

Comfort at Christ's Coming

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Preacher: Jeremy Martinson

- [0 : 00] 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. And I have the privilege of serving you today, not only in preaching, but also in reading this scripture to you.
- So, since you'll hear me read it in the CSB, the Christian Standard Bible Version, during the preaching, I'm going to read it first from the ESV.
- So here is 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. And verse 5.
- Let's pray.
- Father, we are grateful to have your word, and we are grateful that we can read it and learn from it together.
- [1 : 51] Father, would you please help us as we now sit under the preaching of your word, help us to listen and to discern. Help us to understand by the Holy Spirit's power.
- Holy Spirit, please come and illumine your word for us. Help us to understand what you are saying to us from your word.
- Lord, would you please help me to speak clearly and succinctly and directly. We ask that we ask that we would be comforted and encouraged, that we would be built up in our most holy faith, that we would be provoked to greater love and good works, and that we would be comfort and comfort and hope and reason to persevere in faith.
- We ask all of this in Jesus' name, giving thanks. Amen. I wonder if you have said this week, that's not fair.
- Now, if you're a child or a young person, have to be careful, because not all of the kids here are children anymore.
- [3 : 17] If you're a child or a young person, maybe it was because something didn't go your way. Maybe you didn't get to ride along with dad, and you thought it was your turn, but it turns out it wasn't, and so you express your frustration by saying, well, that's not fair.
- Maybe your sister split the piece of gum that you were allowed to have and then took the larger portion. Does that ever happen at your house? I had two brothers. That happened occasionally at our house.
- Maybe you are playing a game like Uno, and you get hit with multiple wild cards in a row, and you are drawing what seems like a hundred cards, and it's really only eight, but you're thinking to yourself, this is not fair.
- Maybe if you are an adult, you miss out on a promotion, or your boss offers you a raise and then doesn't follow through on the raise.
- Maybe the check engine light comes on again in the car. Maybe you're being asked to work extra hours, and you don't really want to work those extra hours, and you think to yourself, this isn't fair.
- [4 : 28] I don't want to deal with this. Maybe there was a purchase contract on your home that fell through, and you're thinking, this is not fair.
- Maybe you have been treated badly for making a very difficult choice. I wonder if the Thessalonians thought that's not fair.

Mike helpfully introduced us to the Thessalonians, preaching from chapter one of the first letter to the Thessalonians a couple weeks ago. This is a wonderful church.

As Mike taught us, they have work that is produced by faith. They have labor that is motivated by love, and they have endurance that is inspired by hope.

This is the kind of church that you would want to be part of. And yet, yet, persecution marked this church from its very beginning in Acts chapter 17.

[5 : 34] There was a mob, and there was a riot, and a guy named Jason is drug out of his house and into the city square. That's not fair!

In fact, persecution is a theme in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter two and verse two. On the contrary, after we had previously suffered and were treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you.

Notice, in spite of great opposition. And again, over in chapter three and verse two, we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith.

Why? So that no one will be shaken by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.

Appointed to what? To afflictions. But you read that and you say, that's not fair. Don't we have work produced by love?

[6 : 56] Don't we have work produced by faith? Don't we have labor motivated by love? Aren't we the kind of church that people want to be part of? And yet, Paul, you're telling us that we are appointed for this?

That this is God's will, God's plan for us to suffer? That isn't fair. However, following Jesus was not culturally acceptable for the Thessalonians.

It was costly. And when you do the right thing, when you are doing the right things, when you are endeavoring to obey God and to follow his commands and to be faithful and to walk according to the Spirit, and life doesn't go your way, it's natural and normal to say, Lord, this doesn't seem fair.

And so Paul begins his second letter to the Thessalonians with encouragement. Their faith is flourishing. It is a vigorous kind of growing faith.

Faith that grows like a teenager's growth spurt. And we learned last week how important this is, that their faith is not static. Faith isn't an on or off switch.

[8 : 18] Faith is never motionless. Faith is either growing or it is retracting. It is shrinking. It is atrophying like a muscle that is unused.

