

WHEN JESUS APPEARS ALL THE WICKED WILL BE DESTROYED 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10

INTRODUCTION

In the movie “Lion King” the good king, Mufasa under whose rule all the animals of the jungle live in peace and prosperity is murdered by his evil brother, Scar who then takes over as king. He invites the wicked hyenas to join him in ruling. They abuse and oppress all the other animals, stealing all their food and the lush jungle becomes a desert. Eventually, the king’s only son, Simba, who had to flee for his life as a cub, gains the courage and the love to return to his father’s kingdom. In the battle which follows Scar is killed and the hyenas are driven out of the prideland and peace and prosperity returns to the jungle. The love and courage and justice and wisdom of Simba are displayed and praised by the jungle animals when he destroys wicked Scar and the hyenas and restores the jungle to its former glory. This is one of the most common plots in the stories that we love. An evil, powerful character oppresses and abuses and enslaves the innocent, helpless good people and destroys their land and then the rightful ruler comes and destroys the wicked and restores the people and the land. We love the stories and admire these courageous heroes who destroy the bad guys, set the people free and establish just and peaceful societies.

The reason this is one of the most popular plot lines is because this is the story line of the universe. The good and great God made a perfect world in which he intends to live with his perfect people forever. However, the perfect people he created rebelled against this good God and we have plundered his kingdom. We have lived in open rebellion to this good and kind king who, in spite of our rebellion continues to provide us with food and clothing and shelter and joy. This good king has sent his son into the world as a baby in order to begin the process of executing his justice and restoring his world. However, unlike stories like “The Lion King, Jesus did not enter the world in order to rescue innocent, good people but in order to save sinners, people who naturally hate God and his laws. So his first Advent set in motion God’s plan to make a holy people to live in his holy world one day by Christ living and dying and rising again in order to make it possible for God to justly forgive and love criminals like us. And so at Christ’s second Advent, his second appearing he will be revealed as the great and glorious and loving and just Savior and king as he finishes the work he began at his first Advent.

During this Christmas season we are considering five of the things that will happen at the second Advent, the second appearing of King Jesus. We have seen that when Christ appears again death will be no more and sin will be no more. Today, as we examine this fearful passage in 2 Thessalonians we will see that when Christ appears the second time, the wicked will be destroyed. The central point of this text is that God displays his grace, justice and goodness as the good king of this world at the return of Christ. Just as the glory of Aragorn, in “The Return of the King” was manifested in his defeating the hordes of Mordor and restoring peace to Middle Earth, so the greatness and the glory of the Triune God is shown forth now and forever through Christ who now creates a holy people and who will one day destroy the wicked and satisfy forever those who believe.

MAIN POINT

God displays his grace, justice and goodness by...

I. Turning sinners into faithful, loving Christians (vv.3-5)

Paul begins this second letter he has written to the Christians living in the Greek town of Thessalonica by telling them that he thanks God for them. Actually, he does not simply report that he thanks God for them but he declares that he is under moral obligation to thank God for them. He “ought” to thank and it is “right” to thank God for them. Paul says it would be a moral evil to not thank God for them just like it is a moral evil to steal or to lie or to murder.

When do we give thanks to a person? We thank people when they do good to us or for us. We thank the person who does the good, not someone else. When your parents give you a Christmas present you don't thank your uncle Wally for the gift. Also, we don't generally thank people for doing good to someone else unless we are care deeply for the other person. Parents will thank people for being kind to their children or husbands will thank someone for helping his wife get unstuck from a snowbank because parents love their children and husbands love their wives. So when Paul thanks God for the faith of the Thessalonians which is growing abundantly and their increasing love for each other we understand two things. First, he loves the Thessalonians and cares what happens to them. Second, he recognizes that God is the one who has given them faith and love and he is the one who is causing their faith and love to grow.

