My kids ask me whether I’m nearsighted or farsighted on a regular basis, not because they have a bad memory, but because the concept is hard for them to understand. I always respond the same way to their question, which turns into a small litany. I say, “I’m nearsighted,” and they say, “What does that mean again?” I say, “It means I can see near, but not far.” Then they say, “Can I put on your glasses?” and I say, “Yes.” Then they say, “Whoa, Daddy, you have really bad vision.” They are right; I don’t see well without my glasses. My prescription is around -7.00. Some have told me that I am legally blind. That seemed a little extreme so I looked it up on the internet, always a “reliable” source. And what did I find? Is a -7.00 legally blind? And I quote, “No… -7.00 is a rather large number, but if your glasses can correct you so that you can see 20/100 or better, you are not legally blind.”

This is interesting to me; I don’t know if it is true, but it works as a sermon illustration. Without my glasses I can do next to nothing, except sleep. But I’m not legally blind because I have corrective lenses.

We are all to one degree or another nearsighted in America; some might say we’re legally blind. We live in a right-now society. Everything is instant. Everything is high speed. We rarely look far into the future. I read somewhere recently that five year plans are passé. Businesses are now thinking one or two years out. We are nearsighted; we lack a long-term perspective.

Our text this morning offers us encouragement to press on in our faith. We are called to grow in faith and love in a world that opposes the lordship of King Jesus, and that often opposes his followers. Living up to our calling is difficult and can be discouraging in the face of opposition and suffering, especially if we’re nearsighted. In fact if we’re nearsighted we can do next to nothing in the Christian life. Perseverance in the faith requires a long-term vision. Thankfully, our text this morning offers corrective lenses for our nearsightedness. Our King, the only Righteous Judge, will return. That future perspective should inform how we live now.

Turn in your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 1. If you will recall from our study of 1 Thessalonians the Thessalonian Christians were a young church at the time of Paul’s first letter to them. His second letter was most likely written very soon after the first letter. So, they were still a young church when Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. From the very beginning the Thessalonians were persecuted by the Jews in Thessalonica and soon after began experiencing opposition from the Gentiles (cf. 1 Thess 2:15-16). In Acts 17 we are told that the Jews drug the Christians before the city authorities and charged them with sedition – they accused them of giving allegiance to another king (v. 8), King Jesus. Growing in the faith was difficult under circumstances like these. It required a long-term perspective. They needed to be reminded of the Return of the King.

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1 http://lasikanswer.com/optical-lasik/1523-lasik-optical-2.html
2 John Stott. The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians.
**2 Thessalonians 1:1–12 (ESV)**

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 our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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. 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. 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—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and 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 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. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away 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 among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. 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, 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.

**Sermon in a Sentence:** Be encouraged to live up to your calling, knowing that God is the Just Judge.

In our time this morning we’ll first explore the evidence of God’s just judgment now, and then look at the evidence of God’s just judgment when Christ returns.

**Suffering now is evidence of God’s just judgment. (3-5)**

Hopefully this statement will become clear as we move through verses 3-5, but for now let’s start at verse 3. Paul starts out by saying why he ought to give thanks for the Thessalonians. He’s thankful for the fact that their faith and love are growing (v. 3). Then he says he has bragged on their steadfastness and faith to other churches (v. 4). John Piper has said that the essence of the Christian life is faith and love. Faith directed toward God on the vertical axis and love directed toward others on the horizontal axis. But it is not merely faith and love that cause Paul to give thanks; it is the fact that their faith and love are growing in the context of persecution.

What causes faith and love to grow? Notice Paul’s thanksgiving is directed toward God, not the Thessalonians. God causes faith and love to grow and therefore God is to be the one who is thanked when we see faith and love growing. But if God is the one to be thanked then why does Paul tell the Thessalonians he is thankful for them? He wants to encourage them. Although they are growing, he wants them to continue growing. However, he doesn’t want to give them credit for their growth – that belongs to God. God is the one who enabled them to grow in faith and

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3 I have skipped verses 1-2 because they are so similar to the greeting in 1 Thess. See that sermon, “How the Gospel Impacts the Church,” for explanation.
4 What do we give thanks for? We give thanks for what is important to us. Don Carson. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation.*
5 John Piper. “Suffering and the Second Coming.”
love and remain steadfast. God is the one that will continue to enable their growth through their suffering.