Faith not encouraged and built up by the Word and by prayer and by fellowship with other believers and by the communion that we enjoy during the Lord's Supper.

Faith that is not bolstered in these gracious things that God has given us will decay and deteriorate. Why is it so crucial that a Christian's faith is not static?

Why is it so crucial that our faith is growing? Well, the answer is fairly simple. It's because our problems keep growing, don't they? I mean, if our problems were static and didn't change, if our hardships and our adversities weren't increasing, if we didn't have on our minds that we might face more persecution someday and not less, then we wouldn't need this kind of growing faith.

But here we are. Our problems seem to increase regularly, consistently, even painfully.

[9 : 45] I don't know about you. I haven't experienced fewer problems or less adversity or a decrease in persecution since trusting Jesus. And perhaps we say with the Thessalonians, Lord, I am doing the right thing.

I am trying to be faithful to you, and this isn't fair. I love my friends. I love my neighbors. I love the church. And this is the way that my life goes.

And so Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, addresses this inequity and this injustice that we may feel from time to time as followers of Jesus.

And he addresses this by pointing his readers to the future. He wants to provide them hope. Hope that helps us hang on.

Paul affirms their steadfastness in persecution is very boastworthy. That's what he says. I boast about you to all the other churches because in spite of your persecution, you are continuing in steadfastness.

[11 : 02] This is proof that God has saved you. Listen again to Paul's words inspired by the Holy Spirit, 2 Thessalonians 1 and verse 4. Therefore, we ourselves boast about you.

Among God's churches, what is it that they boast about? About your perseverance and your faith in all the persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring.

It, I believe, their perseverance and faith in the middle of persecutions. It is clear evidence of God's righteous judgment that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom for which you also are suffering.

Since, notice, since it is just, same word as righteous, righteous judgment. It is just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you.

And to give relief to you who are afflicted along with us. That's not fair is answered by what God says is right.

[12 : 18] It is right that when followers of Jesus persevere in faith by the Spirit's power, it is right that God considers them and gives them this judgment call.

That call that God made on their lives is right. His verdict on them is right. God has saved you. And when you persevere in that, it is clear evidence that God's call was right.

It was just. And simultaneously, for those who persecute followers of Jesus, it is just.

It is right. It is right that they are repaid with the same affliction that they put onto others.

It is right. It is just for those who are persecuted to have relief. And it is right. It is just for those who are afflicting to be repaid for what they have done.

[13 : 28] This is God's declaration. This is good news for us. This means that our present circumstances do not tell the whole story.

Our present circumstances do not tell the whole story. Hear this. The final chapter has already been written. We just haven't read it yet.

God has already written the end. Relief for those who are persecuted. And repayment for those who do the persecuting. That chapter is written.

We're just waiting for it to be read. Now, we may be persecuted. We may suffer affliction. Hardship.

We may endure suffering. But that's not how the story ends. One day, Christians will be relieved of all of their suffering.

[14 : 29] And those who persecute and ridicule and shame and harm and abuse God's people. They will be afflicted.

How does that sound? I mean, that sounds pretty good, right? Maybe we even ask ourselves, all right, when? Like, when will that happen?

You're telling me that this is the end of the story. But when do we get to read that final chapter of the story? Well, Paul helpfully anticipates that question.

And it's in the middle of verse number seven. The fact that it's in the middle is a little unhelpful. But that is not Paul or the Holy Spirit's fault. It's in the middle of verse number seven.

This, this relief for those who are persecuted and the repayment for those who have done the persecuting, this will take place at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his powerful angels.

[15 : 43] When will it take place? It will take place when Jesus is revealed at his revelation.

ESV, New American Standard, NIV, they say revealed. CSB says revelation. Same idea. The word is apocalypse. But it doesn't mean like the end of the world that we think about it.

That's how we think about this term, apocalypse. What it really means is an unveiling. A revealing.

In other words, Jesus is not absent. He's only invisible right now.

Jesus' return is less of an arrival and more of an appearing. He is already here by his Holy Spirit.

[16 : 48] But we just don't see him yet. When will this take place? When will we be relieved? When Jesus is revealed.

