

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 *All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

Why should we look forward to Jesus' return with joy?

1. Trouble for troublemakers
2. Relief for troubled
3. Jesus in glory

"But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. . . . You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ Everyone will hate you because of me." (Luke 21:12, 16-17) "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." (2 Peter 3:10) Does all that sound like fun to you? Is that something to look forward to? Wouldn't you look forward to this about as much as you look forward to going to the dentist?

Jesus warns us about the troubles and difficulties of the end times. It will be difficult days for Christians. But there is hope. The Apostle Paul gives us reason to look forward to Jesus' return with joy.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. We can look forward to Jesus' return because he will payback those who have made life for a Christian difficult. Jesus said they will hate us, betray us and persecute us. Have you experienced that? The recent Supreme Court ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade has brought them out of the woodwork. They hate us because we protect unborn children. They hate us because we stand for morality. They hate us because we ring church bells on Sunday mornings. They hate us because we teach only one way to heaven: Jesus Christ. We wonder when Christianity is going to become illegal as it is in some other countries. They trouble us. What's God doing about it?

"A young man was taken from a family, a loving, caring family and he was a loving, caring compassionate person and now his son has to grow up, his daughter has to grow up . . . without him. Where is the fairness here? 39 months for murder . . . This is a great injustice. This is a slap in my face. This is a slap in my son's face." These are the words of a mother whose son died as a result of a teenager dropping a boulder on his car on a highway. She was bitterly angry at the injustice of the sentence against her son's murderer. Where is the justice?

You hear similar complaints against God. A two-year-old child dies of cancer or gets killed in a car crash. A woman is brutally raped. A flash flood comes and kills hundreds of people. God could have done something to stop it. He stepped in against the Egyptians and set the Israelites free with mighty miracles. But he seems to rarely do anything for God's people today. But he will. Don't let appearances fool you. God sees and God will repay.

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. This is hell: everlasting destruction and being shut out from the Lord's presence. It is the end of hope.

This is the opposite of what happens in this world. We are called unloving, judgmental, behind the times when we take a stand against obvious sins. We are naturally shut out from society, sometimes shut out of social media for our stances. But on Judgment Day, those who shut us out will be shut out from God's presence forever.

If you doubt hell's existence, look at yourself in the mirror. Are there wrinkles? Do you feel the pressure of time passing? There's nothing natural about the aging process, and there's nothing normal about death. People don't die just because stuff happens. We die because God says so, because we live in a moral universe where things fall apart because of sin. How especially devastating death is for those who deny God's love, who suppress the truth. Sin is real. Hell is a reality.

This is all lost on the person who won't face the problem, who suppress the truth of sin and grace. A sighted person can see the room is dark and will wish for a light. A blind person doesn't care. God is coming to throw the light switch. The spiritually sighted are thrilled by the news. They can't wait for it to happen. The blind are wondering what all the fuss is about. God is coming to throw the light switch and we will all find ourselves before the judgment seat of God's final justice.

Some people shake their fist at God for this. They say, "I could never believe in a God who sends people to hell." Ok. You don't have to. But, the consequences don't change just because you don't want to believe it. I don't think I would mess with a God who has the power and the right to send me to hell. I don't want to pretend he doesn't exist or shake my fist at him.

Instead, let's put our trust in him and believe his promises. He promised, *He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you*. Can you imagine what the Thessalonian Christians must have faced? The intimidation, trumped up charges, mob violence, the loss of business and social standing. Fear for their families and their future. How tempting to hide their faith or give up on it entirely!

Martin Luther said, "Looking at the Christian community with the eye of human reason and reflection, no more wretched, tormented, persecuted, unhappy people are in evidence on earth than those who confess and glory in Christ the crucified. . . [God] allows them to remain prostrate under the weight of the cross, while others in the world, particularly their persecutors, live in the enjoyment of honor and fortune, of happiness, power and riches, with everything moving to the fulfillment of their desires." (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 8, p. 380)

But what does Paul say of them? *All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering*. When the world makes you feel like a loser for living your faith, remember God's judgment overturns the world's verdict. He has counted you worthy of his kingdom because Jesus' worthiness covers you through faith, that faith which the world hates. That very faith that suffers at the hand of the world is the same faith that claims Christ's worthiness as your only hope and salvation. His worthiness covers our sinfulness. Face the world, confident of God's judgment that counts you worthy because of Jesus.

So, let's put on Jesus, left leg, right leg, shirt, gloves, hat. We want to be covered in Jesus so that only Jesus shows before others and before God. The world may think it's a bit cheesy to bow down to God and pray to him, to ask him for mercy, to take his sacrament and memorize his Word. But that's what we do. We want to be filled with him. We want to receive him. We want him to cover us from head to toe.

Years ago, a movie came out with Kurt Russell called *Backdraft*. They had some firefighters talk about it and critique it. In one scene Kurt goes rushing into a fire with his coat unbuttoned. The firefighters said that would never happen. It was not realistic. When you rush into a fire, you need your full gear on. It's probably the first rule of firefighting. So, it is with Jesus. He is coming with fire. The only way to escape is to be wearing him.

In him we are safe. We are covered in Christ's righteousness and God counts us worthy. As we look at the cross, we can be optimistic about Judgment Day. We can look forward to Jesus' return with joy because we will have relief from the troubles of this world.

Is it one more day removed from the vitality of youth or one day closer to paradise? Is it another health problem or a step closer to relief? Is it the loss of a loved one or another believer waiting to welcome you into heaven?

We can look forward to Jesus' return with joy because of the end of our troubles, but also because we will experience Jesus' glory. *On the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

We like to be amazed, don't we? A fireworks show, fall colors, a beautiful sunset – these bring amazement to our eyes. But the world can amaze only so much and for so long. The amazement, wonder and marvel of heaven has no bound, no limit, no end. We will be in the presence of the majesty of God and the glory of our Savior. Words can't begin to describe and emotions can't begin to feel what it will be like.

So, look forward to Jesus' return with joy. Dream about it. Rejoice in it. And may we pray with St. John, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.