



WHEN GOD GETS THE LAST WORD

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 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12
 First Message
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We all enjoy stories that end with the good guys winning and the bad guys losing. We can handle pain and loss as long as justice prevails in the end. We probably began to think this way as children when we were introduced to fairy tales. Cinderella was continually put down by her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. When she finally got invited to the grand ball, at the stroke of midnight her gown changed into the rags she wore earlier that evening, and her beautiful coach turned into a pumpkin. But everything would be fine in the end. The glass slipper fit her perfectly; she married the prince and lived happily ever after. I don't know how I would have felt as a child if one of those ugly stepsisters tried the glass slipper and it fit her. Another childhood character I found appealing was Robin Hood, the man who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. I wondered whether it was right to do that, but I felt it probably was because those poor people needed money more than the rich. But what if Robin Hood had a Swiss bank account? How would I have felt if he was stealing all the money for himself? That would have been tough to handle.

The reason for this is that deep down, we all want to see justice prevail. But that doesn't always happen in the real world, where the weak and helpless get pushed around. In the real world, the wicked stepsister gets the glass slipper. The people we trusted, who appeared to be selfless and loving, often turn out to be greedy self-seekers. As we see this going on all, in the words of the poet, "truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne," it's easy to become disillusioned and cynical.

That is why we read Psalm 73 earlier this morning—because our life experiences help us relate to the words of the psalmist. As we begin our studies in Second Thessalonians, I want to look first at this psalm. The Thessalonians were facing the same problem as the author of Psalm 73. As the psalmist surveyed his world, it was obvious that he lived in a world of hurt. He saw the prosperity of the wicked, and he became prejudiced against God. He could not understand why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That did not make any sense to him. There did not seem to be any moral order in the universe. He was trying hard to do what was right, and God was not rewarding him for his efforts.

The psalmist opens with a statement of his theology:

Surely God is good to Israel [that is, he is good to his people],
To those who are pure in heart. (Ps 73:1, NIV)

The author considered himself to be pure in heart in the sense that he worshipped God; he was a God-fearing man. But his theology did not jibe with his experience, as he goes on to say:

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;

**I had nearly lost my foothold.
 For I envied the arrogant
 When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
 They have no struggles;
 Their bodies are healthy and strong** [They are fat, dumb and happy.]
**They are free from the burdens common to man;
 They are not plagued by human ills.
 Therefore pride is their necklace;**
 [They thumb their noses at God and get away with it.]
They clothe themselves with violence. (vv 2-6)
 [They go through life never giving God the time of day, and yet they prosper.] Verse 12:
**This is what the wicked are like—
 Always carefree, they increase in wealth.** (v 12)

This leads the psalmist to conclude:

**Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;
 In vain have I washed my hands in innocence.**
 [He got nothing out of the deal he had made with God.]
**All day long I have been plagued;
 I have been punished every morning.**
 [He doesn't understand why things aren't going better for him. He regards the world as unjust.]
**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
 I would have betrayed your children.** (vv 13-15)

This was the forgotten factor. He could not undermine the faith of the family, so he went into the sanctuary.

**When I tried to understand all this,
 It was oppressive to me
 Till I entered the sanctuary of God;
 Then I understood their final destiny.** (vv 16-17)

When he looked at the Word, and saw the face of God, he learned something he did not know before about the way God is running the world and the ultimate fate of the wicked. Verse 18:

**Surely you place them on slippery ground;
 You cast them down to ruin.
 How suddenly are they destroyed,
 Completely swept away by terrors!** (vv 18-19)

With these verses from Psalm 73 as an introduction, let's turn now to the apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. This short letter was written a couple of months following the completion of the first letter. About twelve months earlier, Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica to people who had never heard it before, and they responded to the truth. But there were a few problems he wanted to address, one in particular concerning the coming of the Lord. There was still some confusion in the church about that. In fact, many of the Thessalonians did not understand the things he wrote concerning that subject in the first letter. Don't you find it encouraging that Paul

had to write a second letter to explain his first letter?

One result of this confusion was that there were some in the church who were not working. They were freeloading off others, and justifying their laziness by saying that Jesus was coming back at any moment, so why bother working? Paul has to correct that misunderstanding. Yet others, apparently, were protesting that Paul's words of praise in his first letter were not really deserved. Finally, the apostle wanted to address their disillusionment over the state of things in the world—the same problem that the writer of Psalm 73 wrestled with. The Thessalonians had made great sacrifices to follow then Lord, and life had become extremely difficult for them.

The first two verses of the letter are a salutation. In fact, they are almost identical to the opening two verses of the first letter. This was the standard introduction to New Testament letters written during this time period. Verse 1:

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy [his friends who were associated with him in the ministry in Thessalonica] **to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** (2 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)

The Thessalonians, like us, have two addresses. They were in Thessalonica, but more importantly, they were in God. That is true of each of us too, no matter where we live. We also live "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." How these words must have encouraged this young church in Thessalonica, knowing that God was the source of their protection.

