

Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: You? Worthy of the Kingdom of God?

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

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*The Lord's Day Morning
September 16, 2012*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. We're going to be looking at verses 5 to 10. This is a passage about persecution and it's the passage from which the theme of our study of 2 Thessalonians is drawn. We have called this, "Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return" and that is exactly what Paul is talking about in this passage. And though persecution may be an alien thing to us, affliction and suffering for our belief in Christ and our testimony to Him, it is not a strange reality to many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. There are thousands upon thousands of Christians who know the reality themselves, not second hand but first hand, of which Paul speaks in this passage. And all of us need to be prepared for the testimony should we be called to give it. And so I want us to look at this passage together today. Let's pray before we hear God's Word.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. You mean it for our encouragement, You mean it for our benefit, You mean it for Your glory, so do these things in us as we hear it read and explained and applied. Work it deep into our hearts by Your Holy Spirit. Open our eyes to behold wonderful things in Your Word, in Jesus' name, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it from 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 beginning in verse 5:

This is the 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.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

About the year AD 156, right in the middle of the second century, an eight-six year old Christian pastor from Smyrna in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, was arrested by the local Roman provincial ruler, simply for being a Christian and for refusing to worship the emperor, and his name was Polycarp. He had been appointed to be a pastor in the little city of Smyrna by John, that John. He was born about the year that Jerusalem fell, AD 70. He was probably about twenty-five years old when the apostle John died. He represents that generation of transition between the apostolic age into an age where there were no longer apostles; and he loved the Lord. And when the local Roman ruler said to him, "Unless you deny Jesus and worship the spirit of the emperor, I will throw you to wild beasts and I will burn you at the stake," he refused to recant his love and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, we have recorded for us, by his congregation a year after he died, the prayer that he prayed before he was burned at the stake. And in the middle of that prayer, he said, "Oh Lord, I thank You that I have been counted worthy to be numbered among Your martyrs." Now you recognize that language comes right out of 2 Thessalonians. What has the apostle Paul just said to them in verse 5? "That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering." Is that how you would think about it were you called upon to suffer to be afflicted or even die because of your love and trust in Jesus Christ?

Many of us have been praying for about three years now for pastor Youcef Nadarkhani from Iran, a Christian minister who had been in prison simply because he was a Christian, simply because he was attempting to share the Gospel and live as a belief in our Lord Jesus Christ in a state in which that is against the law. And we were thrilled this last week when he was released from prison and when the death penalty was suspended and when he gained freedom for the first time in many, many years. But what would have been our reaction had the supreme court of Iran gone through with the death sentence? Surely one appropriate reaction would have been moral outrage that, simply for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ a person could be put to death. But would part of our reaction have been, "Lord, we thank You that pastor Youcef has been counted worthy to be numbered among the martyrs"?

At the installation of the new chancellor of Reformed Seminary just a couple of days ago, I quoted Michael Ramsden's words from the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, Cape Town in 2010, where he said, "There's no such thing as a closed country if you're willing to die for the Gospel." Is that how you think about it? Is that how you think about affliction and persecution, possible death, because of trusting in Jesus Christ and bearing witness to His name? That view is pervasive in early Christianity. There was a recognition that it was a very

significant blessing and gift from the Lord to be counted worthy to suffer for Him. And Paul is talking about that to the Thessalonians in this passage.

And it raises a very interesting question. Notice what he says in verse 5. “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.” Now that’s a strange statement to make because persecutions and trials seem to contradict the righteous judgment of God rather than to confirm it. I mean, think about it. If God is God and God is sovereign and God is good, why in the world would His people be suffering and afflicted and persecuted simply for believing in Him? It seems to contradict the goodness of His judgment that His people would endure affliction and be persecuted simply because of faithfulness to His name. But Paul here says that God’s righteous judgment is evidence and demonstrated and made manifest amongst the Thessalonians in the Thessalonians even in what they are suffering and what they are going through. And you have to ask the question, “How? How exactly, Paul, is God’s righteous judgment manifest through that? You mean, God’s righteous judgment is manifest through these humble, faithful, Christians in Thessalonica suffering?” “Yes,” Paul says.

Now that ought to make you a little bit curious. What does Paul mean by that and what exactly evidences God’s just judgment? “Are you saying that suffering evidences God’s just judgment?” No. No, Paul tells you. Look one verse ahead of the passage we just read. Look at verse 4 of 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 where Paul is talking about what he boasts about the Thessalonians to the other Christian churches. What is it we boast about? “Your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.” Paul is saying that God’s just judgment is demonstrated, it’s made manifest, it’s evidenced, it’s proven in the Thessalonians staying faithful, keeping on believing, enduring steadfastly the trials and afflictions and persecutions which are encompassing them, that God’s judgment is made manifest in that — His just judgment. Now you still have to ask the question, “How exactly? How is God’s just judgment made manifest in believers staying faithful and enduring through afflictions and persecutions?” Well Paul tells you two things in this passage and I want to focus on those things with you together this morning.