When the veil is dropped and we see him present with us. This reminds me a little bit of the game that we play with little babies called peekaboo.

You know the game. You hold up a blanket. And then you drop the blanket. And that little child is just delighted and surprised that you are still there.

This is because they do not yet have what is called object permanence. It's still developing. Somewhere in their first year they get it. Maybe 6 to 12 months old.

They get this idea of object permanence. And that lets them know that even if they can't see it. Even if they can't smell it. Even if they can't hear it. Even if they can't touch it.

[17 : 54] That thing is still there. That's called object permanence. So you hold up the blanket. And then you drop the blanket.

And the little baby is just delighted to find out that you are still there. Now, I don't know. Tinsley?

Sophia? Evelyn? You guys like to play peekaboo? No. Why not? Because you know how the game works, right? You know how this game works.

You know that that person is still there. Just on the other side of the blanket. Followers of Jesus. We know how this game works.

Paul's word here for revealing, for revelation is so helpful. We need to remember. We know how this works. Jesus isn't absent.

[18 : 51] We just can't see him now. Jesus is hidden. But one day, Jesus will be revealed.

And it will be a little bit like peekaboo. And for those of us who believe in Jesus, this will be a delightful surprise. But for those who do not believe in Jesus, this will be a terrifying reality.

Look again in your Bible, beginning at the second half of verse 7. This will take place at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his powerful angels.

When he takes vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God, and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They, who? Those who don't know God. Those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence.

[20 : 05] And from his glorious strength. What is this penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence?

That is a lot of words, isn't it? There are two schools of thought on this. One is that this penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence means that those who don't believe in Jesus will one day be annihilated.

They will die or Jesus will return and that will be the end of them. They will cease to exist. And there's a second way of understanding this.

And that is that this idea, this penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence means an ongoing existence.

But horrifically excluded from the glorious presence of God. Well, which is it? Which is it?

[21 : 20] Well, we need a definition for this word destruction. And it is helpful that Paul uses this word three other times in his letters. But it is unfortunate, although not outside providence, it is unfortunate that we can't make a conclusive answer based strictly on the ways that Paul uses it elsewhere in the New Testament.

But we are not without hope. There is help for us here. There is one other piece of Jewish literature in which this phrase everlasting destruction appears.

It is in the book of four Maccabees. Now, if you're thinking, wait a minute, that is not in this Bible that I'm holding. You are correct. This is an intertestamental book.

It's a book that happened or took place between the Testaments. It is not a canonical book. That means it is not included in your copy of Scripture.

And that means we believe this is not an inspired portion of God's Word. So we should be careful and very discerning with what we take and how we draw from this.

[22 : 34] But I do think there's something here that's helpful for us, in particular because this exact phrase is used in four Maccabees. When it is used here, this phrase, everlasting destruction, it describes, hear this, unending suffering in the afterlife for those who persecute God's people.

And this unending suffering is equated with eternal torture by fire and indestructible torments that cling to a person for all time.

Does that sound something like what we're hearing about here? Persecutors being met with affliction and vengeance from God and flaming fire?

It does sound like that, doesn't it? That's helpful. One commentator calls this the most relevant and contemporary parallel for the reasons that I've mentioned.

One, because the afterlife is the context for this usage of the phrase. Two, because the exact same phrase is used. And three, because those who are punished also persecuted God's people, which is what Paul has in mind here.

[24 : 02] So we are leaning away from any idea of annihilationism, and we are leaning towards this idea of eternal destruction, meaning some kind of ongoing existence, but horrifically separated from God's glory.

Now, in the Old Testament, we don't find this exact same phrase. But, helpfully, we do find a couple portions of Scripture where these same combinations of words are used.

You can turn in your Bible, if you'd like, to Isaiah chapter 66. These will also be on the screen. Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 4.

The Lord is speaking, and he says this. Isaiah 66 and verse number 4. So I will choose their punishment, and I will bring on them what they dread, because I called and no one answered.

I spoke and they did not listen, they did what was evil in my sight, and chose what I did not delight in. You who tremble at his word, hear the word of the Lord.

