

# Thessalonians

## I. Introduction

A. **2 Thessalonians 1:3-10** . . . 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. [6] [Since] 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 marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.

## B. Pray

## II. God's righteous judgment in relation to persecution

A. In **vs 5-9**, Paul is confirming that God's justice is justice for all – for those who persecute and afflict Christians, and for those Christians who are persecuted and afflicted. However, though the persecutors see only one side of God's justice, the persecuted Christians see three.

1. The **first side** that the persecuted Christians see of God's justice is the side that purifies them so that they will be considered worthy of His kingdom (**vs 5**).
2. The **second side** that they see is the side that makes right the wrongs that have been done to them by relieving their suffering and bringing them into the safety and peace of God's eternal kingdom (**vs 6**).
3. And the **third side** that the persecuted Christians see of God's justice is God's retribution or punishment or vengeance on those who persecuted and afflicted them (**vs 7-9**).

- B. [6] For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you . . .
1. Is God's justice only meted out and experienced by righteous and unrighteous alike after the return of Christ? My answer is no. However, we are not told in either 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> **Thessalonians** if or how God afflicts those who persecute Christians in this life.
    - a. In my opinion we can reasonably assume that the persecutors experience in their own character, in what they believe and value, and in the way they live the natural consequences of thinking in such evil, hateful ways, and of searing their conscience, and of harboring such ill-will toward people much like themselves, and of justifying such intentional cruelty toward those whose only wrong is being a Christian.
    - b. In addition, I think it is reasonable to assume God sets Himself against the individuals, the people groups, the religious groups, and the political parties of our day who persecute and afflict His people just as He set Himself against the nations and people groups that mistreated the Israelites.
  2. However, even though we may never get a clear glimpse of God avenging persecuted Christians in this life, we see in **vs 6-9** that the persecuted Christians and the persecutors of Christians will clearly and fully experience God's justice at the return of Christ. And the justice administered at that time will extend throughout eternity.
    - a. The reality is, Christians who are persecuted and afflicted for their faith will most likely have to wait for Christ's return before clearly seeing and fully experiencing God's justice.
    - b. A realistic example of this kind of waiting is spoken of in **Revelation 6:9-11**, "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; [10] and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, '**How long**, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' [11] And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for **a little while longer**, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also."
  3. Though God's justice is rarely swift, His patience is not for lack of caring or wanting justice to be done. **2 Peter 3:8-9** tells us God is

patient toward sinners in hopes that they will come to their senses, turn from their wicked ways, and live a life of godliness.

4. The harsh reality of life is, some things won't change for the better in our lifetime. We might be put to death for our faith, or we might have to endure persecution and affliction until death sets us free. In some situations and for some of us, God's clear and obvious justice toward our persecutors will be delayed until the return of Christ.
5. However, though some things may never change for the better in our lifetime – **we can**. And this is an important truth.
  - a. God's word and the experience of believers down through the ages tell us that in spite of our circumstances – and often because of our circumstances – we can become new creatures in Christ Jesus who are progressively being conformed to the likeness of Christ.
  - b. We can become partakers of the divine nature.
  - c. We can take on the mind of Christ so that we think and respond to people and life's situations like Him.
  - d. We can break free from fear, worry, and anxiety so that we live each day with an inward peace and joy that surpasses human comprehension.
  - e. We can love our enemy. We can bless those who persecute us. And we can pray for those who mistreat us.
6. Your troubles may not be removed. You may suffer excruciating pain. You may lose your job or be driven from your home. You may even languish or die in prison.
  - a. Yet when you change in the ways I just mentioned, you will find that you have become convinced that God is your refuge, that He is present, that He loves and cares for you, and that no one can do anything to you that He hasn't either willed or allowed.
  - b. It is this kind of change that brings inward peace, unshakable joy, and the settled conviction that you are completely safe in God's hands. And when you are in this place with God, you will find that life is better than you ever imagined it could be.
7. Therefore, if you make it your aim to change while waiting for Christ's return for God to bring about justice, then you won't see the present suffering or the waiting for justice as a burden. You will see it as a gift, a gift that produces changes in you that are so life-affecting that upon experiencing those changes you will be forever grateful for having had to wait until Christ's return for justice to be done.

