

“Hope – Power to Change the Present”
2 Thessalonians 1
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Have you ever wondered about the value of Christianity?
Have you ever experienced things or seen things that have
made you wonder if it's worth it or if it's even real?

Holocaust Remembrance Day was observed recently.
Shindler's List was shown on public television.
I watched the last half of it and as with reading the book, I
was moved with the utter injustice of it all.

I have watched documentaries of the injustices that led up to the civil
rights movement in our own country and I cannot help but be moved,
even distraught over the evil that perpetrated, the helplessness of the
oppressed and the impunity of the oppressors.
Where is justice?

That question is not new:
Three thousand years ago, King Solomon lamented, Ecclesiastes 4:1
“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place
under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed-- and they have no
comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors...”

And again, Ecclesiastes 7:15 “In this meaningless life of mine I have
seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.”

Whether it is our own experience or observing what is happening
around us – there are days when we can't help but wonder where is
justice?

I want you to imagine that a friend calls you late one evening.
This friendship is only a year old but you have come to
appreciate this friend immensely.
It was almost a year ago that he became a Christian.

You have since moved to a different city but you have kept in touch with this friend and you have seen and heard how sincere he is about his newfound faith.

But this night as he talks to you, **you know that he is discouraged**.
“Discouraged” is too weak a word for it – he is ready to “bail out”.

Nothing has gone right since he became a Christian.

He was fired from one job and it looks like he’s about to lose another.

His father considers him a fool for his new beliefs.

And his wife who is not a Christian is distancing himself from him more all the time because he’s not interested in the activities that formerly dominated their lives.

“It would be so easy just to forget it ever happened”, he tells you.

“There are days”, he says, “when I’m not certain it’s worth it.”
What do you say to him?

The Apostle Paul had not one but many new friends who had recently become Christians in the city of Thessalonica.

The city had been founded by one of Alexander the Great’s brothers-in-law.

It was located on a major east-west highway and at an excellent sea- port in Greece.

2300 years later the city is a thriving metropolis.

On Paul’s second missionary trip he stopped for at least three weeks in this city and many Greeks along with a few Jews responded to the Good News of Jesus.

No sooner did he begin this church in Thessalonica however than he had to run for his life because of the opposition to his teaching.

It was clearly nothing short of a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit of God that a church was established in so short a time and that it grew even in Paul's absence.

A short time later, Paul was so concerned for these new converts that he sent Timothy, one of his associates, back to Thessalonica to check up on them.

When Timothy returned to Paul he reported what was happening in this new church and how well they were doing in spite of opposition.

Paul then wrote a letter to them encouraging and instructing them.

We know that letter as 1 Thessalonians.

A few months later, about A.D. 51 within 20 years of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Paul wrote to them again.

It is that letter, 2 Thessalonians, which I wish for us to study these next few weeks.

Paul knew these new Christians were under pressure.

In their case they not only had the usual difficulties of life, such as we face from time to time, but they also had open opposition from the religious and political leaders of the city.

2 Thessalonians 1:4b "the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

2 Thessalonians 1:5b "you are suffering."

Paul wrote both of these letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, to encourage these Christians.

What could he say to them that would help them "hang in there" instead of "dropping out"?

I'd like you to be reflective for a few minutes.

As I thought about speaking this morning, I had many of you in mind.

I don't know all of you by any means but I know many of you.

I look at the children and teenagers in our church and I wonder how many of them will grow discouraged with life and will abandon their faith?

I wonder who of us adults, in this congregation, will drift away from the faith we have said we believe.

What will happen to us in the next 20 years or the next 50 years?

If we could fast-forward to the end of our lives on this earth what would we see?

What will be the ultimate spiritual outcome of us who are here now?

How many will remain faithful to the end?

Conversely, what could hold us?

What could encourage you to remain faithful?

The Apostle Paul writes to encourage these new believers and he does it in three ways in these opening paragraphs of his letter:

READ 2 Thessalonians 1

Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill

every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this 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.

When Paul wants to encourage these believers what is the first thing he does?

He commends them for their spiritual progress!

He acknowledges the positive changes that are taking place in their lives.

2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4 “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.”

Paul specifically commends them for two things: Their faith and their love.

Their “faith” is their trust in God.

