Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we begin a brand-new series titled, ▶ "Standing Firm When Shaken." It is a study through the New Testament letter of 2 Thessalonians written by the apostle Paul.

Our text for today is ▶ 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12.

This is an important and challenging passage because it contains what is arguably Paul's most explicit teaching on the doctrine of hell.[1]

Right about now, you may be thinking, "Bob, of all the Sundays to talk about hell, you pick this one—the Sunday I invite my friend to church—the Sunday Wes announces his resignation. You're killin' me, Bob."

In my defense, starting this series through 2 Thessalonians today has been on our ministry master plan for about six months. And if you have been around Moon Valley for a while, you probably know that we generally study through books of the Bible without a lot of skipping or cherry-picking. When we encounter hard stuff, we deal with it rather than side-step it.

And today we step right into hell.

Hopefully, this theme won't continue when we have our annual business meeting after the service. But I do suspect it will be memorable for the new members and elders elected in the meeting. They'll remember, "I got voted in on hell Sunday."

To many the idea of hell seems toxic and unloving and incompatible with grace. The thought of unending suffering in hell is indeed unsettling and

[1] Moo, Douglas J., "Paul on Hell" in Hell Under Fire (

can seem grossly unfair, particularly in the case of a loved one—a seemingly good person who simply doesn't believe the claims of Jesus.

Hell is horrifying.

Without trying to deny or minimize the frightening realities of hell, I want to present a perspective you may not have considered. From our text today, I want to show you that hell helps. In fact, that is the big idea of my sermon: ▶ Hell helps.

Yes, hell horrifies. But it also helps.

Hell helps us understand certain things about God. And hell helps us understand certain things about ourselves.

We are going to have to do a little work, though, before we get to the helpful parts. So, let's dig in.

Our text begins in ▶ 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2, with a fairly standard introduction.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is writing this second letter to believers in the church he planted in Thessalonica. The background and founding of the Thessalonian church is recorded in Acts 17:1-10.

Silvanus and Timothy are Paul's ministry partners who are now in Corinth with Paul, who is writing in late summer, AD 51.

Paul responds to positive reports he has received about the faithfulness of the Thessalonians. In ▶ verse 3, he says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:3 We 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.

Their faith and love are all the more remarkable because of the persecution they are facing, as evidenced in ▶ verse 4, where Paul writes,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:4 Therefore 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.

As recorded in Acts 17, shortly after Paul had planted the church in Thessalonica, there was strong pushback against Christianity. It was spearheaded by some Jews, who were deeply offended by the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. They attacked Christians and dragged them before city authorities on trumped up charges of sedition against Caesar. So strong and dangerous was the opposition that believers in the church sent Paul away from Thessalonica for his own safety. But the persecution continued.

To encourage the beleaguered Christians, Paul says in ▶ verse 5,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:5 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—

When Paul says, ▶ "that you may be considered worthy," he is not suggesting that suffering for Jesus is required to make them worthy.

Rather, he is saying that suffering for Jesus is evidence that they are already worthy in Christ.[2]

Such worthiness comes from Christ, not human effort. When you believe in Jesus, all your sin is charged to him. He paid for it all on the cross. In exchange, all Christ's righteousness is credited to your account, making you worthy before God. Through faith in Jesus, God judges you to be worthy and righteous before him.

Therefore, suffering for Jesus is evidence that we are worthy—worthy to suffer persecution as his representatives.

This idea is reflected earlier among the apostles who had been imprisoned and beaten by the Jewish council for proclaiming Christ. ▶ Acts 5:41 records,

> ESV Acts 5:41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

Paul elsewhere assures us that all who follow Christ will likewise be persecuted. In ▶ 2 Timothy 3:12, he says,

> ESV 2 Timothy 3:12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

It is an honor to suffer for being Christlike. It is also a benefit. Just as Christ experienced a great reversal—from being crucified, to rising again—from hanging on a humiliating cross, to being seated at the right hand of God—so, too, believers will experience a great reversal. Paul explains it back in ▶ verses 6 and 7 of our text, saying,

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[2] Wanamaker, Charles A., *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 223.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:6 —since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, . . .

