

### The Thessalonian Believers Stand Firm in Their Faith

#### 2 Thessalonians 1

2 Thessalonians 1 - *“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>3</sup> We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, <sup>4</sup> so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, <sup>5</sup> which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; <sup>6</sup> since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, <sup>7</sup> and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, <sup>10</sup> when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. <sup>11</sup> Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, <sup>12</sup> that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

#### Background Notes

The date for the writing of 2 Thessalonians is the early 50s AD. It was written soon after 1 Thessalonians - probably only a few months later. Thus 1 & 2 Thessalonians may be the earliest books of the New Testament written by the apostle Paul. In fact, if Galatians was written later, they are the earliest epistles.

2 Thessalonians was a response to the way the Thessalonian believers had received the first letter. Paul and Silas and Timothy were on Paul's second missionary journey. They were still in Corinth when word came back from the young church at Thessalonica – both the good news and the bad news.

The good news was that the believers were continuing to grow in the Christian faith and in their love for one another. After starting the letter with a typical Pauline greeting the apostle wrote, *“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure”(v3-4).* What a tremendous commendation!

The bad news was that misunderstanding had arisen about the “Day of the Lord” since Paul’s first letter. In 1 Thessalonians Paul had clearly differentiated between the future “Rapture” and the future “Day of the Lord.” But because of the persecution that the Thessalonian believers were suffering, some of them thought that the Day of the Lord had already started.

In this letter Paul assured them that the tribulations that they were presently facing were not **the** “Tribulation” of the Day of the Lord. The Tribulation period of the End Times is still future, he wrote, and it could not take place until certain prophetic signs would be fulfilled. Paul explained this in detail in chapter 2.

2 Thessalonians 1 contains insight into the present persecution of believers, and information about the future punishment of unbelievers.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. God’s righteous purposes are revealed in the present persecution of believers.

Verses 4-5: “...*all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God.*”

Did you ever wonder why God allows believers to be persecuted and undergo severe trials? Think of the recent persecutions of Christians in Sudan, for example – and many other examples of present-day persecution continue. Why does God allow the terrible persecution, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom of believers?

The Bible gives a number of reasons (and we can be sure from these verses before us) that all persecutions and trials of believers are part of the righteous purposes of God. This is hard to understand now, from our earthly perspective, but this is what the Bible teaches. God’s purposes in tribulation and persecution will become evident in the future when we are with the Lord in Heaven.

Make sure you understand this: **God is not the source of the evil** perpetrated upon believers (James 1:13). But God controls it, and He limits it, and He overrules and uses it to accomplish His righteous purposes. Psalm 76:10 says, “*Surely the wrath of man shall praise You.*” And Romans 8:28 says that “*in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.*” The “*all things*” in that verse certainly includes persecution and tribulation.

One of God’s many righteous purposes in allowing believers to suffer persecutions and trials is found right here: “*That you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer*”(v5). Have we been through any fiery tests for the sake of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God? Or are we only “peace-time” soldiers of the cross – living a life of

comfort, free from tests and trials? The Bible does not tell us to pray for persecution or to go out and look for persecution. No. But persecution **will** come to us if we seek to lead godly lives and share our faith in Christ. I'm reminded of a verse in the hymn, *Am I a Soldier of the Cross?* "Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? While others fight to win the prize, and sail through bloody seas."

Has your faith been tested and proven in the crucible of persecutions and tribulations? God's righteous purposes are revealed in the present persecutions of believers.

## 2. God's righteous purposes will be revealed in the future punishment of unbelievers.

Verses 6 -9: *"Since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."*

Romans 12:19 says, *"Never take your own revenge."* We are not to take revenge on those who persecute us, because God will take care of it! Romans 12:19 goes on to say that God Himself will repay unbelievers who mock and ridicule and persecute Christians. God **does** keep score, and it will all come out in the end. (I can't wait!) Of course we are not to gloat because God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, but it's wonderful to know that God's righteousness will be seen and maintained forever. And part of maintaining God's righteousness includes His righteous judgment of unbelievers.

When will this judgment take place? The final judgment of the unbelieving dead will take place at the Great White Throne (Revelation 20), but in this passage we see that the judgment seems to be upon the living unbelievers at the time of our Lord's return to this earth in power and glory. At that time, it will be clearly evident that believers were right, and unbelievers were wrong.

And as we see here, believers will enter into the "rest" and the joys of the kingdom, and believers will share in Christ's glory. Notice that the Lord will be glorified **in** His saints (v10), not just **with** His saints. We will share in Christ's glory in His kingdom here on this earth, and the Lord will be glorified in us! What an amazing thought!

At that time it will be obvious that the persecuted Thessalonian believers - and all persecuted believers down through history - have suffered unjustly. At that time, those who persecuted Christians - and all living unbelievers - will suffer the vengeance of God.

In verse 8, notice that two classes of unbelievers will be judged at that time: those who have not responded to the light that they have been given (*"who do not know God"*), and those who reject it (*"who do not obey the gospel of our Lord*

*Jesus Christ*”). The first type of unbeliever is covered in Romans 1. There we read that ***no one has an excuse*** for not responding to the one true God. God has given ***everyone*** some kind of evidence for Himself, because even creation displays His attributes. Romans 1:20 says, *“For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and divine nature, so that they are without excuse.”* The second type of unbeliever that will be judged then is the unbeliever who has heard the gospel - and has rejected it.

The judgment of unbelievers is eternal punishment (v9). *“Everlasting destruction”* does not mean annihilation or loss of being. Can you think of anything worse than to spend eternity alone, separated from the presence and the glory of God? I don’t like that idea any more than you do, but it’s not what we like that counts. What counts is what is true - what the Word of God teaches.

God’s righteous standards demand the eternal punishment of unbelievers, because God is infinitely holy. If God is an infinitely holy God, and He is, there must be eternal punishment of unbelievers. We can’t appreciate this doctrine fully now because we are unholy - but when we are in our sinless bodies, we will forever rejoice that God’s righteous standards are maintained by the eternal punishment of the unbeliever. God’s righteous purposes will be revealed in the future punishment of unbelievers.

## **Practical Application**

### **Would the apostle Paul boast about you?**

In verse 4, the apostle Paul said that he “boasted” about the faith of the Thessalonian believers. Their faith was growing! Their love for fellow believers was abounding! They were standing firm - in spite of persecution and tribulation. Paul was able to boast about them to other churches. Would the apostle Paul boast about the church you attend? What would he say about the church I attend?

In verses 11-12, Paul prayed that the Thessalonian believers would continue to be worthy of their calling, so that the Lord would continue to be glorified in them. And Paul wanted to continue to boast about them.

Each one of us can make this question personal: Would the apostle Paul boast about me?