BELIEVERS’ ENDURANCE UNDER AFLICTION AND SUFFERING JUSTIFIES GOD’S FINAL JUDGEMENT

The first thing is this. Paul says that the faith and endurance of the Thessalonians under affliction and suffering and persecution is proof of God’s righteous judgment in two ways. And the first way is that it justifies God’s final judgment. Now if you read the Jewish rabbis from this time and a little bit earlier, they had, in their writings, in a number of places, that the unjustly persecuted righteous person has a right to rejoice in that suffering because God, at His final judgment, is going to make everything right. So that if we suffer in this life we will

be liberated from that suffering in the life to come. But Paul is actually saying something more than that here. Paul is saying that the very suffering that the righteous endure, God's judgment in the final judgment is justified. Why? Because sin cannot triumph in a moral universe and those who unjustly afflict the righteous must be punished. And the apostle Paul is saying, "Thessalonians, even as you in faith and steadfastness endure unjust suffering, you justify God's final judgment." What is one of the doctrines that people today hate the most? The doctrine of God's final judgment. And why do they hate it? One of the reasons they hate it is because they say it's unjust, it's unfair. God ought to forgive everybody; God ought to bless everybody; God ought to accept everybody. And it's mean and it's wrong and it's unfair to talk about God judging the world. Well here's the apostle Paul saying, "In the face of unjust affliction, there is a moral demand that the afflicters be punished. As they have unjustly punished just believers, justice demands that they themselves be punished."

You know, when you walk out of a courtroom, most of the time people walk out of the courtroom and one party says, "The judge got it right," and the other party says, "The judge got it completely wrong." On Judgment Day, willingly or not, grudgingly or not, everyone will have to admit, "The Judge got it right. It was right for God to judge wrong. It was right for God to judge injustice. It was right for God to judge the afflicters of oppression and wrong and injustice in this world." Everybody will have to acknowledge God was right to do it. And the apostle Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, "The very fact that you're enduring under this unjust persecution, justifies God's final judgment on all wickedness."

But notice, by the way, that's not the only thing that Paul says here that the afflicters had done. Not only have they afflicted the innocent, they have also, notice the language — verse 8. They have not known God, they have not obeyed the Gospel, and whereas he congratulates, if you look down at verse 10, the Thessalonians for believing his testimony, these afflicters have not believed his testimony. They have not known God, they have not obeyed the Gospel, and they have not believed Paul's testimony. And the apostle Paul says they will be judged. "For although they knew they ought to worship God," Romans 1, "they have chosen to worship the creature rather than the Creator." And though they have heard the command of the Gospel, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," they have rejected that command. And though they have heard the testimony of Paul and the other apostles that "there is no other name under heaven that has been given by which we may be saved but the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," they have rejected that testimony and consequently they will be justly judged. It is very important for all of us to take that in. We can sit here Lord's Day after Lord's Day, week after week, year after year and not realize the solemnity of this word. Right now counts forever and refusing to know God and to believe the Gospel and to accept the testimony of the apostles, carries with it eternal consequences.

Listen to the language that Paul uses here. What's going to happen? "The Lord

Jesus is going to be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire and inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the Lord and from the glory of His might." It's very interesting that when the Roman official who captured Polycarp questioned him and demanded that he renounce Jesus and worship the spirit of the emperor, he said to him, "Do you not know that if you will not do what I say, I will burn you with fire?" Polycarp responded, "You may burn me with the fire that lasts for only a while, but if you do not repent, you will burn in the fire that lasts forever." And I want us to take that in. Paul is deadly serious about the just judgment that awaits all who do not know God, who do not trust in Christ, who do not receive the Gospel, who do not believe on the good word of testimony that has been given by inspiration through him and through the other apostles. This is so important, young people, for you. You can hear the message of the Gospel in Sunday school and in Vacation Bible School and in your homes and family worship and family devotions and you can read about it and it can fall on deaf ears. But your response to that Gospel will determine eternity for you. Paul is warning of that in this passage and we need to take it in.

