

Word to Those Who Think God Is Unfair • II Thessalonians 1:5-10

We live in a world with much injustice. The injustice of an innocent man going to prison while the one who actually committed the crime goes free and commits other crimes. The injustice of a husband who is faithful to his wife and loves her only to have her enter into an adulterous love affair and leave the marriage. The injustice of the employee who has worked faithfully as a good employee for his company and then two years before scheduled retirement he loses his job and pension funds simply because greedy managers have ripped off the company and forced it into bankruptcy.

Let there be no doubt that we live in a world with injustice. But where is God? Why doesn't God stop it? Why doesn't he intervene or at least help those who are saints and inflict greater harm upon those who are sinners?

This is a difficult and complex question. But God himself, at least in part, answers it in II 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. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 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. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 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.

God answers the injustices of life first of all in verse five, speaking to the present and speaking specifically to what happens in the Christian's life as evidence of God's presence and God's rule. "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."

Character is most often built in the fiery flames of adversity rather than in the ease of comfort and prosperity.

Suffering was very real for the Thessalonians. They suffered persecutions in the external opposition that came from unbelievers and they suffered the trials that everyone faces in life. But specifically here they were suffering simply because they were Christians. At this time, in A.D. 51, the Thessalonians had been Christians for less than a year. We can safely say that had they not become Christians, they would not be suffering the specific things that were their afflictions at that time.

Let us dispel a popular American myth. Many Americans, and I say with regret, many churches, books and teachers, propagate the myth that when a person becomes a Christian suffering ceases. They believe that if, in truth, we are faithful to God in every respect, than we will no longer suffer. Such an idea is virtually a slap in the face to those Thessalonians and to other Christians throughout history who have been faithful to God and have suffered. In fact, many early first century Christians believed that suffering for Christ was both a privilege and a proof of their faith. If they did not suffer as a consequence of being a Christian, they had some doubt in regard to their own salvation.

It is tragic that there is such misunderstanding among some American Christians about this. I have known people, as I suspect you have as well, who have turned bitter against God and against the church of Jesus Christ because prayers were not answered as they asked or because they have suffered as a direct consequence of their coming to

know Jesus Christ as Savior. This tragic misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about presents the question of why God would allow such a thing to happen. Why would

God allow such suffering in the life of someone who is his own?

The patriarch Job in the Old Testament was a favored child of God, yet he suffered enormously and never knew why. Many who are the children of God today also experience suffering and are never told a reason why. On the other hand, the reason in some situations may be quite clear. It may be that God seeks to draw us to himself. The testi-

monies are many that we are far more inclined to be drawn into a close relationship with God through the tough times than the easy times. It may be because God wants to build our character, for he is far more concerned about our character than he is concerned about our comfort. Character is most often built in the fiery flames of adversity rather than in the ease of comfort and prosperity. Or it may be that God personally wants to teach us to love him simply for himself rather than for the things he gives to us.

I'm not saying in any of this that anyone ought to seek suffering. I would have great difficulty approving such a masochistic approach to faith. However I am saying that Christians are not exempt and that God even allows and causes suffering in our lives in order to make us into the kind of people he wants us to be.

A verse earlier, in II Thessalonians 1:4, the suffering Thessalonians are described as persevering and enduring. Not because they were tough or more spiritual than any other group of Christians, but because God helped them through. They persevered and they endured through this enormous suffering because God had given them the gift they needed, for endurance is God's gift to suffering saints. While God does not always take us out of suffering, he does always take us through suffering.

I wish that I could come up with some marvelous example to illustrate this principle. Perhaps we could say that God is like a lifeboat in a very stormy sea. The boat will not get us out of the storm, but it will get us through the storm. We could compare God to an obstetrician who will not eliminate the pain of labor but will get the mother safely through the labor and the delivery. Or, we could compare God to a tutor who does not get us out of taking a test, but through his teaching enables us to pass the test. The teaching in 2 Thessalonians 1:5 is that the very fact that you endured and that you have gotten this far is proof of God's love and justice. "*All this is evidence that God's judgment is right.*"

In the rest of verse five we are told that there is a prize that goes with this proof or this evidence: "*you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.*" Now please do not misunderstand this statement and misconstrue the New Testament teaching to be that because someone suffers therefore that person has access to the kingdom of God and to heaven. That is the Muslim

teaching of the Ayatollah Khomeini who tells people to suffer and die for Islam in order to get a guaranteed place in heaven. The Ayatollah sent 14 year-old boys into battle against Iraq with the promise that if they died for Islam they would ascend to heaven as martyrs because suffering gives access to the kingdom. That could not be farther from New Testament teaching. The New Testament consistently proclaims that we do not gain access to God nor to his kingdom in heaven through the things that we do but through the grace of God that is bestowed generously upon our lives. When the Bible says that we are "counted worthy," it's because of Jesus, not because of ourselves.

Several years ago I was privileged to eat at a country club where I could never be a member on my own. I could not afford it, nor do I have the prestige to join. But that day I was a guest of someone else who was unable to be there. He very graciously made a reservation for me for lunch and gave me his membership number which I, not reluctantly, used. When I went to the country club and gave his name, I was immediately welcomed and had a marvelous lunch. I must confess to you that I felt a certain level of pleasure when the check came and I simply wrote his number in the appropriate blank there at the bottom.

That is the way I got into the country club, and that is the way I'm getting into heaven. Not on my merit, but on Jesus' number. That is what it means in verse five when it says we are "*counted worthy of the kingdom of God;*" we are getting in on Jesus' number.

Let me try to summarize what this verse is teaching — sort of capsule it. We are being taught that Christians suffer. No doubt about that. But our suffering, our enduring and our "getting Jesus' number to the kingdom" all are proof that we belong to God and that God is active in our present lives. "*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.*" While the suffering is hard, what is taught here is good. But it does not fully answer the initial question about injustice. Why is it that Christians suffer and those who cause that suffering seem to prosper? For that we move to the future and to verses six through ten.