They are the ones who are exercising faith in Jesus and they are the ones who are loving each other and yet Paul says that God is the one who is causing them to trust Jesus and love each other because God is the one who deserves the credit, the thanks, not them. Do not miss the profound and powerful truth that Paul expresses by this report. If you are a person who is trusting in Jesus as the only one who can save you from your sins you deserve no credit for your faith. The reason you believe and another person does not believe is not because you are smarter or more spiritual but because God has had mercy upon you and caused you to believe. If you are a person who loves other Christians and who is growing to love Christians more, it is not because you are such a loving person or have a loving personality but because God is exercising his mighty power on your behalf to give you a growing love for the brothers. So if you do not believe in Christ and if you find it difficult to love Christians you should tell God you are sorry for your unbelief and your lack of love and you should ask him to have mercy upon you so that you trust Jesus and love other Christians. When you see others who do not trust Jesus or love Christians you should ask God to have mercy upon them. If you are trusting in Jesus and loving others you should praise God for the astonishing miracle that he has done in your life. When you see others trusting Jesus and loving others, you should thank God for his work of grace in their lives.

How does Paul know that these people are trusting in Jesus and loving each other? We know from 1 Thessalonians 3:6 that he has gotten a report from Timothy that even though these Christians are being persecuted for their faith and are suffering sickness and financial loss and the death of loved ones and other kinds of sufferings they are continuing to hold fast to Jesus and to love other Christians. According to v. 4, upon receiving this report he boasts to other churches about their steadfastness in trusting Christ in the face of the persecutions and the other kinds of afflictions that are happening to them. Paul is holding up their perseverance in faith and love before other Christians as an example of how God works in people's lives and for the purpose of encouraging other Christians to hold fast to Jesus and love others in the face of their own troubles. He does not want other Christians to be impressed with them but with the sufficiency of Jesus. He wants other Christians to see that to have Jesus and get beat up or to have Jesus and lose your business is infinitely better than not having Jesus and living a secure and prosperous life. Paul says in v. 4 the exact opposite of what many supposedly Christian teachers say. Paul is saying that the clearest evidence of faith and the clearest manifestation of God's work in the lives of Christians is not healthy and wealthy and successful people but people who are suffering all manner of loss and disappointments in this life while continuing to trust and rejoice in Jesus and to love other Christians. If you want to find help in trusting Jesus more, don't pay attention to the purveyors of prosperity in the name of Jesus but pay attention to those Christians who are suffering and yet trusting Jesus and loving others.

In v. 5 he also contradicts what many false teachers in the Christian church say. He says that the thing that proves that God is a righteous judge is the fact that faithful Christians are suffering. We are often told that the evidence of God's justice is that Christians have good things happen to them in this world. How often do people complain that God is not just because bad things happen to his children? What Paul says is that the proof, the evidence that God is a righteous judge is that faithful, loving Christians suffer now. How can that be? The reason that the present suffering of faithful Christians is evidence that God is just in his judgment is because we know that God is a just God. He says he is just over and over. He says that the wicked will suffer for their wrong doings and that his people will be restored. Therefore the unjust treatment of God's people now proves that there is a just judgment coming in the future. That is exactly where Paul goes in the rest of this

passage. God's righteous judgment is coming when Jesus returns. The first thing he wants us to know in the end of v. 5 is that the result of God's righteous judgment will be that we will enjoy the kingdom of God in its fullness. The losses we experience while holding fast to Jesus will be more than compensated for when we enter into his kingdom. We endure the sufferings now in faith, we are steadfast and immovable so that in the end we will receive from our Lord Christ that warm welcome into the heavenly city. But more about that later, the main thing that these verses tell us is that God is the one who creates faithful, loving Christians and causes them to grow in their faith and love in the midst of suffering and thus God alone deserves all the credit and praise and thanks.

God displays his grace, justice and goodness by...

- *Turning sinners into faithful, loving Christians*
- *And by...*

II. Punishing forever all unbelieving sinners (vv. 6-9)

Verse 6 is a statement of one of the most fundamental facts about God. He is just. He does not play favorites. He cannot be bribed. He acts in accord with perfect justice because he is the standard of justice. He always does what is good because he is good. Verse 6 is a clear statement of that fundamental principle of justice: at the end of all things, everyone gets what they deserve. Here it is stated that everyone who persecutes or causes trouble for Christians will be persecuted or troubled or afflicted by God. God will recompense, or repay people according to what they have done. Obadiah 1:15, "For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head." Isaiah 59:18, "According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies..."

