

SECURITY IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Objective: To realize that we can trust God's faithfulness regardless of our difficulties.

Life can be frightening at times. We really do **not** know what is just around the corner. We think we have a pretty good idea based on past experiences and we go about everyday activities with a measure of confidence based on that experience. Usually, everything works out just fine and we go about our jobs and other activities with friends and family. Every now and then, we turn the corner and find that our house has been burglarized, or water pipes have broken and flooded the house, or the house has burned down, or you discover that you have cancer, or that your retirement investments were with Bernie Madoff. If you read the fine print in a lot of contracts you will find wording that says something to the effect that "past performance is not a guarantee of future performance." This disclaimer certainly applies to life itself.

All those things are bad enough to have to deal with; but, if you add to that a situation in which people are deliberately attempting to hurt you and make your life difficult just because you have a different world view or don't believe as they do, then you get a sense of the kind of pressure the church at Thessalonica was under.

Clearly, the confidence that comes from thinking that tomorrow is going to be like yesterday is not sufficient to produce any peace in such times. If you are there in the middle of a trying time, then you know that today is not like yesterday and you have a pretty good idea that tomorrow might get worse. What is needed is a longer term viewpoint that holds out a hope for a better day and some semblance of justice. Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica provided prophetic insight that was meant to give them with a sense of security in the midst of the problems and pressures they were experiencing.

As we approach this study of a book that emphasizes prophecy, it is important to remember that in Scripture prophetic teaching is *practical*. That is, the Christian vision of the future is intended to have application to the believer's present experience. Prophetic teaching is not focused on constructing prophetic systems, which link future events in any particular sequence. We are able to fit prophesied events together, to some extent. But the major emphasis of the Bible itself is on seeing the relevance of yet-future things to our lives today. (Richards and Richards)

It is believed that Paul wrote this second letter to the church at Thessalonica pretty soon (six months) after he wrote the first one. There were still questions that need to be answered and there were some false teachings that needed to be corrected. The first part of the letter starts out pretty much as did the first letter. We could divide the chapter into the (1) Greeting, (2) What God think about their suffering, (3) What God will do about their suffering (Interpretation of and putting into proper perspective what they were going through) and finally, a (4) Prayer for spiritual success in their lives.

Greeting:

¹ Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2 (NASB95)

The church knew Paul, Silas and Timothy and realized that they worked together so it was appropriate for Paul to include them in the greeting of the letter. Some commentators claim that this second letter to the church is more personal than the first in that Paul uses the word "our" (as in our Father) rather than the word "the" (as in the Father) as he used in the first letter.

I think that is stretching the text to make a point.

One might question why Paul made a point to use the words “in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” in reference to the church. We would tend to think that it might be somewhat redundant since he had just used the word “church.” The answer is that the Greek word translated as church is “ekklesia” and simply means “a gathering or assembly of citizens called out from their homes into some public place.” So it was necessary for Paul to specify “which gathering of citizens” he was addressing. Essentially, Paul was writing to “the Thessalonica assembly of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So how did we get to this English word “church” from the Greek word “ekklesia?” If we look at the origin of the English word, we find that it came from the Middle English *chirche*, from Old English *cirice*, ultimately from Medieval Greek *krikon*, from Late Greek *kriakon* (*dma*), the Lord's (house), neuter of Greek *kriakos*, of the lord, from *krios*, lord. The translators did more than just translate, they also did some interpretation in changing the meaning from the assembly of God's people to something that meant the “Lord's house.”

Paul frequently used the expression “grace and peace” as a means of giving a word of blessing to those who would read his letters. We might write something like “Hope everything is going well with you and yours” in our letter. However, Paul chose to use an expression that would be a reminder that all we are and have is a result of the grace of God and the peace that comes from being reconciled to Him. This is a great blessing that we could wish all people to have.

What God Thinks About their Suffering (Acknowledgment and gratitude for what God had already accomplished in their lives.)

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater; ⁴ therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. ⁵ This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-5 (NASB95)

The wording here is very similar to that used in Paul's first letter. In his first letter he was giving thanks to God for their work of faith, labor of love and their faithfulness. In this letter he saw this as a continuing obligation to thank God because the Christians at Thessalonica were excelling even more in these Godly virtues. What we see happening here is that Paul had been thanking God for the good results in the lives of these Christians and God had responded to this prayer of thanksgiving by increasing the blessings. The obvious lesson for us is that when we are blessed and if we want those blessings to grow, then we need to recognize the origin of the blessings and give thanks to God for them. Simply stated: If we are thankful to God for His blessings, He will continue to bless us.

In the previous letter he had mentioned their good reputation among the other churches was such that he did not need to say anything about them. Here, Paul let them know that he was, indeed, talking about what a great work God was doing among them and their patience and faithfulness in all the problems they were having. If we are looking for a practical application, then it would be that we should go out of our way to speak well (boast) of the blessings God has given others even though people may already be aware of what is happening. There are benefits in doing this in that it gives us a chance to give credit where credit is due (that is, to make sure others know that the blessings are from God) and also to encourage others to respond to God in ways that produce such blessings in their lives. A third benefit is that it is likely that word will get back to those we are boasting about and they will be strengthened to continue on in their

faithfulness.

The connection between the problems they were experiencing and God's judgment mentioned in verse five is interesting.

When suffering comes it will either make us or break us. Difficulties will either cause us to grow and get stronger or cause us to give up and fail. The suffering or affliction or persecution is **not** the variable. So, what determines whether "make" or "break" is the outcome? A likely answer is "how we respond to the problem." And what determines "how we respond?" The answer is simply the genuineness of our faith. In other words, "Does our faith produce faithfulness?"