All of this is preface to the next verse. Verse 5 is the hinge verse in the chapter. What comes before verse 5 is evidence of the righteous judgment of God. What follows verse 5 further develops evidence of the righteous judgment of God. When Paul says this is evidence...“this” refers specifically to the persecutions, afflictions, and suffering the Thessalonians had endured. I spent a lot of time this week trying to figure out verse 5. How is suffering evidence for God’s just judgment? I think we find the answer to this question by looking at the purpose of suffering.

All suffering is for a purpose. According to verse 5, the result of our suffering now is that we would be considered worthy of the kingdom of God. This doesn’t mean if you suffer you will earn your way into the kingdom of God or earn your salvation. Only those who have believed the gospel are saved (cf. v. 10). “Worthy” in this context means “living up to” who we are as citizens of the coming kingdom of God (cf. v. 11).7 We have the opportunity now to “live up” to who we are through suffering, and so be confirmed as genuine believers when Christ returns.

Christ suffered and died for our sin (gospel). If we believe the gospel, we are in Christ; our lives are bound up in his life (gospel-truth). Therefore those who are in Christ will suffer like Christ, and in fact are called to suffer (gospel-conduct).

Romans 8:16–18 (ESV)

16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Our suffering is evidence that we belong to him and are in him. But we must remember that our suffering won’t last forever.

Christ suffered to the point of death and then was raised in glory. Those who are in Christ will also suffer in this life, but that is only one part of a two-part sequence for those who are in Christ. Those who are in Christ will also be raised in glory when Christ returns. Our suffering now points to our glorification on that day. We experience short-term pain for long-term gain.

Suffering now, for believers, is purification, not punishment.8 Of course, there can be consequences for sin in this life.9 But ultimately the punishment for our sin has been placed on Christ, if we have placed our faith in Christ. Suffering is God’s way of making us more like Christ and therefore more fit for his kingdom. As we suffer we have the opportunity to prove our

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7 Don Carson. A Call to Spiritual Reformation.
8 John Piper. “Suffering and the Second Coming.”
9 Sometimes people buy into a lie that God is getting them back for their sin. E.g. I didn’t have my quiet time this morning, so when I stubbed my toe on my way out of the house that was God getting back at me. No, you stubbed your toe because you weren’t wearing shoes!
faith by how we deal with our suffering. When we endure suffering like the Thessalonians we prove that God is at work in our lives. When our faith and love grow in the context of suffering we prove that God is at work in our lives. And we can have confidence that one day we will enter into God’s glory.

In the Thessalonians’ context they were suffering for their faith; they were being persecuted. But persecution is not always physical. It can be social and financial as well. I suspect that some of you may be suffering for your faith to some degree in these social or financial areas. Some of you may be ridiculed or even shunned by your colleagues, family, or peers because of your stand for Christ. Our stand for Christ can hurt our reputation. Some of you may have been passed over for a job promotion because of your stand for Christ. Our stand for Christ can hurt our pocketbook.

However, the Western church in the 21st century is an anomaly in church history. For much of church history, Christians have suffered for their faith. However, few of us suffer for our faith now, but we may someday. And while we rarely suffer for our faith, we do suffer nonetheless for other reasons. Whatever your suffering may be, it provides an opportunity for you to identify with Christ in his suffering and live up to who you are in Christ. When you endure in the face of suffering you live up to who you are in Christ. When you grow in faith and love in the face of suffering you live up to who you are in Christ.

So, we can be encouraged to live up to our calling, knowing that God is the Just Judge. He has paid the penalty for our sins in Christ; we are now given the opportunity to suffer like Christ. And the long term result is worth any short term pain. God’s just judgment is seen now in the suffering of believers; it will be seen at Christ’s return as well.

Suffering at Christ’s return is evidence of God’s just judgment. (6-10)

A contrast is being set up in verses 6-10. What will happen to the believers who are being persecuted when Christ returns? And what will happen to the unbelievers who are persecuting the believers when Christ returns? Quite simply the answer is this. God will give relief to the believers and retribution to the unbelievers; they will be paid back (vv. 6-7). Both of these things will happen when Christ returns, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels (v. 7). Let’s look first at the judgment of unbelievers.

The picture is not pretty for those who do not know God and do not believe the gospel. First of all the law of retribution is enforced (lex talionis). In the Old Testament we are introduced to this law – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Lev 24:20). Some believe that eye-for-eye justice only applies to the Old Testament, not the New Testament. This passage seems to indicate the law of retribution is still in place. Look at verse 6.

