

The Hope of Reversal

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon and welcome to this week's Lunchtime Bible Talk. As we started last week, we're going to continue through Paul's letter, the second letter to the Thessalonians.

So perhaps you could turn that up whilst I pray. You'll find it on page 989 on the Church Visitor's Bible. Let me pray.

Father, we thank you that you have so graciously spoken to us, that we can know you, that we can know your grace, that we can know the real hope of the gospel.

So as we meet together this afternoon, as we take time away from work, time away from our homes, time away from whatever it is that fills our week, would you give us ears to hear and hearts to respond to you, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're reading 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 3 to 12. Paul says, This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering.

[1 : 46] 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 sins, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

To this end, we always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and may fulfill every resolve for good, and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I remember the revelation at school that the answers were at the back of my mathematics textbook. That made life much more straightforward. That was the easy way out of the homeworks we had to do. Sometimes, though, problems, questions, require complex answers over easy ones.

We're looking at the issue of suffering in this. The Thessalonian church faced great persecution and trial, and there is no easy answer to suffering, because it pushes us, it stresses us, it tests us, and simple answers won't suffice then.

[3 : 43] Yet, suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life. It's the pattern of Paul who said, All who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted.

And even Jesus himself said, Pick up your cross and follow me. Thessalonica was a church born in persecution. We read in Acts last week that Paul preached about Jesus, saying that he was the true king, not Caesar, and that Christians were accused because of this, of turning the world upside down, and so affliction and opposition came.

And the truth is, for all of us, if we exalt Jesus, eventually it will be met by opposition. For if he is to be king, it means no one else can be.

When we rightly claim that Jesus is king, when we tell our friends that, when we tell our colleagues that, when we tell our neighbors that, it has implications for everyone.

And many of the people we tell will hate it. So persecution, opposition, trouble will follow.

Sometimes painfully, it will be from those who are close to us.

[5 : 04] As we seek to live lives saturated in the gospel, lives that ooze out the good news about Jesus, then opposition, persecution, and suffering won't be far off.

They weren't for the Thessalonians, and they won't be for us. But Paul is writing to comfort this church. And so he has three encouragements for this suffering church.

First, verses 3 to 4, he says, Look at your past. Look at your past. And there you'll see signs of resolve that characterize real faith.

Paul begins by pointing out how they have already displayed faithfulness. In the midst of their suffering, Paul emphasizes three things about the Thessalonians that characterize their resolve. that reveal their real faith. And there are things that can teach us too. So he says, A, in verse 3, their suffering has strengthened their faith.

[6 : 06] He says, Your faith is growing abundantly in the face of this. They haven't just shrunk back and been discouraged and been tempted to give up. No. Paul is saying, So far their suffering has only made them stronger.

I have an Iranian friend who was very successful in business. He has a lovely family. He had a lovely house.

Plenty of money. But he had to leave it all behind. And with this difficult life away from all that he loved, because he believed in Jesus, his response was that Jesus is better.

Jesus is better than having all those things if it's a choice between the two. I now know that Jesus is better. Perhaps he wouldn't have known that had he not faced the struggle, the difficulty, the pain.

You see, at the prospect of difficulty, responding to it by turning to God will only strengthen our faith. That's what the Thessalonians have already done.

[7 : 15] They haven't scorned the suffering. Instead, they've used it to strengthen their faith in the Lord Jesus. Suffering and opposition are often the arena that proves the reality of faith.

And if we've come through a lot and are still believing, then Paul says that's a reason to be encouraged. But he also says in verse 3, in the midst of their suffering, they've supported each other.

He says, the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. The Lord Jesus says, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now and this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life. Surely what Jesus was saying here was that when faced with all the cost of following him that yes, of course, in the age to come it will be worth it. But also here and now he says you'll receive a hundredfold brothers, sisters and mothers.

What he's talking about there is clearly the benefits of a church family. Paul says in the midst of their suffering, it's pushed them together, it's caused their love for each other to grow, they're increasingly loving each other as a church family should.

[8 : 51] And so when earthly families reject us because we follow Jesus, we have been given a church family to care for us. Sometimes we will need that love and other times we'll be able to give that to other members of our church.

But Paul is saying be encouraged, not only have you been strengthened, but in the face of suffering you've supported each other. And he then goes on to say in verse 4, you have a steadfastness that encourages others.

Paul boasts about their steadfastness and faith in all their persecutions, that's what we read. Paul points out that they've kept going this far and indeed it's a miraculous work of God that any of us are at present still believing and following him.

All the more so when that's in the face of hardship. The Thessalonians knew from the beginning that believing would mean opposition. That's how their church was birthed.

But yet they're still faithful. They're still clinging on to the promises of the gospel. And Paul says that that acts to encourage others. Paul boasts about them.

[10 : 03] He wanted other churches to know that this Thessalonian church was standing firm even under really intense persecution. He wanted other churches to know that it's possible to keep going.

