

1 Thess 1:1-12 Peace, Patience, and Persecution, part 2

We support a missionary who is originally from Iran, and his ministry is focused on reaching Muslims with the Gospel. He's seen several people in Iran saved through his outreach. Life for a Christian in Iran is very difficult; many of them are persecuted and oppressed. Some are killed for their faith.

Last week, we began our study of the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians. I mentioned that the main theme in this first chapter is steadfast, patient faith in the midst of persecution. The Thessalonian believers were enduring hostility and opposition against them, yet they retained their faith and even grew in their love for one another during these difficult times. They displayed Christian virtues even when under distress. So this first chapter is Paul's expression of appreciation for their steadfast faith and endurance.

The example of the Thessalonian believers should challenge us to persevere in steadfast faith, love, and patience even through the trials and difficulties of life. We must patiently endure the tribulations associated with our faith in Christ. One way we prove the validity of our faith is holding up patiently in the face of opposition and hostility that we may experience because of our faith.

Paul next turns his attention from believers suffering tribulation and persecution to God's just retribution against unbelievers. God's righteous judgment will fall on the wicked at some point.

This truth is one of the most sobering aspects of the Christian faith. The wicked will suffer under the righteous justice of God. Paul affirms this truth and explains it in stunning detail in this text.

This teaching, that God will punish the wicked for their sin, is also one of the most despised and denied doctrines of the Bible. People simply do not want to think about the fact that the wicked will suffer divine retribution for their sin. They reject the idea that God would pay back the wicked for their evil behavior. But this text is very clear; God will punish the wicked for their sin. If God is righteous, the wicked will suffer righteous retribution for their sin.

[The outline picks up from last week]

D. .6 See persecution as a promise of retribution for the wicked.

God's righteous judgment allows believers to suffer persecution, but it also guarantees that persecutors will suffer for their wicked behavior.

1. God will at some point repay those who cause tribulation.

- a) “recompense” (ἀνταποδίδομι) – to repay, to give back, to return in kind. Those who cause tribulation (θλίβω) will receive tribulation (θλίβω); those who cause trouble will receive trouble.

“Trouble” comes from the same root word as “tribulation.” Christians are suffering tribulation/trouble right now, but God will trouble their persecutors when Jesus returns.

- b) .6a And it’s a righteous thing for God to do this. The unrepentant wicked deserve the wrath of God.

In 1 Thess 1:10, Paul asserts that unbelievers will be subject to “the wrath to come.” Those who believe in Jesus *avoid* God’s wrath; unbelievers will experience that wrath.

Many people dislike the idea of God causing the wicked to suffer. They don’t like a wrathful God. They want a God who is only loving, merciful, and gracious, not a God who pays back the wicked for their sin.

God certainly is loving, merciful, gracious, and kind. He delights in showing mercy to repentant sinners. If sinners repent, God will relent. However, God is also holy and righteous; he’s a just judge. If people refuse to repent, then they’ll receive the punishment that their sins demand.

God’s punishment of the wicked is a “righteous thing.” This is divine justice; it’s right and fitting.

Salvation is an escape from this promised retribution and judgment that God will pour out on the wicked. If you want to avoid God’s judgment, then you must repent and seek God’s mercy. Forgiveness comes to those who repent of their sins and trust in Christ for salvation.

We do not rejoice in the prospects of the suffering of the wicked. The eternal suffering of the wicked is not a happy prospect, even for God.

Eze 33:11 ... As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

- E. .7-10 Those under persecution now will “rest” when Jesus returns in glory and vengeance.

Christ’s return will provide *retribution* for the wicked, but that same prospect should provide *rest* for Christians.

1. .7a God repays the troublers with trouble, but he repays those who are persecuted for the faith with “rest.”

The word “rest” (ἄνεσις) means “relief from suffering, relaxation; a reduction of a burden, removal of pain” (cf. Anacin pain pills)

The 2nd Coming of Christ will be a relief for believers; it will solve many of our problems. The prospect of future “rest/relief” helps us persevere through troubles now.

Many of us would be relieved if Jesus returned today.

2. .7b Paul describes the return of Christ as Jesus being “revealed (ἀποκάλυψις) from heaven.” A revelation happens when God reveals something previously unknown. In this case, Jesus will be revealed when he comes again.

The 2nd Coming will happen in two distinct phases/parts: rapture and revelation. Jesus comes *for* his church at the rapture, and he comes *with* his church at the revelation.

Paul is not talking about the rapture here; he’s talking about Christ’s coming in glory after the Tribulation.

3. .7end This coming “revelation” will consist of Christ coming “with his mighty angels.” So this is clearly a majestic, glorious return. We believe the angels and the saints will return with Christ to judge the wicked and to establish his kingdom.
- a) This revelation will provide rest and relief for believers. Their trials and tribulations are over. We look forward to that great day.
 - b) This revelation will mean fiery judgment for unbelievers. Christ returns to judge the wicked.