In v. 7 we are told that this repayment will occur when Jesus returns, not before. The language that Paul uses here is from the OT. The fact of God's coming to the earth to repay his enemies, accompanied by his angelic armies, in flaming fire for the purpose of inflicting vengeance upon his enemies is one of the most oft repeated facts in the entire Bible. I looked at every occurrence of fire in association with God's name in the OT and I found hundreds of cross references. The fury of God against sinners is often described with the language of fire. Psalm 21:9, "You will make them as a blazing oven when you appear. The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them." Psalm 50:3, "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest." Jesus himself is described with this language by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:12, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Jesus uses this language himself many times as in Matthew 18:8, "And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire."

In v. 9 Paul states in clear terms the punishment that will befall the wicked. It is eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. Please note it is not annihilation but eternal, conscience torment away from the presence of the Lord. All the horrific ways in which the punishment of God is described throughout the Bible aim to help us understand how horrible it is to be shut out from the presence of God. The reason that hell is such a horrible place is because God is not present to bless but he is only present to punish. All of the pleasure and joy that you and I experience on this earth is because God is present to bless. He is now providing all men with rain from heaven and crops in their season. He is right now providing us with plenty of food and filling our hearts with joy. But in hell men and women are away from his presence and his glory. As Jesus repeatedly says, it is a place of darkness, shut out from the kingdom of God, where human beings gnash their teeth in eternal torment and misery.

Who are the objects of his vengeance, of the fury of his anger? All those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of Jesus. These are not two different categories of people but two ways of describing the same category of people. When Paul says that people do not know God he is using "know" as the language of relationship. In Romans 1:20-21 Paul says, "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his

eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God they did not glorify him as God, nor give thanks to him..." In other words every human being who has ever lived has been given overwhelming evidence through creation that there is a personal, creator God who has always existed, who has infinite power and who is not made up of matter and energy. No human being will ever be able to claim that they did not know that there was a glorious creator God to whom they owed everything. Paul's point is that although men and women know that this glorious God exists we are not impressed, we do not truly "know" him. We find creation impressive. We find gods of our own making impressive. But we do not "know" the God who actually exists. All humans by nature treat God the same way that Steve Krug, our Associate Pastor, treats the Green Bay Packers. Steve knows about football but he cares nothing for football and while he knows the Green Bay Packers exist he doesn't truly know them, he is not impressed by their greatness. He is not impressed or grateful for the green and gold. Thankfully for Steve, God does not care that he is not impressed with the Packers. However, God does care when human beings don't know him and he is going to punish all who willfully reject his glory, which is every human in their natural condition. It is just for God to inflict vengeance upon us because our refusal to glorify him is in the face of his overwhelming kindness to us. We are refusing to glorify and thank the one who gives us life and every good thing we have ever experienced.

The other description for the objects of God's good wrath are those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus. How do you obey the gospel of Jesus? You freely acknowledge that you are a hell-deserving sinner and you trust that God will not punish you as you deserve because of Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection; not because of anything you do or decide. Humans are not only guilty for not truly knowing God but also for presuming that they are able to earn God's favor by their own religious or moral performance. Humans by nature are guilty before God because we think we can save ourselves and by nature we treat the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with indifference or outright hostility. We are far more impressed with our own goodness than with the goodness of Jesus. It is a very interesting fact that in the USA over 75% of us believe that hell exists but only a fraction of us believe we are going to end up there. How can so many people who say they believe in hell not believe they will end up there? It is because most humans naturally assume that God is happy with them because they are basically good people. Most believe that hell is for really bad people and they are not that bad. It is this self-righteousness, this pride in our own goodness that is such an affront to God because we are declaring that we do not need him and especially we do not need a crucified savior. It is just for God to punish with eternal destruction those who believe they are able to save themselves because it is an assertion that we are as good as God.