[25 : 24] Your brothers who hate and exclude you, for my name's sake, have said, let the Lord be glorified so that we can see your joy. They are taunting and mocking and shaming God's people.

Listen to what God says at the end of verse 5. The Lord says, but they will be put to shame. Verse 6. A sound of uproar from the city, a voice from the temple, the voice of the Lord paying back his enemies what they deserve.

Flip over to verse number 14. You will see, you will rejoice, and you will flourish like grass. Then the Lord's power will be revealed to his servants, but he will show his wrath against his enemies.

Look, the Lord will come with fire. His chariots are like the whirlwind to execute his anger with fury and his rebuke with flames of fire.

For the Lord will execute judgment on all humanity with his fiery sword, and many will be slain by the Lord. Verse 24.

[26 : 39] As they leave, they will see the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against me. For their worm will never die. Their fire will never go out.

And they will be a horror to all humanity. That's dark, isn't it? But it does sound quite a bit like what Paul describes to the Thessalonians.

If you happen to be taking notes, you will also find references in Isaiah chapter 2, in particular verses 10 and 11, and also verse number 19.

There, Isaiah writes about being removed from the terror of the Lord. Sounds like what Paul has in mind when he says that they will be removed, banished from the Lord's presence.

That's a second reason why we lean away and find ourselves believing in this idea of eternal destruction being an ongoing torment.

[27 : 54] Let me offer you one third explanation, and this is just related to common sense and logic and inference in what the text gives us.

So we don't give this as much credibility as number two, where we saw those combinations of words used in God's word. But think about it just from a logical perspective.

In what way is it a punishment for those who have persecuted God's people if they simply cease to exist? How is Jesus repaying them for the injustice done to his people if they get to the end and their existence is over?

In what way is it somehow punishment for them to be excluded from the Lord's presence if they don't even know that they are excluded because they don't exist?

It seems to me that Paul describes not an annihilation, but rather an eternal destruction. That is, an eternal punishment with fire that includes a banishment from the glory of the Lord's presence.

[29 : 06] This is an ultimate kind of punishment. This is an ultimate kind of punishment. Here's why. God created humans to enjoy him forever and to experience the glory of his grace forever.

But if you persist in unbelief, if you refuse to know God now in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then please hear this loving warning.

One day you will be unable to know God ever. forever. This is destruction by deprivation.

It is a destruction by being deprived of the purpose for which you were created to enjoy the Lord's glorious presence forever.

This is the eternal ruin of an immortal soul that is unable to fulfill the purpose that God made for it.

[30 : 35] What is a watermelon good for? Is it good to play football with a watermelon? No. It is way too heavy, isn't it?

Would it be good to play soccer with a watermelon? No. That would hurt, wouldn't it?
Would it be good to put a watermelon on your car as a spare tire?

Now, I'm not very good with that kind of thing, but I know better than that. That is not going to work. Maybe in a cartoon, right? But not in reality. Why? Because that's not the purpose of a watermelon.

What is a watermelon for? What is the purpose? It is for eating, isn't it? That's the purpose of a watermelon. So let me ask you this. If you take a watermelon up on the peak of your house and you hurl that watermelon down so that it smashes on your driveway, what has happened to that watermelon?

watermelon? I don't mean to be trite when I give this illustration. What has happened to that watermelon? Has it been annihilated?

[31 : 54] Well, no. It still exists, doesn't it? But it is ruined. It is permanently destroyed.

It is now unable to fulfill its purpose. it cannot be eaten. Notice the contrast that Paul sets up as he closes this very long sentence which runs from the beginning of the letter down through verse number 10.

Notice this contrast that he sets up. Verse number 9. They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from his glorious strength.

When Lord on that day when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at by all those who have believed because our testimony among you was believed.

You see this contrast that Paul sets up in 9 and 10? they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction and yet some will marvel at the Lord Jesus at his coming.

[33 : 15] We will bask in his glory and we will enter into that last chapter and enjoy him forever. Notice this contrast and as you notice this contrast in God's word in your heart ask yourself this question or maybe better answer this question do I believe in Jesus?