Interjecting this idea of "faith" simplifies the connection between problems we experience and God's judgment. What is God's judgment with regard to faith (faithfulness)? In Hebrew 11:6 we see "Apart from faith, it is impossible to please Him." So, we can safely say that those who do not have genuine faith will not be counted eligible for (worthy of) the kingdom of God. Therefore, we could say that the Christians at Thessalonica had shown evidence (manifest token) of the genuineness of their faith because they had faithfully endured the persecutions that were designed to make them abandon their trust in God for salvation.

What God will do about their suffering (Interpretation of and putting into proper perspective what they were going through):

⁶ For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and *to give* relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 (NASB95)

There are several different ways to look at the problems we encounter in life. We've just considered how our **response** to problems reveals a lot about our character - who we are and what motivates us. Another way to look at problems is to ask **why** such things happen. This question is, many times, motivated by a quest for understanding so that such problems might be avoided in the future. This question is far different from the question of "Why Me?" The "Why Me?" question is getting into an area of consideration of fairness. Many times we may hear people say, "This is just not fair."

How do we decide what is fair and what is unfair? Is there some sort of standard by which we judge things? Is it fair that we were born in America and 95% of the rest of the world's population was not? Is it fair that some people die at an early age and some others live to be more than 100? Is it fair that some people have all kind of health problems and others are never sick? How DO we judge fairness? Most of us have developed a sense of what we call "fairness." It can be summarized somewhat as follows: *"If you do wrong, then you should expect to be punished. If you do what is good, then you ought to be rewarded."* When things happen this way, we say, "That's only fair," or "they got what they deserved." When things do not happen that way, then we are thrown off course, because the thing that has happened does not fit into the preconceived idea that we have regarding fairness.

In life itself, we have a sense of fairness and have expectations of being able to be treated fairly even by the world system. Many times such expectations result in disappointment and we are apt to ask "where is the justice in this?" If we can't look to the world system for justice, where then do we look?

The answer to this question is exactly what Paul is addressing in verses six through ten.

God is all about justice. In the previous section we asked about God's judgment with regard to the faithful (those who persevered and endured persecution) and in these verses Paul addressed God's judgment with regard to the unbelievers (those who were causing the persecution). Paul referred to these as "those who do not know God" and "those who do not obey the gospel." This could be a reference to the Gentiles (do not know God) and to the Jews (reject the gospel).

Paul states a commonly held sense of justice in that God will repay (in kind) those who afflict His people and will provide relief or rest for those being afflicted. When will this happen? We want it now, but it will come about in God's own time. That time will be when Jesus is revealed from heaven with His holy angels as they come in "flaming fire." According to Matthew Henry

"He will come in flaming fire. A fire goes before him, which shall consume his enemies. The earth, and all the works that are therein, shall be burned up, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. This will be a trying fire, to try every man's work,—a refining fire, to purify the saints, who shall share in the purity, and partake of the felicity, of the new heaven and the new earth,—a consuming fire to the wicked. His light will be piercing, and his power consuming, to all those who in that day shall be found as chaff."

All this appears to be the final judgment which will be at the end of time.

The justice of God might well be questioned if only what happens in this life is considered. But when we realize that God has set a future time to fulfill His role as Judge, then these questions of fairness can be answered. The questioning (doubt) that is natural under external persecution is satisfied when we look ahead, and realize that God has created a truly moral universe. God will both "pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to those who are troubled." When Jesus returns all will be set right.

An interesting difference in interpretation is found in comparison of Matthew Henry's comments versus many others' comments. Specifically, in verse 9 we see that the persecutors will experience eternal destruction "from the presence of the Lord." Most commentators emphasize that the punishment is related to the fact that they will be banished away from God's presence and that (being deprived of the presence of God) is the worst punishment one could imagine. Matthew Henry contends that the punishment actually emanates from God's presence and that He is overseeing the punishment. (Grammatically, either is correct. The Greek word "apo" - which is translated "from" - could mean "separation" or "origin.") These are completely different ideas. I do not know which interpretation is correct, however, I have wondered why unbelievers would be distressed by being banished from God's presence when they spent their lives fleeing from Him.

Much of the suffering we encounter in our lives is not at the hands of people who are deliberately persecuting us because of our faith. So what is the origin of such suffering? Is it not because we live in a "fallen world?" The world is imperfect, there are germs and viruses and physical weaknesses which maybe inherited and things that happen totally unrelated to our belief system. Where is the fairness and justice in these situations? The answer is the same as in the case of God being the ultimate Judge. Just as the wicked will be judged and consigned to everlasting destruction, so the fallen world has been judged and will be destroyed and replaced by a new heaven and a new earth. We observed earlier that God has created a "moral universe" and we will see that justice applies not only to people but to the world itself - all will be judged.

Prayer for Spiritual Success

¹¹ To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and *the* Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 (NASB95)

Most of us have difficulty in thinking that we are "worthy" of the invitation (calling) God

has issued to us to be part of what He is doing in His plan of salvation. The fact is that we have nothing (in and of ourselves) that would commend us to God. What Paul is asking in this prayer is that God would find us living our lives in an appropriate way that we are fulfilling the ministry of good works that He had preordained for us and doing it in such a way that Jesus is exalted. When Jesus is exalted, then we who are in Him will be exalted or glorified with Him.

Summary

Once we come to a realization that this world is not our home and that our inheritance is “in Christ” being made “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,” then we will not place our hope in receiving anything from this world. Our confidence must be placed in God and God alone. When we do that, then we will be able to prioritize our efforts toward knowing Him and obeying Him and receiving from Him what He knows is best for us in this life and in the life to come. Unlike the world system, His promises never fail.