- c) And in a certain sense, the condemnation of the wicked should also bring a sense of relief and restitution to believers. Those who caused them pain and persecution will themselves experience pain for their sin. The punishment of the wicked for their sin is righteous; God's righteous condemnation of sinners is good; it's fitting, proper, and right. We should have the right attitude about this.
4. Vss. 8-9 describe some aspects of the vengeance Christ will enact when he returns.

- a) .8 Vengeance includes "flaming fire."

Lit. "in/with fire of flame." I.e., "blazing fire." This phrase describes "taking vengeance." I.e., taking vengeance by means of flaming fire.

(1) This is likely *not* referring to the fires of hell. That will come later, but it does not happen immediately upon Christ's glorious return.

(2) This fire is likely the fire of God's judgment that will fall on the world when Jesus returns in power and glory. I.e., the fire of God's wrath poured out, as described in the book of Revelation.

- b) The word "vengeance" (ἐκδίκησις) is based on the root word for "righteous." Lit. "out of righteousness." So this is righteous judgment. Vengeance is the punishment God gives (δίδωμι) to unrepentant sinners. And it is righteous for God to take vengeance.

.8 "taking vengeance" is lit. "giving/rendering vengeance." In Greek, they would say "giving vengeance," but in English, we say "taking vengeance." Cf. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay..." (Rom 12:19).

App: People like to picture Jesus as meek and mild, a baby in a manger or a noble philosopher speaking words of comfort and assurance. They do not picture Jesus as coming in vengeance to destroy the wicked.

But clearly the picture here is that Jesus will return in great power and vengeance—he will return to deal out righteous punishment for the unrepentant wicked.

Of course, the wicked can avoid this judgment through repenting of their sins. God would rather forgive people than judge them. God delights in showing mercy. But if they refuse to repent, Christ's return will mean fiery judgment for the wicked.

Paul describes the wicked under two headings:

c) .8b Vengeance falls on "them that know (οἶδα) not God." (perf. act. ptc, pl) – lit., "to those who have not known God."

(1) From a Jewish perspective, those who do not know God are the Gentiles. Gentiles were, for the most part, idolaters and pagans.

(2) To know God is to be saved, to be rightly related to God. These people don't know God in that sense.

App: Sadly, this is likely true of the majority of people today. They know something about God but they do not know God savingly. Some are even religious, but they do not know God.

*Mt 7:23 And then will I profess unto them, **I never knew you:** depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*

These are likely the most terrifying words that anyone could hear. And many will hear them, just before they reach their final destination—the lake of fire.

Paul goes on to define exactly who do not know God.

d) .8end Vengeance falls on "those who do not obey (ὕπακούω) (pres act ptc pl) the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." Lit. "those who are not obeying the gospel..."

1Pe 4:17 ... what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

(1) If those who do not know God are the Gentiles, those who do not *obey* the Gospel are the Jews. They know God because they know the OT, but they do not obey the Gospel because they reject Jesus as their Messiah.

- (2) The word “obey” implies hearing, listening, and submitting. Cf. James 1:22—be doers not hearers only.
- (3) The “gospel,” is the good news about Jesus, particularly his death, burial, and resurrection. Those who obey the Gospel are saved; those who don’t aren’t.

The only sense in which we are saved by obedience is in this sense—we hear and submit to the Gospel. Salvation happens when we obey the Gospel. And that means that we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus.

John 6:29 Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

- (4) If you don’t obey the Gospel, you don’t know God. Cf. John 14:6; Acts 4:12

John 8:24 [Jesus said,] if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

- (5) Both Gentiles and Jews, if they do not know God and do not obey the Gospel will suffer the vengeance of God poured out on them. They are facing a fiery judgment for their unrepentant evil disobedience. The wrath of God will fall upon them.

John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

We should not be ashamed of that message. When we present the Gospel, we should present both the problem and the solution. We must warn people to flee the wrath to come.

The Bible is very clear that the only way of knowing God is by obeying the Gospel. Faith in Christ is the only solution, the only way of avoiding the judgment of God.

- e) .9 Vengeance consists of everlasting destruction.

Here we see what waits in store for unbelievers: God’s righteous judgment will fall on the unsaved.

- (1) .9a God’s vengeance is punishment. “who shall be punished”

The original language has two words translated with the single word “punished” here (δικην τίσουσιν).

The first word refers to righteous justice or penalty; the second literally means “pay the price; bear the penalty; discharge a debt.”

We could translate these two words as “pay the penalty of justice.” That’s really what punishment is—to get what you deserve.

The wicked shall suffer righteous retribution in the form of punishment. God’s justice demands that they pay the penalty.

Quote: A price must be paid in return for the suffering inflicted on God’s people and that price is none other than “everlasting destruction.”¹

- (2) God’s vengeance amounts to “destruction” (ὄλεθος); ruin, death, punishment. It refers to the loss of everything that gives meaning to life. The Thessalonians experienced persecution, but the unrepentant wicked will experience eternal destruction.

1 Thes 5:3 *sudden destruction* (ὄλεθος) *comes upon them.*

- (3) God’s vengeance is eternal; “everlasting” (αἰώνιος). Their ruin/punishment will never end. Those under this condemnation will never find relief. This is an irreversible experience.