Look again carefully at II Thessalonians 1:6-7.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 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.

God guarantees justice. The troubled will get relief and the troublemakers will get trouble. God is just. He keeps full and accurate records. God knows everything that is happening in the world; there are no secret places where God cannot see or hear. God knows who cheated the other person out of a job. God knows who is responsible for the break-up of a marriage. God knows all of the details, and he will pay back everyone. That is his promise and his guarantee.

The troublemakers will get trouble, but the troubled will get relief. The Greek word chosen here to communicate this relief is a word that the Greeks used to refer to releasing a bowstring so that it is no longer taut and under pressure. We can relate to that for many times we feel as tight as a string on a 100-pound hunting bow! But then they would use this word translated here as “relief,” referring to when the string is released and even when the bow is unstrung. We have expressions in our own society that are parallel to that. We refer to being “uptight” or to being “strung out.” We welcome the promise that God will release the tension, that he guarantees relief.

But when is this going to happen? Some of it happens all the time. God intervenes and cuts off the power of the Hitlers and the Idi Amins of this world. He often reaches out to catch up with the pimps and the drug dealers and the white-collar criminals of our society. It is a documented everyday occurrence. However, the final guarantee of eventually making everything right does not come until that moment of Christ’s return. On that amazing day, this Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, who grew up in Nazareth, who taught as an itinerate preacher, who performed miracles, who died on the cross outside of Jerusalem, who rose again on the third day and eventually ascended into heaven, will come back with flaming robes and with powerful angels. On that day he will judge the troublemakers and relieve the troubled. He absolutely promises.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to

those who trouble you 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 (II Thess. 1:6-7).

When Jesus returns he will judge and he will punish. Two specific groups are detailed in verse eight. The first is “*those who do not know God.*” This does not refer to those who are ignorant of God and the gospel, those in distant places who have never heard of the name of Jesus Christ, but specifically to those who have had the opportunity to know God and have chosen otherwise. Likewise, the other group is “*those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*” They are those who have deliberately chosen to disobey. They have refused the invitation and the truth of salvation.

We need to understand what we are talking about, for we are dealing with God himself. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the king of kings, the boss of bosses. He is the creator of all creatures, absolutely supreme. It is he who offers salvation to all

who will believe and it is he who calls upon us to obey and follow him. There are those who say, “I’ll think about it,” “Just give me a few years to work it through” or “I’d like to

know the options. I’ll check them out and get back to you.” Do we realize who we’re talking to?

Again, what parallel can we find? What employee who wants to keep a job would dare speak to the boss like that? What private in an army in the midst of a battle would tell the commanding general, “I’m not sure you have a good plan?” Or what patient on the operating table would tell the surgeon how to operate? The absurdity of anyone so addressing Jesus Christ himself! We need to understand that this is serious business. Life is serious. What we say really does matter. What we do really does make a difference. And what we believe makes an eternal difference.

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power... (II Thess. 1:8-9).

When Jesus returns, he will give punishment for the rejecters and he will give glory to the believers.

This is hell. Not a popular teaching, but true. Surveys say that even among those who count themselves to be Christians and take the Bible to be authoritative, there is a diminishing belief in the reality of hell. Those who turn their backs on Jesus Christ in this life will have made a choice that lasts forever. Eternity. Alone. Shut out from the presence of God which is the greatest horror that any creature could ever experience. This is frightening. It's awful. Hell is no joke; it is God's answer to the injustices of this life.

When Jesus returns, he will give punishment for the rejecters and he will give glory to the believers. Those who believed in Jesus and lived for him will get to share and reflect in the incredible glory of Jesus Christ *"on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."* As bad as it will be for the rejecters, it will be so good for the believers. That is the day when all the injustices will be made right. That is the day when everything will be made fair and right forever and ever.

Then verse 10 adds, *"This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."* Can you guess how those Thessalonians felt when they heard those words, *"This includes you..."* They must have felt wonderful! And you and I can feel just as wonderful because the message is precisely the same to all who have believed in Jesus Christ and obeyed his gospel.

I offer three concluding comments to this most significant section of the Bible. Comment number one is that, because of what is here taught, we are free from all need for vengeance. Because Christians know that God will make it right and God will judge, we don't have to get revenge against anyone. We don't need to hate or get even; we can freely forgive! That is why forgiveness is at the core of what Christianity is all about. When we really believe God will eventually bring absolute justice, then we can forgive anyone for anything. Did you know the freedom that that gives? It is a wonderful truth!

A second comment is that we must believe now. That decision determines our destiny forever. So please make absolutely sure that you have placed your trust in Jesus Christ for eternal life. What you say does matter. What you believe does make a difference. It is not something to be toyed with. Don't play games with God. You must believe — now.

A third comment is to be patient. Often when

we are troubled by others, when we are as tight as a bowstring, we want justice now! We want God to make things right immediately. We are like a family that gets in a car and goes on a cross-country trip. Before we have gone twenty miles, one of the children in the backseat says, "Are we there yet?" As a parent you know how far it is to your destination and how long it will take, but you also know how difficult it is to explain to the child strapped in the back seat so she can understand. And so it is with God. For when we are in the midst of the injustices we keep saying, "Are we there yet?" "Are you going to fix it now?" "Has the time come?" Even God is hard put to explain to us that we aren't there yet. It is hard to wait. But wait we must, and at precisely the right time, in a magnificent way, in robes of flames and with powerful angels, Jesus Christ will come and he will make everything right and he will make everything good. Justice will prevail, sinners will be judged and Christians will be glorified. It could be today!

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