

Some to Hell, Some to Heaven, its Only Right

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

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TEXT: 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

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-- 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, 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. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 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.

First of all, what is being said here? The Thessalonians are suffering. Last week's message regarded how all Christians will suffer because we serve Jesus. The world is against Him and He is against the world. To follow Jesus is to share His enemies. He has a lot of enemies. For us, this suffering can take various forms. But in America, we have been largely spared the kind of physical persecution that is experienced by other believers in the world and throughout time. The most common ways to persecute Christians are to take their money and their stuff, to beat them up or kill them, or to take their freedoms. Members of the Church in Thessalonica experienced all three, especially their leaders. Paul is putting their suffering into context so that they will understand what is happening to them from a larger perspective.

Paul's message can be summed up like this: "I know you are getting abused for loving Jesus, but Jesus is going to come back and punish the people who are bothering you by sending them to eternal punishment. But you will have joy and glory in the presence of Jesus. This suffering can be endured. It's even a good sign for you."

An Observation: God is justified in punishing unbelievers and rewarding believers

Those who persecute the church in Thessalonica are justly sent to hell by God. Their punishment is not the bitter over-reaction of an angry God. Rather, it is just. Justice is a concept that needs to be understood correctly. The idea of justice is simple: everyone gets exactly what they deserve, no more and no less. What we call our criminal justice system is rarely truly just. Why? Because the efforts to make punishments fit the crime are circumvented at every level. We don't always want justice. Often, we want mercy from our courts. We want people to not pay what they owe. Also, if someone can afford a good lawyer, often justice is not gained but thwarted. Some lawyers know enough tricks that they can get you off the hook. That means you don't have to pay for your crime. Also, sometimes people can't afford a good lawyer and they might get punished more severely than they deserve. Often justice is set aside not by a guilty or innocent verdict, but by the misguided values of the Judge who issues the punishment. He can be a hanging judge, repaying more punishment than is deserved. Or he can be lenient, not giving enough punishment.

Then there is the problem of how to punish. Is locking someone in a room for years equal to the crime of murder or rape? Or should a life be given for a life? If someone steals, is locking them in a room for years a just punishment? Or is repayment with damages?

And then there is the question over whether we should punish at all. There is the debate between a “penal” approach to justice versus a “remedial” approach (remedial meaning that no one needs to be punished, just reformed). Justice is hard in mankind. But not so with God. God distributes justice perfectly. In God, punishment is always equal to the crime and no worse. Likewise, reward is always deserved. God is just. Look at this language and see the justice that runs through it:

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--

The suffering of believers that shows them worthy of the Kingdom is a matter of justice. It is just, right and good for believers to inherit the Kingdom of God. God isn't simply favoring one group over another. He is administering justice in a correct manner.

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 punishes those who persecute the church in a just manner. They deserve what is coming to them. And relief is granted based on justice also. The two sides of the scale level out. God is doing what is right.

And a Question: How can it be just to punish someone with eternity in hell for persecuting “me?”

Paul is clear, as we have seen that justice is the issue in this text. “Don't worry,” he tells “the suffering church, when the Lord returns there will be justice, and those who persecute you will be properly punished and you will be properly rewarded.” This punishment for the persecutors is no small thing. Look at the language Paul uses:

6 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you... 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance ...9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord...

This punishment is described as eternal, as destruction, and as away from the presence of Jesus. Our squeamish age doesn't want to hear about punishment and hell. There are many Christian teachers who are leading people astray by seeking to soften the pains of hell. There are many who are saying that hell is not just for it is too cruel, to mean. They say, “God would never send anyone to hell forever.” But the Bible says exactly that right here. Eternal – destruction– away from the presence of the Lord. Can it be clearer? Who is man to say to God what is just? The arrogance of mere men to call themselves the Lord's spokesmen and declare that His punishment is unjust. He is a just God and never does evil. He hates sin and wrong doing. He always does what is good and right.

Of course, when I put myself in the place of the Thessalonians, I can't help but wonder if it's all a little extreme? I mean, sure, they persecuted me. But hell? Forever? Is that really necessary? That's like running to your mom and saying, "Billy hit me!" And she says, "I'll handle that." And then she takes a pistol and shoots Billy dead. "Really, Mom? A spanking should have done the trick." It doesn't seem just to me to punish someone in hell for hating me. It also doesn't seem just to me to send me to heaven. Look at the other side of the equation:

God considers it just...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...when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed

This seems like eternal joy for me. In fact, that is what it is. He will come back and be glorified among the saved. We will have pleasures forevermore. Now, some people think they are good enough to deserve this kind of treatment. But we don't. Some think, "Well, I'm good enough for heaven." But that is arrogance. We are sinful people, easily succumbing to evil desires. I'm not that good, even on my best day. This is like a little boy runs to his mother and says, "Billy hit me!" and she takes a gun and shoots Billy, and then says, "And here's a million dollars for you. You're such a good boy. You can have the house too. Want some ice cream?"