God has told us about his certain punishment that will come upon all those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. How should we respond to this knowledge? Why does he tell us these things? First, if you have not yet trusted in Christ as the one who died for you and the only one who can save you from God's wrath, then I urge you to do so today. If you have not trusted Christ then you are among those who do not know God or obey the gospel and thus right now, if you were to die you would go immediately to hell where you would begin to experience God's wrath which will never end. When Jesus returns you will be raised from the dead and become the object of the fire of his wrath as he inflicts God's vengeance upon you forever. So wait no longer. Flee to Christ and hold fast to him. Second, if you are a Christian, you should not desire that any individual suffer in hell. We are to love our enemies now and we are to pray for God's blessing to fall upon them now. We know that even the worst of sinners, even the most pernicious persecutor, like the apostle Paul, while still living may become an object of God's favor and so we pray and do good to all men so they will repent and believe in Christ. Third, we should never take revenge on another human being because we know that God is going to inflict vengeance on all of his enemies. We do not make people pay for their sins now but freely forgive others because God will make sure that everyone pays for the evil they do. All will stand before him, including us. Fourth, we should rejoice now in the knowledge that one day, all injustice, all wickedness will be punished. All unbelieving child molesters and thieves and liars and gossips and disobedient children and dictators will one day suffer the death they deserve. Fifth, we should rejoice now that God has delivered us from his wrath by pouring out his just anger against us upon Christ and he has given us hearts that

believe that Christ has done this. The joy of the Christian is in the knowledge that we stand as justified men and women who are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. This leads to our third and final point.

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- *Turning sinners into faithful, loving Christians*
- *Punishing forever all unbelieving sinners*
- *And by...*

III. Satisfying forever all believing sinners (vv. 7a & 10)

According to v. 7 when Jesus comes again, at his second Advent, all believing sinners, all Christians, who have been afflicted, whether by persecution or by any other form of suffering in this world will be given rest. We will no longer suffer. We will be brought into the kingdom of God where there will be no more crying, no more sorrow, no more sickness, no more poverty, no more broken relationships, no more sexual or physical abuse, no more unjust governments. The misery of this age will end when Jesus returns and we enter into the fullness of his kingdom. Please note Paul is most emphatic that this rest, this kingdom will not be gained until Jesus returns. Again, those who insist that believing Christians should not be sick or poor or afflicted in this world have ignored this much repeated fact, the misery does not end until Christ returns.

But the main thing I want you to notice is what Paul says in v. 10 regarding the experience of the saints, all those who believe the gospel. The experience of the saints is exactly the opposite of those in hell. Whereas they are shut out from the glory, we will share in the glory of Christ. What does that mean? We are going to more fully discuss this on Christmas Eve and next Sunday so let me now use a simple illustration. After President Obama won the election a year ago there was a massive celebration of his election victory in Washington Park in downtown Chicago. Everyone present was sharing in the glory of him in his victory. None of the people there won the election. Only Barak Obama won. Yet everyone there was sharing in the glory, in the joy of his victory. Today, many people who did not win the election are now in positions of power and authority in the U.S. government because President Obama won the election. Many now share in the glory of his authority, not because they won the election but because Barak Obama won. This is how it will be when Jesus returns. None of us who believe in Christ obeyed God or died on the cross for the sins of others yet we will share in the glory that belongs to Christ because he did these things. And we will participate in Jesus' rule over the universe not because we did anything but because of him.

In addition, Paul says that Jesus will be marveled at by all those who believe. Think for a moment about the experience of marveling at someone or something. I regularly have marveled at the skill of my children in dance and theatre and athletics and academics and artistic endeavors. I regularly marvel at my wife's artistic creations. I marvel at the antics of my grandsons. Often, on an evening I've marveled at the beauty of the sunset and the rising moon. I've marveled at the power of a blizzard. To marvel at someone or something is to take delight in, to be impressed by his or its beauty or skill or kindness. When Christ comes the second time, we will admire and wonder at and marvel at him forever. There will never be a moment in all of eternity when believers will not be impressed by Jesus because at every moment throughout all eternity we will know that the only reason we are living in this joy is because of Jesus. We will know that if Jesus for one moment stopped interceding for us we would be justly cast into eternal hell for our many sins. The only reason that heaven will never become boring and will always be an experience of joy is because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be there and we will live in a perpetual state of wonder at his love and grace and power and goodness.

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