In verse 4 he speaks of their perseverance and faith.

Their trust in God was growing through each new tough experience and rather than “bailing out” they were growing stronger.

That does not mean it was easy.

It doesn't mean they weren't tempted to quit.

It wouldn't be called perseverance if there hadn't been pressure to do something other than believe.

They were being taken to the limits of their faith and seeing that God was still faithful and they were growing in their trust of him.

There are scores of illustrations of that among you.

Some of you have been in the furnace of your faith in recent months.

You have struggled with God's apparent absence and with the injustice of situations.

You have known soul-pain that is far more severe than physical pain.

And after you came out of the furnace you saw how God walked you through it.

And your persevering-faith has grown.

Paul not only commended them for their faith but he also commended them for their love.

The picture of their relationships that came to Paul from Timothy was that all these people were increasing in their love for one another.

There was a caring for one another and a concern for each other's spiritual welfare that made Paul absolutely effusive in his commendation "among God's churches we boast about you..."

Is this flattery?

It seems that too often in our speaking with one another we think there are only two options – flattery or silence.

We are afraid that if we commend someone for their spiritual progress it will be flattery or that it will spoil them with pride.

And so we tend to keep silent about the growth we see in others.

It clearly was not flattery that Paul lavishes on these believers.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul wrote to them, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."

He wanted to see their faith increase and he had evidence that had happened.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:12 he prayed, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."

He specifically prayed that they would increase in their love for one another and Timothy gave evidence that it was happening.

It was not flattery because first of all it was true and secondly Paul's desire is to encourage, not to gain personal favor with them.

Paul knew and reminded them that the credit belongs to God but nonetheless they were to be commended, encouraged that God was at work in their lives.

I mean it when I say, "God forgive me, and will you please forgive me for not encouraging this congregation and for not encouraging many of you individually for the good progress I see in your lives."

I have witnessed many of the young people of our church go through hard family and personal situations and you have remained faithful, even growing in your faith in the process.

I have been there as many of you have gone through terrible personal tragedies or hardships and I have observed that your faith has not failed but has become stronger.

Yes, in 22 years, I have seen some fall away, but I have seen many, many more, many times more, of you walk on, persevering, growing and learning.

I have witnessed your love for one another – strong, caring, enduring love.

Oh believer maybe you're discouraged today – but please know God has begun and continues a good work in you – you can't turn back now.

He is faithful and he will enable you to be faithful as well.

A reminder of God's grace in your life already is a great encouragement to remain faithful even in the roughest of times.

But secondly, Paul **also speaks very specifically about JUSTICE.**

Justice has two sides to it.

Those who do it right ought to be rewarded and those who do it wrong ought to be punished.

Solomon was right when he considers so much of life unjust.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.”

It’s not fair!

Certainly injustice is a major contributor to discouragement.

Where is God and why doesn’t he do something?

We say that about the world and we say it about our lives.

Surely those new Thessalonians Christians had to wonder what went wrong.

They were the good guys and look what was happening to them.

Paul wants them to know two very important things about God’s justice.

The first thing Paul does is counter a natural tendency of ours.

We think that difficulties in our lives are an evidence of a lack of God’s justice.

If God is just, why doesn’t God do something?

Look please at 2 Thessalonians 1:5 “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.”

What is the “**all this**” referring to?

“All this” refers to what Paul has just acknowledged and described.

He has acknowledged the hardships they face in life.

He has also described the growth that has taken place in their lives.

He then says, “all this is evidence that God’s judgment is right...”

We too often think that hard times in life are indications of God’s injustice.

The truth is that hard times in life are indications that God is truly doing the right thing, the just thing.

Justice is the outworking of God’s purposes.

Justice means the right thing finally happens.

We tend to think of avoiding suffering at all costs but God explicitly says that he works out his eternal purposes often through suffering. He teaches valuable lessons.

We live in a world where suffering is inevitable – faith is worked out and even grows in such an environment.

We only know growth in faith when it is tested.

But Paul also wants the Thessalonians to know that their perseverance is evidence of God's justice.

The very fact that they are struggling and not giving up is evidence of God's grace and their resulting faith.

God's justice is being worked out through those hardest of times.

But secondly, Paul writes, I want you to know the final outcome of all that happens in your life and the lives of those around you.