God will one day mete out justice in which oppressors will be punished, and in turn, persecuted believers will be vindicated and relieved of suffering.

In ▶ verses 7 and 8, Paul explains that this reversal will begin upon Christ's return. He says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:7 . . . when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

There is no way to sugarcoat this. When the Lord Jesus returns he will inflict vengeance. This is likely a reference to the Tribulation. Grammar makes it clear that such vengeance will be inflicted upon two groups of unbelievers.

Let's consider the second group first. It is described as ▶ "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The gospel is this: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died and rose again in payment for our sins, and on the basis of that payment, he offers eternal life to all who will simply believe in him for it. The command connected to this gospel is to believe it. As such, those who do not obey the gospel are simply those who have heard it and refuse to believe it.

The other group—the first group—is described as ▶ "those who do not know God." By inference, this is most likely those unbelievers who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet, they are also without excuse and subject to God's wrath. In ▶ Romans 1:18-20, Paul explains,

> ESV Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ▶ 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ▶ 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

God draws people to faith progressively. God reveals himself in some way—through creation, for example—and to those who respond to that revelation with openness and receptivity, God progressively reveals more. This can lead ultimately to hearing the gospel message and, hopefully, believing it. But it doesn't always get that far.

We may shut down this process of progressive illumination at any point, suppressing the truth of what has been revealed, resisting God's efforts to draw us, perhaps before we ever hear the gospel. Nevertheless, we remain without excuse such that no unbeliever will be able to say before God, "I would have believed in Jesus if only I had heard about him."

God knows better.

Back in our text, Paul then shifts his focus from the Tribulation period to the eternal fate of both groups of unbelievers. In ▶ verse 9, he says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

This is a succinct description of hell: ▶ "eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord."

Some have tried to soften the hellishness of hell by saying that "destruction" means unbelievers simply cease to exist rather than suffering forever in hell. This alternative view is called annihilationism.

As attractive as annihilationism may be to our sensibilities, I am afraid it doesn't square with Scripture.

The original Greek word translated "destruction" is ὄλεθρος (*OH-leh-thros*). It describes a state of ruin, not necessarily a state of extinction.[3] For example, in 1 Timothy 6:9, Paul uses the same word to argue that the desire to become rich can lead to ὄλεθρος (*OH-leh-thros*). The idea is that greed can lead to ruin, not to a cessation of existence. Similarly, back in our text, unbelief leads to ruin, not annihilation.

Also, the original word for "eternal" normally means unending or everlasting, which certainly suggests an ongoing state of ruin. So, if "destruction" means the end of existence, as annihilationists claim, then the phrase "eternal destruction" becomes an contradiction—something like an unending end.

What's more, the phrase "away from the presence of the Lord" elaborates the nature of the ruin Paul has in mind. It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated to be eternally separated from God. If unbelievers simply cease to exist, becoming nothing, the resulting nothingness cannot be logically described as separated from or united with anyone else. Being "away from the presence of the Lord" implies existence somewhere else.

So, we are left with a hard truth. Hell is an unending state of ruin apart from the presence of the Lord. And it is a fate reserved for those who have not believed in Jesus.

[3] BDAG.

Right about now, you may be wondering about the big idea I mentioned earlier: ▶ Hell helps.

How is that possible? How can it be that hell helps?

Let me offer ▶ five ways hell helps us.

First, hell helps us come to grips with ▶ authority. Specifically, it forces us to deal with the question: Who or what is our authority for determining what is true?

The apostle Paul makes an important claim in ▶ 2 Timothy 3:16:

> ESV 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

If it is true that God has revealed himself to us through his word breathed out in Scripture, then what God says to us in Scripture about hell is our ultimate authority.

