respected. Employees are simply used.

How is it that two such different people can be at the same level in a company? Why do so many managers lack people skills? Why do so many professors lack the ability to teach? Why does one person have incredible advantages because of race, social status, or just plain luck while another works harder without any opportunity? Why isn't this world fair?

The answer is that God is radically committed to the free will of his creation. But that the choices people make do have consequences and those consequences will eventually catch up. God will bring justice to the earth.

Know that if you are plugging away, trying to follow Jesus, it is worth it. If you are frustrated by the injustice of the world and long for a time when justice and mercy prevail, then keep going because it is coming. If you are suffering for the sake of the gospel, stay with it because it won't last forever. Jesus is coming back and he will bring justice when he does.

If you're tired of being faithful, be comforted. Tenacity is worth it.

Challenge to Continue

This letter began by celebrating the growth and tenacity that this young church had displayed. Then it moved on to a message of comfort: a reminder that their efforts were not pointless. Their faithfulness would be concluded when Jesus returns and brings justice to the earth. The passage concludes with a prayer for their tenacity to continue. Here is 2 **Thessalonians 1:11-12**.

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹²so 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 letter opened with Paul praying in gratitude for their faith. Now he prays that it would continue to be strong. Having celebrated the past and comforted them in the future, now they are challenged to continue. All throughout this passage, there has been the underlying encouragement that their tenacity is worth holding onto. Now it is made explicit. Now Paul prays that they would continue in faith.

Notice though, that this is not simply an encouragement to redouble your effort. This is not a pep rally. It's not just the message to keep trying. The prayer is that God would hold their faith steady: that God would make them worthy of their calling.

This is how you continue in tenacity. You realize that it isn't up to you. You don't work harder. You don't buckle down and grit your teeth. You trust God to be at work in us and through us. He is the one that gives us tenacity. It is his faithfulness that is lived out in us.

That's why Paul prays "that God would fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:11). It isn't our effort that fulfills anything. The Gospel message is that God works through us.

So what do we do? We just keep going. We just stay in the game. We don't have to be brilliant or innovative or dazzling. We simply stay faithful and keep at it and God will grow us. Keep initiating with your friends even when they don't reciprocate. Keep loving your spouse even when they don't notice. Keep

servicing even though it's discouraging and confusing. Stay in a place. Stay in a place, in a relationship, in a spot for a long time and see what develops. See what God does through a simple dedication to perseverance.

Let God take your ideas and fulfill them. Let him work through you in his power. When that happens, the name of our Lord Jesus is glorified. When we just stay, not trying harder, not pushing ourselves until we break, then good things happen.

Conclusion

It's pretty cool to think that when you have an Altoid, you are enjoying the exact recipe that people have enjoyed since the time of the founding of this country. But how much more impressive is it to realize that we are part of a stream of people who have tried to be faithful to the gospel for almost two thousand years.

It's hard to stay with something for the long haul. But the gospel is worth it. Tenacity in following Jesus will not be disappointed. That's the message that we need to hear when we get discouraged and confused.

We begin by celebrating the tenacity we see around us. Notice those who have walked faithfully over the long haul and learn from them. Then we can be comforted and comfort others with the knowledge of the faithful character of God. The idea of a God who punishes can raise a lot of questions for us, but when we really consider how God reveals himself, we can see that the wrath of God is good news. We want a God who rescues victims and punishes evil. One without the other is not enough.

Finally, we trust God to help us continue. One more day of following Jesus. We stay in that relationship and ask God to grow us and stretch us and help us to be faithful to his call in our lives. We keep going in tenacity.

God is good. God is loving. Trust him and be tenacious in faith.

(Endnotes)

¹ Haugens, Gary. "The hidden reason for poverty the world needs to address now." International Justice Mission., March 2015. Web. 20 April 2015. <<http://news.ijm.org/gary-haugens-ted-talk--highlights-whats-missing-in-fight-to-end-poverty>>

² Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart*. Tyndale House, 2014. Print.