In verses 6 and 7 he begins to paint the picture of what will eventually and inevitably happen when justice is served.

He describes two sides of this coming justice.

In verse 6 he begins with justice for the unjust.

2Thessalonians 1:6 "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you"

And in verse 7 he describes justice for the just.

2 Thessalonians 1:7 "and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well."

Here it is in a nutshell – God is just and justice will be done.

Those who have been **unjust** in this life will "get theirs!"

Those who have been **just** in this life will get relief.

When will this happen?

2 Thessalonians 1:7 "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."

Paul says I want you to know, I want you to be absolutely certain of this one thing – when Jesus comes again, justice will be served.

You wonder where God is and what he is doing?

Don't wonder! He is simply extending mercy – but **mark it down**, a day is coming when Jesus will return and **when he comes he will administer full justice.**

2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9 “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power...”

The Apostle John paints a fuller picture of that day when he writes: Revelation 19:11ff “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns... Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations... He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 20:11ff “Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and...each person was judged according to what he had done. And (all of them) were thrown into the lake of fire... If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Do you believe that?

All right will be vindicated.

All wrongs will be righted.

All evil will be fully, totally recompensed.

Justice will be done.

In this life, injustice does too often have free reign.

Even when evil-doers are punished it is not enough to compensate for the evil they have done.

But a day is coming when justice will be done.

Barbara has asked me “Why do you watch “Shindler’s List” with its cruelty and injustice?”

“Why do you insist on walking the streets of Calcutta every time you go to India?”

In the preparation of this sermon I think I now have an answer.

Seeing evil, injustice and suffering pushes me, pushes me right to the limit, to ask again, “What do I truly believe?”

Seeing such suffering makes me ask, “Do I truly believe that justice will be served?”

“Do I believe a day is coming when all this will be made right?”

“Can I, can we, remain faithful in the face of injustice now, knowing that justice is coming?”

But that is only one face of justice.

The other is why Paul writes of that coming day.

2 Thessalonians 1:10 “...on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”

Justice will **not only** be served in the punishment of those who have rejected God’s love.

Justice **will also** be served when God’s purposes for his children are fully completed.

Jesus died for his people.

He died not only to forgive our sins but to recreate us into humanity he originally designed.

Ephesians 5:25-27 “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

Jesus receives glory not only as a result of who he is but also as a result of who we are by his grace.

The glory of a great painter is reflected in his work.

The glory of Michelangelo is reflected in the ceiling of the Cistine Chapel.

So the glory of Christ is supremely shown not in the beauty of the mountains or the expanse of the universe but in the people saved by his grace.

Louis Berkhof wrote, “These saints constitute the handiwork of Christ... They are a people snatched from the power of the devil... They are the people once ensnared in the meshes of sin and burdened with guilt, but now liberated and righteous before God... They were mortal and subject to the temptations and limitations of life and subject to death itself; but now they are endued with endless life.”
(Berkhof in *The Second Coming of Christ* p81)

Dealing with the wicked is incidental to the primary purpose for which the Lord comes – he comes for his own!

And what a day that will be!

Romans 8:18ff I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed... ²⁰ the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Justice will be done!

God’s grace and his people’s faith will be rewarded.

The ungodly, the rebellious (those who have rejected God’s transforming love) will be punished to the full.

Believe it Thessalonian Christians.

Believe Southern Gables Christians!

Faithfulness will be worth it!

I run out of time but let me briefly mention **the third way** that Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers and us.

He writes in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 “With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this 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.”

That third source of encouragement is prayer.

Paul not only prays for them but he tells them he is praying for them and he tells them what he praying for them.

Paul knows it is important to pray and pray constantly.

We rise or fall by the grace of God.

We are called on to pray in every situation, to express and live in dependence on God.

Paul is willing to so pray – he knows his and their lives depend on it.

God has so ordered the Christian life that prayer is essential.

And what Paul is asking God to do, is exactly what God has promised to do.

Paul is laying claim to God’s word to complete the work he has begun in those new believers. (Phil 1:6)

Even in his prayer for them, Paul is reminding them of what God has promised.

What encouragement!

How about you?

Do you know what gracious work God has already done in your life?

Do you know what justice God will administer when Jesus comes again?

Do you know what promises God has made and that others are claiming those promises for you?