A friend told me about someone in his church who'd just been through a string of really horrible things family dying illness losing a baby a fatal car crash all sorts of hardships.

And my friend said that this couple's faith kept him going. Seeing these other believers in the midst of real pain and sorrow still coming along each Sunday still singing praise to God still submitting to his words.

He said their endurance their steadfastness showed him showed him that our faith is real that it's worth it. It stands up to great pain it stands up to suffering and persecution.

Paul says they were steadfast and had encouraged others. So Paul says look at your past and see all that you've already been doing.

[11 : 20] You are keeping going, you're supporting each other. You're being strengthened in your faith. Don't give up. And in order to help them not give up he moves on to say secondly look at your future verses 5 to 10 look at your future and their future is one of reversal.

in the end they can keep doing these things they can keep being faithful they can keep supporting each other because God has promised them a different future.

There is a real hope for them beyond their present circumstances there's a real hope for us now beyond our present circumstances however difficult they may be.

Their resolve was possible because the suffering the opposition wouldn't last forever. it's time limited because God has promised that there will be a great reversal.

In the end those who face affliction now will enjoy an eternity free from all pain and suffering and those who would seek to oppose God to oppose his people they will ultimately face the consequences.

[12 : 39] In the end Paul is telling us that we can be sure it will be worth it. for all the hardship now what is in store will be all the sweeter.

He says for now verse 5 there is judgment the Thessalonians steadfastness in the face of suffering is verse 5 the evidence of the righteous judgment of God that they may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.

Their perseverance is proving that they are worthy to belong to God even when life is difficult even when believing is hard they are still standing and that is proving the genuineness of their faith.

Their ongoing faith will see that they will be judged worthy of God's kingdom. Standing firm in the midst of great trial is real faith.

but Paul moves on to say in this great reversal we will see the afflictors afflicted we will see those who persecute being punished we will see those who deny God and disobey him being destroyed.

[13 : 56] God's righteous judgment will find his people worthy of his kingdom their faith being proven through trial but for those who oppose God and his people that day will only be bad for them they'll be repaid for the ravaging of God's people.

Verse 6 God in his righteous judgment considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you for now in this life under the sun it doesn't feel fair God's people are opposed persecuted afflicted for being faithful to him do you know that feeling?

I'm sure there are many of us in here who do well Paul says we can have confidence that true justice is coming all the opposition we face as God's people will not be ignored it will not be forgotten about Paul says justice is coming the justice we yearn for will come so this difficulty this hardship of following Jesus now won't last forever and in the end all that will come to those who reject God who reject his people is affliction verse 6 verse 7 they'll have to face Jesus and his mighty angels who will come in flaming fire verse 8 they will face vengeance verse 9 they will suffer punishment eternal destruction they'll be cast out from God's presence forever so in the face of horrible opposition in the face of unrelenting pressure we can know that God will do justice our present circumstances won't last forever things will be made right but there's also a word here for those verse 8 who do not know

God a word to those who would reject his gospel if you're choosing to ignore God siding with those who hate Jesus and his people if you don't think that Jesus is worth is worthy of being your king then you share this destiny there isn't a third way read verses 6 to 9 carefully Jesus will come back and he will judge if you scorn him now if you ignore and reject him Paul doesn't mince his words it's stark it's frightening if you don't want Jesus now then verse 9 you'll be away from his presence forever and that means suffering the punishment of eternal destruction perhaps sometimes we can be afraid of speaking so strongly about hell or judgment and these horrors any mention of them can almost be done apologetically doing whatever we can to tune it down to make it sound less severe maybe we want to distance ourselves from the man on the street corner who shouts turn or burn but whilst we may think there are more tactful ways than that

Paul doesn't want Christians to distance themselves from the reality and the horror of an eternity of destruction he says this is ongoing punishment this is a destruction that Jesus himself says is being thrown into eternal fire a punishment that means being isolated and estranged forever being cut off from God eternally being cut off from anyone and anything good tragically a friend of mine when I was growing up once said to me that hell sounded pretty great because it would be full of what

Christians aren't allowed to do his perception of Christianity was it was merely a set of boring rules and he thought hell would be like a big party with a devil as a DJ that couldn't be further from the truth Paul is making clear here that hell will be awful it is unending destruction and isolation from God isolation from all that's good it will only be terrible so don't choose that for now it might seem better to shun God but reversal is coming

[18 : 46] Paul's words here are not just a hope that means the afflictors are being afflicted it's also a word of hope that the ravaged will have relief when Jesus comes back verse 7 he will bring relief to those who are afflicted the reversal is not just for those who oppose God it's for us it's for those who face the daily cost the following Jesus relief is coming and more than that verse 10 we will see Christ's return his appearing again in all his glory Jesus won't just be returning as judge to right the wrongs his people endure he won't just be coming back to punish those who ignore him he will return in a great display of power and he will light the whole of creation with his glory verse 10 he will be marveled at because he is completely unlike anyone else ever he is the most loving gracious sacrificial mighty glorious king and his glory this glory that means he is worth being marveled at will be ours too that is what is in store for us all who remain steadfast even when it is hard even when it is painful it will be worth it to keep on keeping on in contrast to those who ignore and reject