¹ Rober L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 313.

Isa 48:22 *[There is] no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked.*

There are only two options for your eternal destiny:

Mt 25:46 *And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

- (4) Destruction does not refer to annihilation. The word refers to loss of everything good and valuable, not loss of existence.

App: A bad idea that has gained some popularity among evangelicals is called “conditional mortality.” This idea implies that the wicked will *not* suffer eternally in hell, but only for the time required for them to pay off their debt of sin. After that, they will be extinguished and cease to exist; they’ll be annihilated.

However, this verse teaches that the destruction of the wicked will be eternal. They will continue on in conscious existence and punishment eternally. For the rest of eternity, they’ll be paying the debt for their sin.

A very good reason to get saved is to avoid this destiny.

Mt 3:7 *[John the Baptist said], O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to **flee from the wrath to come?***

- f) .9b Vengeance consists of separation from the Lord.
- (1) The wicked will be “punished ... from the presence of the Lord.” This implies separation from God. Unbelievers will be eternally excluded from God’s gracious presence.
- (2) “presence” is lit. “face” (πρόσωπον). The wicked dead will be absent from the Lord. They actively excluded God during their lives, and for all eternity, that exclusion from God will continue.

App: It always astounds me when people take this threat so frivolously or casually.

The condemnation of hell is a very serious matter.

Quote: Words cannot adequately express the misery of this condition. On the other hand, those in Christ can anticipate the very opposite: “we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess 4:17).²

5. .10 Paul returns to the positive side of Jesus’ 2nd Coming.

a) .10end He’ll come “in that day.”

(1) “when he shall come” – the word “when” (ὅταν) is often translated as “whenever.” The grammar (subjunctive) suggests that Paul is asserting the uncertainty of when this will happen. The 2nd Coming will happen at some unknown time in the future.

Mt 24:36 But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

We believe that the 2nd Coming is imminent—it could happen at any time. No one knows when—it will happen “whenever.”

(2) “in that day” – of course, this is the great Day of the Lord. The OT prophets looked forward to this great day when the Messiah would come establish his kingdom.

(3) Only God knows the day and the hour of Jesus’ 2nd Coming. But it’s on the schedule. On some day, known only to God, Jesus will return. “What a Day That Will Be”

b) .10a He’ll come “to be glorified (ἐνδοξάζομαι) in his saints.” To be glorified is to be recognized, held in high esteem.

Jesus died in great indignity and dishonor, but he will return in great glory. He came the first time in great humility, but he’ll return in great majesty.

² Rober L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 313.

The Jews always expected their Messiah to arrive in great dignity and power. That was a proper expectation; that's how the Messiah will return.

- c) He'll come to be "admired (θαυμάζω) among all those who believe." This word means "to marvel, to be astonished, to be amazed, to wonder."

The 2nd Coming will be an amazing, glorious, astonishing spectacle.

- d) .10c The Thessalonians believed because of "our testimony among you was believed." These people were saved because they believed the testimony about the Gospel when Paul proclaimed it to them.

That's how people usually get saved—they hear the Gospel from someone and believe it.

App: We should be involved in that process. We never know who is going to believe our testimony.

III. .11-12 Paul's prayer for them.

As I mentioned, the whole first chapter amounts to an extended greeting. So these last two verses finish his greeting that he started in vss. 2-3. He started a normal greeting, got sidetracked for a few verses, and then came back to finish his greeting.

Paul prays for several things here:

- A. That God would count you worthy of this calling—that they would live consistently with their identity as Christians.
- B. That God would fulfill the good pleasure of his goodness and the work of faith with power—probably referring here to a life of good works. We should do what is good, right, and beneficial for others.
- C. .12 That the name of the Lord may be glorified in you and you in him—our highest goal and objective is that we might glorify God through our lives.
- D. All this would happen according to God's grace. The only way we can live a godly Christian life is to rely on God's grace.

We could summarize this part of the passage by appealing to Rom 11:22 *Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: ...*

Both God's goodness and severity are evident in this passage. The goodness of God is evident in the fact that Christ will return in great glory and majesty to relieve Christians from their burdens and suffering. Those who believe the Gospel will be spared from God's judgment and experience the wonder of the 2nd Coming of Christ.

The severity of God will fall on the unrepentant wicked. The full extent of that will not happen until Jesus returns in great power and glory. At that point, God's wrath and vengeance will fall on the wicked, particularly on those who torment and persecute believers.

And remember that these truths were meant to comfort believers who were enduring persecutions and tribulations caused by wicked unbelievers. The Second Coming of Christ ought to fill us with hope and rest, as should the prospects of the eternal destruction of the wicked. God will repay the wicked for what they have done. And God will relieve believers for their steadfast faith in the face of persecution.

If we want to avoid the punishment and everlasting destruction envisioned here, we must know God by obeying the Gospel. Once we do that, we have no worries about Jesus' Second Coming, about the fiery judgment of the wicked, or about our own eternal destiny. By God's grace, we can live in a way that glorifies God and is consistent with our identification as believers in Christ.