BELIEVERS' ENDURANCE UNDER AFLICTION AND SUFFERING PROVES, DEMONSTRATES, AND MAKES MANIFEST THE JUST JUDGEMENT OF GOD

But there's a second reason in this passage that the apostle Paul says that the faith and endurance of the Thessalonians under affliction and suffering have proven, demonstrated, made manifest the just judgment of God. And it is this. Paul says here that through that, through their faith and their endurance of affliction and suffering, God is using even their affliction and suffering to sanctify them and so that they will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God. Turn back with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 5 verse 41. This theme, I challenge you to study it; we don't have time to look at all of the passages in the New Testament this morning but I challenge you to study this theme in the New Testament. I'm going to show you a few passages. But in Acts 5 verse 41 you remember the apostles have been imprisoned and then they escape and they go back to preaching and then they're hauled before the Sanhedrin again and the council beats them, they torture them, they threaten them, they tell them, "We're going to let you go but stop preaching in Jesus' name." And what are we told in Acts chapter 5 verse 41 that their reaction is? "They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."

Now it's very interesting that New Testament Christians thought that suffering for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ was a gift from God. I want you to think about that for a second. You remember what Paul says in Philippians? "For to you it has been granted not only to believe but also to suffer for His name." They viewed suffering for Christ as a gift just like they viewed faith as a gift from God,

so suffering for Christ was a gift. And here are the apostles saying, "Lord, we're unworthy men and we accept it as a gift that you've counted us as worthy; even though in and of ourselves we're not worthy, You've counted us worthy to suffer for Your sake." You understand that it was a problem for the apostles that immediately after Pentecost they didn't suffer. They were a little bit worried about that. You know, we get worried when we suffer; they got worried because they didn't suffer and now that they've been tortured for the faith they go out praising the Lord, "Thank You, Lord because You'd already told us in Matthew chapter 5 that everyone who loves You is going to be persecuted for You. Thank You, Lord that You've granted to us that we could suffer for Your name!" Is that your attitude and is that my attitude? And you know why it isn't? Because we don't treasure the Lord Jesus enough. He doesn't mean the world to us. He meant the world to Paul; He meant the world to Peter; He meant the world to the apostles. It was a privilege to suffer for Him because He meant more than anything else in this world.

Just look at how this plays out in the New Testament. Turn to 1 Peter chapter 4. In 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 13, Peter says, "Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." There's the instruction from Peter who can speak out of his own experience. He had suffered for the Lord and his reaction was rejoicing, just like Paul — you remember when Paul is in the prison in Philippi and the earthquake comes and the gates are opened and the jailors about to kill himself because he's afraid that he's lost his customers and they're singing hymns? They're rejoicing! Why? Because just exactly what Peter said. "Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings."

Well think about what Paul says in Romans 5. Turn back to Romans 5 and look at verse 3. Paul says, "We rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope." There's Paul saying, "Lord, You're so wonderful. You use our sufferings to sanctify us! It's amazing! Our persecutors think this is going to break our spirit and it's going to turn us back from Christ and it's going to prove their victory in this world and You use it to make us more like Jesus! You use it to grow us up in grace, to mature us in Christ."

Turn back to 1 Peter again but now just to the first chapter, 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 6. He says, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith - more precious than gold that perishes though it's tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." You see this theme running throughout the New Testament? Suffering for Jesus but rejoicing? Why? Because it's a proof of God's righteous judgment and it is a gift in which He declares you to be worthy of the kingdom. No wonder Polycarp prayed, "Oh Lord, I thank You that You've counted me worthy to be numbered

among the martyrs.” And by the way, I want you to notice the parallel. It's the same kind of language that Paul uses for justification, where we're counted righteous, not because of our own righteousness but because of Christ. He says, “I've been counted worthy — not, He's made me worthy; He's not declared that I'm worthy in myself. This is a gift from the Lord. The Lord has counted me worthy to suffer for Christ.” You see, it's a proof of God's grace just like justification is a proof of God's grace. Polycarp's not saying, “I'm acceptable to God because I died.” He's saying, “The Lord has blessed me with the privilege of suffering and dying for His name. He has counted me worthy even though I'm not.”

The Roman official said to Polycarp, “If you will renounce Christ and offer incense to the emperor, I will let you go. All you have to do is recant His name, curse His name.” Do you know what Polycarp said to him? He said, “I have served my Lord for eighty-six years and He has never once done me wrong. How can I blaspheme Him now? Do with me what you will.” Would that be your reaction? Do you love the Lord Jesus that much? Are you that convinced of His love for you? Does He mean more to you than this life? My friends, those are the Christians that change this world by God's grace. And who knows how in our own time we may be called, especially those of you who are younger, how you may be called to give testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be my prayer that, by God's grace, you are counted worthy to suffer for His name.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this word, solemn though it be, and we pray that You would change us by it for our everlasting good and for Your eternal glory. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Well let's this great hymn by the tune by Martin Luther, “Great God, What Do I See and Hear?” And Dr. Wymond will play through it once and then we'll sing it.

The only way to be prepared to meet Him is by the Gospel. We need the mercy that's provided only in Jesus Christ and God does that amply in Him. Receive then the Lord's blessing. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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