- C. To summarize vs 5-9, we see that God uses persecution to purify you so that you will be worthy of His kingdom. And we see that God will not only repay with affliction those who afflict you, He will give you complete and eternal relief when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire.
1. I want to point out several scriptures regarding Jesus' mighty angels and His flaming fire.
    - a. God's mighty angels – **Matthew 13:41-42**, “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, [42] and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
    - b. God's mighty angels – **Matthew 24:31**, “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”
    - c. God's flaming fire – **Hebrews 10:26-27**, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, [27] but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.
  2. In vs 7, the literal translation of the words “mighty angels” is, “**the angels of His power.**” In other words, these angels are servants of God who use God's power on God's behalf to save and destroy.
    - a. It is interesting to me that in biblical history, God's angels have often exercised His power to save by subduing or destroying the enemy.
    - b. A classic OT example of this took place during the reign of Hezekiah when the king of Assyria came against Jerusalem to destroy it and conquer Judah. However, God sent an angel in the night who struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians – thus saving Jerusalem and Judah from the threat of defeat (**2Kings 19:35**).
  3. The point is, Jesus will return with the angels of God's power and destroy evil and those who do evil, thus saving those who belong to Him from ever having to be harmed by evil again.
- D. [8] dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

1. The **retribution** that God is dealing out to those who do not know Him and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus is **eternal destruction (vs 9)** – and this eternal destruction takes place away from the presence of God and the glory of His power.
2. However, though this eternal destruction is irrevocable and permanent, it is not annihilation.
  - a. It is not annihilation because God created us to live forever, with the intention that we would live forever with Him – and if not with Him then away from His presence.
  - b. Jesus gives us a picture of this kind of destruction when He describes the condition of the rich man following his death in the parable about the rich man and the poor, beggar Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**).
  - c. Therefore, those whose retribution is eternal destruction continue to live, but they live in a place that is void of God's presence, and therefore empty of all good and all hope of improvement.
3. Many ask, how can a loving God condemn people to such a cruel and hopeless existence for eternity? Though we may never have an adequate answer for those who reject God, I think there is one more question that should be asked and answered.
  - a. What would happen to God's kingdom if He allows people into it who – in this life – want and even demand to be treated well by those around them but unrepentantly and repeatedly treat those around them in selfish, unkind, hurtful, and even cruel ways?
  - b. Consider, if God's intention in creating us is to have eternal relationships of mutual love and trust with Him and with each other (*and I believe it is*), then He must prevent anyone who wants something other than that or more than that from entering His eternal kingdom.
  - c. And if God's intention is to be perfectly just, then He must protect the innocent and weak by preventing the strong and cruel – who unrepentantly, unnecessarily, and cruelly mistreat them – from entering His eternal kingdom.
4. Therefore, God does deal out retribution **to those who do not know Him** – not because they couldn't, but because they wouldn't.
  - a. For example, Pharaoh, who could have learned about God from Moses – had he wanted to, boasted in **Exodus 5:2** . . . “Who is

the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go.”

- b. Another example comes from **Romans 1:18-23** which tells us that there are those who know about God and the truth of God, yet suppress that truth in order to live according to their own passions, lusts, fears, and self-interest.
  - c. And finally, those who persecute Christians could also come to know God if they would listen to the Christian message rather than persecuting and afflicting them.
  - d. The point is, God deals out retribution to those who do not know Him because they could know Him but refuse to know Him.
5. God will also deal out retribution **to those who do not obey the gospel** – These are those who know God, who know the truth of God, and who know how God wants them to live yet refuse or carelessly neglect obeying the parts of the gospel they are aware of.
- a. **Romans 2:3-11** provides a picture of religious people who fit this description. Within this section of verses we read, “God...will render to each person according to his deeds: [7] to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, (*God will render*) eternal life; [8] but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, (*God will render*) wrath and indignation.”
  - b. We read something similar in **Hebrews 3:17-19** which deals with God’s own people who He rescued from Egypt, brought to the edge of the Promised Land, and who chose to disobey God by refusing to enter and take the Promised Land. Therefore, God shut them out of the Promised Land and left them to die in the wilderness.

E. [9] These (*those who do not know God and those who do not obey God*) will pay the penalty of eternal destruction (*experience the consequences of their own actions and deeds*), 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 marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.

1. Choices and behavior have consequences. Paul says this clearly in **Galatians 6:7-8**, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. [8] For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

### III. Conclusion

- A. It is doubtful any of us will ever persecute and afflict a Christian just for being a Christian. However, do we mistreat anyone who isn't what we want them to be?
- B. Those who persecute and afflict Christians defend and justify their behavior. Do we defend and justify any measure or level of mistreatment toward any neighbor?
- C. Those who persecute and afflict Christians hold to a double-standard, for they do not want to be treated in the way they mistreat Christians. Do we hold any double-standards in our treatment of others?
- D. **1 John 4:7-8**, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. [8] The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Therefore, let us love and seek the good of all our neighbors, including those who persecute and afflict us.