Do I as Paul says here do I know God and do I know God in such a way that I obey his gospel? Do I know God in that kind of in a meaningful way?

That obedience to his word is a delight? Am I eager to fulfill the purpose for which God has made me? Or or will I right now as my heart stands before the Lord today will I be ruined on that day when Jesus returns?

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Let's be clear Paul's purpose here is not reveling in an unbeliever's ruin.

That's not his purpose and we should not revel in an unbeliever's ruin either. Paul's purpose is to cultivate hope that helps us hang on.

[34 : 59] He wants to shift our perspective from that's not fair to Jesus is going to make this right. He wants to shift our perspective from persecution to vindication.

He wants to shift our perspective from trouble to triumph from suffering to glory and hear this from vengeance to mercy.

a desire for revenge in the heart of one of God's children.

A desire for revenge in the heart of one of God's children demonstrates a deficiency in your understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus promises.

for those who persecute his brothers and sisters. You don't need to desire or plot or exact revenge because Jesus will.

[36 : 16] Listen to Jesus' words from Matthew chapter 10 and verse number 28. Matthew 10 and verse number 28.

don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul.

Rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Who is Jesus talking about?

himself. He is talking about himself. When we desire revenge when the pain of that's not fair rises up to such an extent that we want evil to come on those who have hurt us our understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus promises is deficient and Paul wishes to correct that deficiency.

Jesus will deal with those who persecute, those who torture, those who kill his people and his vengeance will be absolutely just and eternally horrific.

[37 : 47] And hear this, brothers and sisters, if Jesus promises vengeance for persecutors, then he can also be trusted to deal justly with those who hurt you, those who marginalize you, those who harm you, those who shame you, those who ridicule you, those who abuse you, those who treat his church like an institution to be managed rather than a bride to be adored.

Full and eternal relief awaits you, dear child of God, when Jesus returns. And a full repayment awaits those who persecute you.

And that horrific description of Jesus' vengeance and his own testimony that he can and will do it ought to motivate us away from that's not fair and away from a desire for revenge and towards mercy, love, and an urgent desire for the repentance of everyone who does not know Jesus.

Jesus. When we suffer unjustly or repeatedly, we may be tempted to assume that Jesus doesn't know or doesn't care, but I assure you, dear child of God, Jesus is not absent.

He is only unseen. He sees, he knows, he cares about every harm that is done to you and one day he will make it right and until that day, expect to suffer, prepare to persevere, be sober minded about the fate of unbelievers and be generous in proclaiming the gospel because hear this, some who persecute you will see your faith in Jesus they will see your steadfastness through persecution and they will be compelled to respond with repentance and belief in the Lord Jesus and they will join us in gathering around God's throne and enjoying the presence of the Lord Jesus and his glorious grace forever and brothers and sisters this, this, this is hope that helps us hang on let's pray good father we are grateful for your word help us as we consider the things that we have heard this morning where we have been trite and nonchalant in our testimony in our witness in our generosity with the gospel would you please convict us and give us boldness where we have been tempted by revenge by getting even by a desire for vengeance would you calm our hearts give us courage and faith to persevere make us steadfast even in the middle of being hurt and persecuted and wounded and even killed father where we are tempted by thoughts like this is not fair would you build up our faith in who

[41 : 57] Jesus is and what Jesus will do on behalf of his bride please Holy Spirit help us as we take a few moments to consider the things that we have heard to reflect to repent to receive again your gracious forgiveness please help us as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord's Supper thank you Lord Jesus for going to the cross on our behalf thank you for suffering the wrath of God and making a full atonement for the sins of your people thank you that the offer of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone is still good today thank you Holy Spirit that you continue to work that you continue to use the preaching of your word to draw to faith those who don't yet know God and as a result don't obey the gospel of our

Lord Jesus would you please today grant life and faith so that a sinner responds by repenting and believing this gospel this glorious gospel of the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus on behalf of people like us who were his enemies we love you and we are so grateful to be your children help us as we continue in our worship now to worship you in spirit and in truth father son and holy spirit thank you for your great kindness and your good grace to us in Jesus name amen