Of course, God's word may be—and too often is—misinterpreted or twisted. But if God's word is the ultimate authority, then we are obliged to surrender to our best, most objective understanding of it, whether we like it or not.

Hell as an unending state of ruin apart from the presence of the Lord horrifies me. It is emotionally difficult to affirm. And I distance myself from those professing Christians who seem to hatefully and self-righteously revel in condemning people to hell.

Nevertheless, according to my best, most objective understanding of Scripture, I believe hell is real. And I believe it is right because God is right.

Hell raises some questions I cannot answer. But the questions themselves do not invalidate the truth of hell; they simply testify to the limits of my understanding.

If I were to proclaim something like, “God cannot be so unloving as to send people to hell for not believing in Jesus,” then I must ask myself, “By what authority do I believe this to be true?”

If I can find no support in Scripture for my belief, then the truth is I have made myself my own authority for what is true. I have rejected the authority of Scripture to fashion a god I like better.

Ironically, my source for believing that God is loving in the first place is none other than Scripture. Where else is God’s love revealed through Christ but in God’s word? To the extent that I accept some parts of Scripture and reject others, I treat it like a smorgasbord, picking and choosing what I like, which is just another way of putting myself in authority.

Hell helps us confront with intellectual integrity the question of who is in authority.

Second, hell helps us understand the depth of our ▶ depravity. There is a common notion that hell is unfair. How could someone be made to pay forever in hell for something done in one’s limited time on earth?

The truth is, from a scriptural perspective, no matter how good some of us may appear to be, we all deserve hell. Every single one of us.

We live in a culture that isn’t big on owning up to wrongdoing. I often underestimate the gravity of my own sin. I minimize. I give excuses. I gloss it over. I like to think I’m a good person.

But Jesus himself issues a sobering assessment of sins we consider trivial. As recorded in ▶ Matthew 5:22, Jesus says,

> ESV Matthew 5:22 “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Jesus says an angry insult is deserving of hell. In the same breath, he later characterizes a lustful glance as adultery (5:27-28). Elsewhere in Scripture, adulterers are described as deserving hell (1 Corinthians 6:10), and we are told that, “no one is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10).

That may seem over the top to us. But perhaps this is because we are the fallen ones whose perspective is warped by our own sin. If our Creator reveals to us that our sin is so offensive in his eyes that we deserve to be banished from his presence forever in hell, who are we to have the temerity to suggest that he shouldn’t be so offended or punitive?

Before the fall, I can imagine Adam and Eve thinking that such a small thing as eating the forbidden fruit can’t be that big of a deal. And yet, according to Scripture, it was so bad it set in motion death for all humankind, rendering us hopelessly separated from a holy God, incapable of saving ourselves apart from his grace.

I suspect one reason we poo-poo the severity of our sin is that we compare ourselves with one another. But because we are all sinners, we can only gain an appreciation for how bad sin is by comparing ourselves to someone without it. There is only one person who has ever been without sin: Jesus Christ. He is the standard. How do we stack up to him?

Hell helps us understand the depth of our depravity.

Third, hell helps us understand the height of God's ▶ grace. This goes hand-in-hand with our depravity. The greater our depravity, the greater God's grace to save us from it. The hell we deserve makes the grace we don't deserve even more jaw-dropping.

Jesus tells a story to a self-righteous Pharisee named Simon who understood neither the depths of his own depravity nor the depths of God's grace. The story unfolds in ▶ Luke 7:41-43, where Jesus says,

> ESV Luke 7:41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ▶ 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

By his grace, motivated by love, God in the person of Jesus paid our sin debt. That debt must have been enormous because it required the costliest payment imaginable to cover it. It required the sacrifice of God himself in the person of Jesus, who died on the cross in our place and on our behalf.

Now, on the basis of that payment, Jesus graciously offers to save us from hell by simply believing in him for the salvation he offers as a free gift.