Next, Paul offers a word of thanksgiving for these brethren. Verse 3:

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; (1:3)

Notice here two of Paul's triad of the really important things in life: faith and love. The Thessalonians didn't have much else. Times were hard. Many of them had lost the ability to support themselves and their families. They were being pushed around, abused and opposed. Paul acknowledges these difficulties, but he reminds them of what they still have, the things that really matter. They had God; he was reliable, he could be counted on; and they had each other. These are the relationships that endure in life.

Having been Christians for but a year, however, they had only a portion of these qualities. They made mistakes. They struggled in their trust for God and their love each other. But, Paul says, "you are growing." That is what God is looking for. I am learning that God doesn't expect perfection. It is all right to make mistakes. It is all right to stumble and fall, to be weak. The important thing is that we are growing.

Paul uses two words here to describe this growing process: *enlarged*, and *grows*. The first word is descriptive of the inward process, like growth in a tree, which can't be seen. The second word has to do with the outward manifestation of that growth. It begins internally, with faith. We begin to cling to God and rely on him more; and the outward manifestation of that trust is love. We become more

gentle, caring, tender and thoughtful. By God's love, our love grows. One can't love from a vacuum. That is why, when we are struggling, the place to begin is loving someone, not gritting our teeth and trying harder. We must begin by drawing close to God, reminding ourselves of how much he loves us. It is a matter of putting our roots down into God and letting love flow out of that relationship.

Paul goes on to say that he speaks proudly of the Thessalonians, because they were believing and loving in the midst of circumstance that made it hard to believe and love. Verse 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. (1:4)

They kept on trusting God and loving each other, despite the hard times they were experiencing. That's the rub, isn't it? It's not hard to love God and each other during a Sunday morning church service, when our hearts are moved by the beauty of the worship and the love of our brothers and sisters. But afterwards, we have to go home. That's when hard reality sets in. Some of you return to a moody spouse, others to unsympathetic parents, yet others to ungrateful children, or difficult employers. Then it is hard to keep trusting God and loving each other, isn't it? You wonder why you have to go through those times, "Is it ever going to end?" you ask. "Will there ever be a time when I don't have to struggle to believe? When it will be easier to love?"

Paul goes on to explain some things about the Thessalonians' suffering and struggle. Verse 5:

This is a plain indication [the hard times, the persecution, the struggle, the wear and tear, the hardness of life, all this, says Paul, is a plain indication] **of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.** (1:5)

Here Paul is explaining the relationship between growth in faith and love and hard times. In a remarkable statement, he says that the hard times are really the hand of God upon the Thessalonians. Now let us be clear about one thing: God doesn't send the hard times. He is not behind the principalities and powers that assail us. But he *permits* the hard times. In a sense, according to Paul, that is the judgment of God upon our sin. That is a different way of looking at suffering, isn't it? It is one thing to see our suffering as the fiery darts of the evil one, and to ascribe all of our difficulties to our circumstances and those that others contrive for us, but it is quite another thing to see our suffering as the judgment of God on our sin. God hates sin so much, he will do anything he must to deal with it in the lives of his children.

This is not the only place we encounter this rather surprising revelation. There is a parallel passage to these words of Paul in 1 Peter 4. Life was even harder for those to whom Peter was writing. Nero was on the throne, and Christians were suffering imperial persecution. It wasn't just a matter of having Christian stores boycotted. These believers were being martyred in the Coliseum. They were giving up their lives for the cause of Christ. Tradition records that Peter himself was crucified upside down. Let's read what Peter says about this. First Peter 4:12-18:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. (1 Pet 4:12-16, NIV)

And now, listen to these pregnant words, from verse 17:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God;

That gives an entirely new perspective on suffering, doesn't it? When people oppose us, that is the judgment of God on sin. When our children rebel, and use drugs, when we have difficulties in our marriages, is it God that sends these things? No, but he permits them in this fallen world. All of these events are guided and directed, screened by God's love, to the sin in our lives, to rid us of the things we are inclined to hang on to.

The fact is, we prefer to hang on to the things of this life rather than God himself. Suffering and pain wean us from the idolatries that rob us of the joy that God wants for us. Richard Foster said: "God becomes a reality to us when he becomes a necessity." God must pry our fingers loose from all our possessions, the things aren't going to last or satisfy, so that we will learn to rely on him alone.

Although it may not be apparent to us, God is making us into something very beautiful. He is taking away our fear of losing, our tendency to hold on to things too tightly, our temptation to want to control everything, so that we can be sweeter, wiser, mellower, easier to get along with. Thus we have the words of Paul in this letter: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God." To what end? The apostle tells us, in 2 Corinthians: "This momentary light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory."

Now there is another side of the issue. Not only is God judging his people, the church, he also will judge the world, those who oppose us. Verse 6:

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, (1:6)

This is the other side of Jesus, the side we don't talk about much. This is Jesus in the temple, his eyes flashing, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving them out. This is not "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is Jesus as judge.

And one of these days he is going to pay back trouble to those who trouble you. Verse 7:

and {to give} relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, (1:7)

Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is going to even the score. He will repay with affliction those who afflict, and bring relief to them. That word *relief* is the Greek word *anesin*. This is probably the word from which the pain relief product got its name. You could say that Paul is telling the Thessalonians to take a couple of *anacin* and wait till

the Lord comes back!