The tables will be turned on those who persecuted the church at Thessalonica. They were afflicting the church for a time, but they will be afflicted eternally (v. 6). They were causing the church to suffer for a time, but they will suffer eternally (v. 9). Theirs will be a punishment of eternal destruction. The persecuted church is not to take vengeance into their own hands because vengeance belongs to the Lord – he will [inflict] vengeance on those who do not know God (v. 8).
This is indeed a bleak picture, but I have not even touched on the worst part of it. Those who don’t know God will be separated from God eternally, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (v. 9). Believers will marvel at his glory when he comes on that day (v. 10). But unbelievers will be banished from the presence of God. There is nothing imaginably worse for unbelievers and nothing more exciting for believers. Believers will behold the glory of God for eternity and share in that glory. We were created for this. We were created to worship the glorious and marvelous God eternally. Believers will realize that goal perfectly when Christ returns. But those who don’t know God will be eternally separated from God.

Not all Evangelicals believe this. Some take this teaching to be quite offensive. So, when faced with this seemingly offensive doctrine one path many have taken is to change it. Rob Bell, a megachurch pastor from Michigan, is one who has taken this approach. His newest book Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived has stirred quite a controversy over this very topic in the last few weeks. In a lengthy review of the book, another Michigan pastor, Kevin DeYoung, summarizes Bell’s view on hell this way:

“Hell is what we create for ourselves when we reject God’s love. Hell is both a present reality for those who resist God and a future reality for those who die unready for God’s love. Hell is what we make of heaven when we cannot accept the good news of God’s forgiveness and mercy. But hell is not forever. God will have his way. How can his good purposes fail? Every sinner will turn to God and realize he has already been reconciled to God, in this life or in the next. There will be no eternal conscious torment. God says no to injustice in the age to come, but he does not pour out wrath (we bring the temporary suffering upon ourselves), and he certainly does not punish for eternity. In the end, love wins.” (emphasis added)

I have not read Bell’s book, but I trust Kevin DeYoung’s assessment. And if DeYoung is right in his description of Bell’s book then, with all due respect, Bell is wrong. A plain reading of verses 6-10 flies in the face of Bell’s belief that hell is not eternal conscious punishment.

But why does Bell, and others like him, change the doctrine of hell? I can’t speak for them, but I would guess this all comes down to one’s view of who God is and how sinful man is. I suspect the notion of hell doesn’t fit with Bell’s notion of who God is or how sinful man is.

I’d like to answer this question: Is God’s judgment just, as described in verses 6-10? But first I think we have to answer the question who is God and the question how sinful is man?

God is a God of holy love. First, God is holy. What this means is God is morally perfect; he is pure. He is righteous – meaning he does all things right. But we are sinful, morally imperfect, and impure. All humans who have ever lived have rejected God’s rule as king and have rebelled

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10 One view is that unbelievers are destroyed after they die. They cease to exist instead of suffering eternal conscious punishment. This is called annihilationism. Another view is universalism. It claims that everyone is or will be saved, so no one actually spends eternity in hell. Collin Hansen. “Toward a Better Understanding of Hell.”
12 Holiness also carries with it the notion of being set apart. God is above his creation; he is transcendent.
against his laws (cf. Rom 3:23). We have “true moral guilt” before a holy God. As a result God must punish our sin because he is also a righteous judge or a Just Judge (v. 5).

Those who were persecuting the Thessalonians are deserving of God’s judgment because of their sin. They sinned not only against the Thessalonians, but also against God – whenever we sin God is always the most offended party. The law of retribution (lex talionis) is in order for the persecutors – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, etc. If God is holy, sin must be punished. Therefore if God punishes guilty sinners he is just in doing so. However, God is not only holy.

God is love. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). God took the punishment for our sin when Jesus died on the cross. The law of retribution is still in place – but it’s Jesus’ eye that was taken for our eye, so to speak – he bore our punishment in our place. So, God is a holy God and God is a God of love. God’s holiness and love, his perfect justice and perfect mercy, meet on the cross of Christ. This is good news; this is the gospel. If we believe this gospel we will be saved; God’s just judgment will be met and we will be delivered from eternal punishment.