How can the punishment fit the crime for someone who persecutes you or me to go to hell forever? How can it be that the reward equals the good deed when we endure suffering for a little while and then get heaven forever? The answer is, the justice in God's treatment of the unbeliever and rescuing of the believer doesn't arise from how one sinner treats another, but rather God's relationship to sinner and God's relationship with the believer. Justice comes at the cross.

Back to the Text to See the Justice

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, 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.

Those who persecute the believers are not going to hell for that sin. They are instead going to eternal punishment because they do not know God. They are separated forever from the presence of Jesus because they do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. You see, there are two halves to what the sinner deserves. First, it is just for God to send sinners to hell. Second, the judgment is sealed when people refuse to obey the Good news of Jesus, the Gospel.

Deuteronomy 32:3-4 3 For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! 4 "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

Our God is Holy! But man is not! Man does not know His God. God is holy, man is sinful. God has no relationship with sinful man. So man is lost in his sins.

Genesis 8:21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth...

God said this as Noah got off the ark. Mankind had just been destroyed because of his sinfulness. God's holiness is such that He is just when He destroys all mankind. There is no whining, no appeals, and no declarations of God not being fair! God is holy, holy, holy! His Holiness is such that any sinfulness in any way is wicked ugliness to Him. He is insulted by all sin, everywhere in the universe. And mankind isn't a little bit sinful, but his heart's intentions are evil from his youth.

This is why God punishes mankind in hell. But this is not the only reason. There is a more damning reason. That reason is this: God bridged the gap between man and Him by doing what He was not required to do. He bore the punishment His justice demanded on Himself. God became man and dwelt in our midst. He lived a perfect life, and then willingly offered Himself as a sacrifice, paying the price by His death on the cross to cleanse sinners. He did what was necessary to bring mankind near to Him. He did the work. He reconciled man to Himself.

2 Corinthians 5:19-21 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, . . . We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:10 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

But many wicked men, deserving hell, still reject this good news. They say, "Who is God to tell me I must believe in Him?" They refuse to obey His gospel. There is nothing left for them except the certain expectation of a fiery hell forever and ever. And it is what is deserved. Those persecuting the church weren't going to hell simply for persecuting the church (although, God views that activity as in itself sinful against Him and worthy of punishment) but because that persecution was the evidence that they hated God, rejected His salvation, and sought to kill Him by attacking His children on the earth. Likewise, we who believe are not being rewarded with eternity in heaven and joys forever because our great goodness. Rather it is because we believe in the Gospel. And this gospel makes it just to reward me and you forever:

Romans 5:8-10 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

I don't deserve heaven because of my goodness. But Jesus deserves it. And because He has taken away my sin, and then brought me near to God through His life, I receive what I don't deserve: pleasures forever. And if the devil accuses and says, "That isn't just. It's not right that this sinner get to enjoy the riches of God forever," then the word says to him, "When we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to

forgive us.”

Jesus deserves joy forever and I deserve punishment. He took the punishment, so now I get what He deserves and it is justice. I'm not guilty. I am now loved as Jesus is loved. I stand clean before God due to the work of Jesus on the cross. And all man who rejects the work of Jesus on the cross as their only path to salvation will remain in their sins and will get the punishment that they deserve. God is not cruel. Their punishment is just.

The same cross that brings judgment to mankind also makes it just to save him.

How should We Respond?

1. Acknowledge that all men and women deserve hell. Stop the debate over whether it is right or not. It is just. That He saves any shows His great kindness.

2. Acknowledge that the cross of Jesus was about justice. What Jesus suffered was exactly what was required to rescue you and me, no more, no less.

3. Realize that the element of time means judgment and salvation are withheld for now. Don't get fooled into thinking that anyone will escape justice just because you don't see it administered right now. Don't get discouraged into thinking that any believer who suffers for Jesus will go unrewarded.

Finally then, if you are not a believer in Jesus, if you have not obeyed the gospel: turn from your sins and believe. Bow to the Son, believe in Him. Turn from your sins for God is stoking the fires of justice because of your sins. You will not escape. Instead, run to the Son who has died for you. If you will obey, believe in Christ who died for sinners, then you will be forgiven your sins and your punishment will be removed. Likewise, you will receive the reward awaiting Jesus. And if you are a believer, don't let the world as it appears today discourage you, not even a little. In a moment, in an instant, all will be set right. All debts will be paid. Justice will be done on earth. The wicked will be punished. The believers in Christ will be rewarded. Remember this every day.