Jesus explains in ▶ John 3:16,

> ESV John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The word “perish” means to be ruined and is the functional equivalent of going to hell. God loves us so much that he paid the ultimate price to save us from hell. All we must do is accept his gift by believing in Jesus.

Being saved from hell is not a big deal if you don’t believe you are deserving of hell in the first place. Or if you believe hell is not real.

But the horrible reality of hell helps us grasp the glorious magnitude of the grace that saves us from it.

Fourth, hell helps us understand the certainty of God’s perfect ▶ justice.

In our text, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian believers in the midst of their persecution. Some bad people are doing bad things to them. It is not right. It is not fair. It is undeserved.

It would be understandable if the Thessalonians were asking some of the same questions we’re still asking today.

- Why does God let bad people get away with doing bad things?
- Why does God allow innocent people to suffer?
- Doesn’t God care about injustice?
- Why is living for Jesus so difficult?

In our text, when Paul describes Christ’s return to repay evildoers and to relieve the oppressed, he is encouraging the Thessalonians and us that, in God’s economy, nobody gets away with anything. All wrongs will be made right. All suffering for Christ’s sake will be rewarded.

Justice may be delayed, but it is never denied.

As part of being created in the image of God, we humans have an inner sense of morality and justice. But because our inner sense is warped and clouded by sin, it is not always reliable. It is broken, but it is still there.

The justice that is imperfectly reflected in us is sourced in our Creator, who is perfectly just. We can and should trust his moral judgment because it is flawless and ours is broken.

Scripture gives us glimpses that there will be degrees of punishment of hell, just as there will be degrees of reward in heaven. I trust God to sort all that out, as only he can.

On a personal level, we need not be concerned about avenging ourselves. In fact, we are warned against it. Instead, we are to entrust vengeance to God. In ▶ Romans 12:19, Paul says,

> ESV Romans 12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Hell helps us understand that God’s perfect justice will ultimately prevail.

Finally, hell helps us appreciate the urgency of ▶ evangelism.

Today, evangelism is almost as popular as hell. It is increasingly viewed as intrusive, insensitive, disrespectful, and a pushy imposition of beliefs on others. To be sure, some misguided efforts to evangelize can be all these things.

But in its purest biblical form, evangelism is simply a humble, compassionate effort to save someone from hell by lovingly introducing

them to Jesus. It is one beggar showing another where to find bread. Evangelism brings life.

The reality of hell helps heighten our sense of urgency and care for the spiritual well-being of others. Listen to the heart of Paul who is burdened for the salvation of his unbelieving Jewish friends in ▶ Romans 9:2-3. He says,

> NLT Romans 9:2 My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief 3 for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.

Paul's compassion is so great he would be willing to go to hell himself—to be forever cursed, cut off from Christ—if that would save his Jewish brothers and sisters. That compassion drives him to evangelize.

Paul wants the person and work of Jesus Christ—his name—to be made known—to be glorified—through the lives of all believers. This desire is reflected in verses ▶ 10 through 12 of our text, where Paul speaks of Christ's return . . .

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:10 when 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.
>
> ▶ ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:11 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,
>
> ▶ ESV 2 Thessalonians 1:12 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.

A primary endgame for the name of the Lord Jesus being glorified in us is so that the unbelieving world might come to believe in Jesus and be saved from hell before it's too late.

To the extent that we may suffer hardship or rejection in our efforts to bring life to our world, we can rejoice that our God considers us worthy of it.

Hell still makes me squirm.

But I hope now you can see more clearly the big idea: ▶ Hell helps.

It helps us come to grips with authority. It helps us understand the depth of our depravity. It helps us understand the height of God's grace. It helps us understand the certainty of God's perfect justice. And it helps us appreciate the urgency of evangelism.

Let's pray. Lord, we are so grateful for your grace through Jesus that saved us from hell. May the grace you have shown to us show through us that others might be saved. Amen.