Next, Paul identifies those whom the Lord will repay. Verse 8:

dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 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. (1:8-10)

One day, when Jesus comes back, he will judge those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel. Some people listening to this are probably thinking, "That's just what I thought about God! What about these poor, ignorant people off in Africa or in the Australian outback who have never heard about God? You say that Jesus is going to come back and judge them all? That is just what I thought Christians believe."

If that is what you are thinking, you should know that Paul makes it very clear in the opening chapter of his letter to the Romans that *everyone knows God*. No one is ignorant of God. Did you know that? The knowledge of God is written on the hearts of everyone who was ever born. Everyone has an instinctive knowledge that there is a God. And that knowledge is corroborated again and again by nature. There is an enormous amount of revelation in nature.

A number of years ago I read a fascinating book entitled *Life and Death in Shanghai*, by Nian Chang. The book is a marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai Chek in 1949, Nian and her husband decided to stay in Shanghai, where he was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, the only multi-national company that chose to remain in China. When he died, in 1957, Shell hired Nian as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse Tung launched his proletarian revolution, and Nian was arrested. She was beaten and put in prison, where she remained in solitary confinement for over six years.

One account in her book parallels what Paul is saying here. One afternoon, in her second or third year in prison, a spider crawled into her cell and began to climb up one of the bars. She said, "I watched it climb steadily up the iron bar, and it was such a long walk for this tiny, little creature." When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. She said she was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread, without any hesitation or mistakes. The spider knew its job. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make a web that was intricate and absolutely perfect, with all the strands evenly spaced. As Nian watched this architectural feat, she was flooded with questions: "Who had taught that little spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution? Or did God make that spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species?" The spider helped her to see that God was real and he was in control. From then on, Mao Tse Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, "I

felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me.”

There is a world of revelation in nature. No one is shut up from that knowledge.

When Paul speaks of “those who do not know God,” he is not saying they are ignorant. He is saying they have *closed their minds* to the knowledge of God. This is not a problem of ignorance; it is a moral problem. They have decided they don’t want to know God. They don’t want to acknowledge him. They don’t want to listen to the gospel, the good news that God loves us so much that he came to earth to die for us. They have closed their hearts to all of that. Paul says there are people who have resolutely set their hearts against God. They don’t want him in their lives.

And tragically, in the end, God will give them what they want. God will not force truth upon people. If we do not want to know God, to love him in response to his love for us, he will let us have what we want. As C. S. Lewis put it: “we will have the terrible freedom that we have demanded.” That should not make Christians happy. It should fill us with deep sorrow that there are people who do not want God in their lives. Lewis is right when he says that hell is ultimately a provision of God’s love: God is merely letting people have what they want.

This passage is perhaps the most graphic description of hell to be found anywhere in the Bible. Paul describes hell as eternal separation “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” If people don’t want God’s presence and power, then he will let them have what they want: eternal separation from God. Can you think of a sentence more terrible than that?

In this life we never experience total separation from the presence and power of God. Even the most resolute atheist has never felt that. In this world, even to those who have turned their backs on him, God has given love, laughter, families, health, and the beauty of creation. He gives us our minds, our intellect. He even gives us the ability to contrive arguments against his existence; even that is a gift. It is what theologians call “common grace,” grace that is given even to unbelievers. God gives to everyone the ability to enjoy life. But eventually, he will give people what they want. If they don’t want God, then he will let them go.

I want to quote a section of a message on hell by Bill Hybels, which brings into focus the terrible separation of that place:

One writer calls it the bottomless pit. And that conjures up dreamlike feelings of falling away—falling, falling, falling. You’ve all had dreams like that, where when you woke your heart was beating because you were falling. Picture in your mind hanging over a precipice, and God is hanging onto you, and you’re hanging onto him. And you decide you don’t need him anymore. So you let go. But the moment you let go you know you made a mistake. You’re falling and every moment you know you are falling further and further away from the only source of help and truth and love, and you realize you made a mistake and you can’t get back up and you fall further and faster and further and faster into spiritual oblivion, and you know you’re going the wrong direction and you’d give anything to go back but you can’t and you fall and you fall and you fall and you fall. How long? Forever. And all the while you’re falling, you’re saying, “I’m further now, I’m further. I’m further from the only source of hope, truth and love. In hell there is never the bliss of annihilation. You’d give anything for annihilation, but it’s unavailable, only the conscious continuation of emotional anguish, physical anguish, relational anguish, and spiritual anguish forever.

God will one day let go of those who do not want him in their lives.

Paul now concludes this opening chapter with a prayer. Verse 11:

To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; in order 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. (1:11-12)

Notice that Paul doesn’t pray that God will bring the persecution to an end. What he prays is that God will continue to judge the church so that it can become everything that he wants it to be. This whole process of judgment is what is causing Christians to be worthy of their calling, making them more believing and more loving. The apostle prays that all of those good desires we have deep down to be what God intends for us would be fulfilled.

And there is only one way to get there: it is through the hard things: the tests, the pain, the sufferings of life. These are the tools that God uses to shape us into the people he wants us to be.

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