But that gospel must be believed. Those who were persecuting the Thessalonians rejected this gospel. Verse 8 tells us they do not know God and ... do not obey the gospel. What does it mean to obey the gospel? Simply put it means that you must believe the gospel? The context makes this plain. Remember there is a contrast being set up here between the persecutors and those persecuted at Thessalonica. The Christians persecuted at Thessalonica are referred to as the ones who have believed (v. 10). And what did they believe? They believed the testimony of the apostles – or in other words they believed the gospel. So in essence, to obey the gospel means to believe the gospel.

The persecutors didn’t know God because they didn’t believe the gospel. There is only one way to know God; it is through belief in the gospel. Without belief in the fact that Christ died for our sins there is no forgiveness of sins. And if there is no forgiveness of sins then we stand guilty before a holy God. And if we stand guilty before a holy God then the only thing we have to look forward to is eternal punishment. So, if we reject the gospel, God remains just in his judgment of sin.

But if we believe the gospel then we have forgiveness of sins and are made right with God. Those who have believed the gospel know God, and when Christ returns they will be relieved. They will be relieved of the suffering in this life, when Christ returns. That is the main thing this text is referring to. But there is another relief implied. They will not suffer God’s judgment on that day.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus? Have you believed the gospel?

If you affirm these truths about God’s holiness and love and the sinfulness of man, then the doctrine of hell makes sense and we can say that God is just in his judgment of unbelievers. But if you reject these truths about God and man’s sinfulness, or have a weak view of them, then the

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13 If there is no real moral guilt then this is a weak argument. But there is real moral guilt. Francis Schaeffer. The God Who Is There in The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy, 146-147.
ideas of retribution and eternal conscious punishment seem barbaric. But there is a flip side to this as well. If you reject the doctrine of hell then the gospel is incomprehensible; it makes no sense that God would send his Son to die for the sins of the world. My theology professor Graham Cole puts it this way, in a thick Australian accent: “The gospel makes no sense if there is not a holy God who is going to set the world to its rights one day.”

This teaching on the return of the King and his just judgment are not intended to merely occupy space in our heads or fill a theological curiosity we may have. This perspective corrects our nearsightedness. And these corrective lenses are used by God to encourage us to live up to our calling.

We may experience opposition in this life, but the opposition will be defeated. We may experience suffering in this life, but the suffering will end and we will behold the glory of Christ. Through this long-term perspective (and the grace of God at work in our lives) we can live up to our calling; we can grow in faith and love; we can endure suffering. We need to keep that day in mind in order to live in this day. That is one way we live up to our calling (a right perspective), but that’s not all.

The Just Judge is the one who enables us to live up to our calling. (11-12)

In verses 11-12 Paul prays that God would make the Thessalonians worthy of their calling. God is the one who must do the work in us. We all have good intentions. As verse 11 says, we have a resolve to do good. But it is God who must fulfill that resolve in us. We are expected to grow in faith and love in this life – in the midst of opposition and suffering – but God must do the work.

Philippians says it this way: …work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (2:12-13). Hebrews says we are to fix our eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith (11:1). So we’re to fix our eyes on the finish line, but also on the one who finished before us and enables us to finish.

And when that happens, the Lord Jesus is glorified in us and us in him (v. 12). When Christ returns it will be in great glory and we will marvel at him. When Christ returns we will be glorified. But that can also happen now, to some degree, as the grace of God works in our lives to fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power (v. 11). God is the one who makes us worthy of his calling (i.e. enables us to live up to our calling) through his grace and power. And when that happens, the Lord Jesus is glorified in us and us in him (v. 12).

In 1952, Florence Chadwick set out to be the first woman to swim the 26 miles from Catalina Island to mainland California. She was an accomplished swimmer and this was well within her abilities. She was accompanied by boats that were there to protect her from danger and help her if she needed it. A dense fog set it along the way and it became difficult to see anything at any distance. She had never given up before but despite encouragement from her mother and the others in the boats she gave up and climbed in one of the boats after swimming about 15 hours with no end in sight. It wasn’t until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away.
At a news conference the next day she said, “All I could see was the fog…. I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”

Two months later, Florence decided to try again. This time was different. The same thick fog set in, but Florence made it because she said that while she swam, she kept a mental image of the shoreline in her mind. Not only did she finish, she beat the men's record by two hours!

We’re called to live up to our calling, knowing that God is a Just Judge. But there is thick fog in this world we live in; we live in a nearsighted culture. We need to keep our eyes on the end. There will be relief for us. This perspective will help us live up to our calling, as we also keep our eyes on Jesus, the one who enables us to finish.
Bibliography