God those who will be away from his presence forever the Thessalonians the church we who trust in him who persevere with him we will be in his presence forever we will be in the midst of his glory we will be in the midst of his might forever we can keep on putting up with opposition and affliction because we have a real hope of promised reversal it won't last forever if you're wondering now how you might keep going if you're counting the cost of following Jesus now Paul wants to encourage you that it won't last forever relief is coming justice is coming because Christ is coming so for now whilst we're sidelined and hushed whilst we're written off and ridiculed whilst the world looks at our king and refuses to bend their knee to

Jesus whilst we face all sorts of scorn and opposition for holding to his authority particularly on things like marriage and sexuality but on all things as we face all of this now being made out to be bigots haters fools the promised reversal will see us no longer in the mud no longer disregarded like a piece of dirt but with Jesus in all of his glory Paul says look at your past you're doing well look at how faithful you've been look at the miraculous work of God to keep you going this far and then he says look at your future look at what's going to be happening look at Christ's return and see that everything will be turned on its head and then he says verses 11 and 12 look at your present verses 11 and 12 look at your present for now this life is a life to be lived for

Jesus glory verse 11 Paul prays that the Thessalians would be worthy of God's calling and we know from verse 5 that being worthy of God's calling is enduring through suffering that is life in the present it is keeping going but life for Christians now is about more than just surviving it's about more than just putting up with persecution and suffering even if that's difficult life in the present is also about keeping going as Paul prays in verse 11 to fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith life in this age life now in the kingdom of God looks like enduring all sorts of trouble for following Jesus and getting on with the good work that he has for us to do Paul doesn't want the Christians to lose sight of that for whilst the future needs to have its place in our thinking if we hold it up too much and focus on it too much it also skews things if we're so fixated by the future that we lose focus on the present then we misunderstand this life isn't just an unfortunate waiting room until the real thing begins the coming of

Christ's kingdom has begun and it will arrive in the future but for now that means we have to focus both on what is to come and what is now as someone once said we live with one foot on earth and one foot stepping up into heaven so whilst we live in this broken world that is in dire need of the Lord Jesus we have much to be getting on with we don't meet here just to pat each other on the back we know the frightening destiny that awaits the world we know what will await those who don't know Jesus so we have the opportunity to work to labor to exalt Jesus now we have the opportunity to testify like Paul has been doing that others might believe we want to do what we can to make Jesus known to pull people away from the prospect of that unending destruction to introduce people to

[25 : 11] Jesus now so that they too can share an eternity with him so we don't have to be afraid of telling people about Jesus we don't have to be afraid of making things difficult for us that's what this life is for it's okay if things are hard now because in the end it will be worth it so pitching up throughout the week to serve in church is worth it being a good employee who works hard who

cares for his colleagues who displays integrity to witness to those he works with is worth it putting your neck out to stand for Jesus with your neighbors is worth it if you're the black sheep in your family because you're the only Christian it's worth sharing the gospel sensitively with your family even if they don't thank you for it because this life is an investment in the kingdom that honors

Jesus first above us but it will also see us join him in his glory verse 12 Paul says so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him all the good works that we do now glorify Jesus so when it's hard to be a Christian but we keep doing it that glorifies Jesus when we prioritize obeying him and saying no to sin that glorifies Jesus saying yes to spreading the gospel glorifies Jesus in doing these things we are saying he is infinitely more desirable than even the best of what this world offers and that truth ennobles even the smallest act of obedience like avoiding a little white lie that elevates the significance of saying no to watching something that we shouldn't that says that there's something cosmically significant to a grand parent doing all that they can to share Jesus with their grand kids it says that Jesus is exalted and glorified as king all the more because you use your retirement to serve him all of these things glorify Jesus that's what life in the presence for the more we seek to honor him the more we show how truly enjoyable he is the more we show the world the better story that is the gospel with Jesus as its center and climax living each day to bring glory to Christ is no small thing every time we gather here to study God's word and exhort and encourage one another we are glorifying Jesus and that is an investment in our future too for verse 12 finishes we will also be glorified in him the gospel promises a wonderful hope for us we can have confidence as we look behind as we look to our past to see what we've already done to see that we've been faithful and that's been

God at work we can look to our future what's in store for us but we can also look to the present and that's an investment in that future the gospel promises a wonderful hope for us and so it bids us live in the present so that the name of the Lord Jesus will be glorified in you and you in him amen let's pray father we thank you for the wonderful hope we have of Christ's return we know that he is surely coming and he will bring his reward for us encourage us by this for we pray in Jesus name amen