



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

2 THESSALONIANS 1-2

AUGUST 2022

JUSTICE, JUDGMENT, AND JESUS

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. 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—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. 2 Thessalonians 1:4-8 NRSV

In Acts 17, we have the story of when Paul and his traveling companions were in Thessalonica and preached in the synagogue for three sabbaths. During this time, Paul specifically pointed out that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Paul customarily went to the synagogue first because the Jews already knew the first part of the biblical story. He went there to tell them the rest of the story. His message was received well by a good number of Greeks, some prominent women, and some Jews, but it angered the Jews who did not desire to receive the grace included in the good news that Jesus was the promised one. They stirred up the whole city trying to cancel the speech of the missionaries. They twisted the facts to suit their agenda and accused all those preaching and responding

of being subversive toward Rome. (Some of these same tactics are used today.) Paul, Silas, and Timothy left the city and went to Athens, and then Corinth. From there Paul wrote the letters that we now read as 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

The “day of the Lord” was a major theme in the Old Testament story. For generations, Jewish believers looked forward to the day when God would intervene in history and radically judge between the righteous and the wicked. Astoundingly, Paul announced that Jesus inaugurated that day. Paul explained how it fit the overall story and how it would look in the days to come. However, there were still questions those young believers were asking, and he wrote the two letters to address those questions. It would

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be helpful if you read the first two chapters of 2 Thessalonians.

The believers Paul wrote to evidently weren't clear on why they were being so persecuted if the day of the Lord had arrived. Shouldn't they be vindicated and their enemies stopped? Some had assumed that when Paul said Jesus would appear, it would be sudden and catch the unprepared unawares. They believed it would be immediate. Why the delay? Maybe they had misunderstood. Some were even saying that it had already happened in some spiritual, invisible way. Paul addresses those questions. This text does not answer all the questions that people today have about the last coming of Jesus. It is better to let the text answer the questions it addresses than to force it to fit into some eschatological scheme that has been proposed. It addresses clearly at least two major issues: present persecutions and the certainty of judgment.

Present persecutions are evidence of God's grace.

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. 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—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.

2 Thessalonians 1:4-8 NRSV

Usually we think of evidences of grace looking more like answered prayer, miracles, healings, timely provisions, or mountain top experiences with God. How are persecutions viewed as evidences of grace? God's design is working. He has called His believers to be His reflections of the light that confronts darkness. Two kingdoms are colliding. The power of Satan who is lord of darkness is reacting to the intrusion of the kingdom of Jesus who is Lord of light. The righteous are being revealed, as are the wicked. The gospel power that has captured the believers is displaying a new kind of life which is threatening the old ways cherished by the lovers of darkness. It is happening already. The believers are proclaiming the message and demonstrating a life that establishes the lines of judgment. Jesus had said this would be the experience of the disciples. They would so embody the message of grace that those who received them would receive Jesus and those who rejected the messenger would reject the message (*see Matthew 10:40-42*). Persecution is building blessings for the believers, but curses for those doing the persecuting. Judgment is happening as the gospel divides the responders.

Persecution is also evidence that God is continuously pulling out the treasure He has deposited in each believer. The light inside is being externalized by the pressure of persecution:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

2 Corinthians 4:7, 10 ESV

Paul was familiar with this dynamic as he was the one in darkness who saw in Stephen's stoning an example of Christ's life being manifested during persecution. The light Paul saw in Stephen's face as he was dying was the same light he saw on the road to Damascus when Jesus captured him.

Judgment is surely coming.

In the Old Testament, the issue of judgment was the Law. When Jesus lived in bodily form, He was the dividing line. Now He shares that role with His disciples. They carry the message that separates the vindicated from the rejectors, and there will be a future when all these judgments will be ratified. When Jesus appears at the culmination of the story, those made righteous by God's grace will be vindicated. Those who refused the offer of grace will suffer vengeance. The visible appearance of Jesus will be a glorious and marvelous time for believers. There is no fear as we approach that day. Our sins have been forgiven. Our curse has been canceled. Our eternal blessing has been secured. Our Savior is coming to be glorified in His people, and they will marvel at how much bigger and better He is than even they imagined (*see 2 Thessalonians 1:10*).

It will also be a day of vengeance. That word sometimes conveys a vindictive tyrant who is eager to destroy someone who does not fit his expectations. But God is not eager to destroy. He has proven that throughout history. He is the one who became sin so that we could be made righteous. But, He is just. The whole structure of human life is founded on the justice that is built into creation, described in the covenants, and

finally revealed fully in Jesus. Contrary to contemporary claims of Christian religion coming of age and rejecting the wrath aspect of God's love, God is true to His nature and will set all things right.

As Paul references the man of lawlessness, he is showing how wickedness is personified in a human who rejects authority, exalts himself, and despises truth. He shows that the demise of such wickedness is brought about by the very breath of Jesus' mouth. The point is that Jesus is the last word and has the last word. Final judgment exalts ultimate justice. Those who demand to live without God get what they demand. Those who perish do so not because God is vindictive, but because when they know truth, they do not love it. The truth declares that all people need a Savior. Refusing to admit their need to be saved is a rejection of the Savior. When they reject truth, they are actively receiving a lie. Continuing in that delusion brings God's act of sending them strong delusion. They will not appeal His judgment.

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 ESV

It is a very serious thing to neglect or reject the grace of Jesus. He alone took our sentence of death for sin. If we reject that, we must pay. Justice will be done.

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Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

Hebrews 10:28-29 NRSV

Believers need not fear the vengeance side of justice. We are righteous by virtue of God's grace through Jesus who took our place in the court. But we are daily challenged to continue to believe the promise of grace offered to us for our lives now. Our light shines as we lean into His good news of grace. We demonstrate for those watching what living by faith in His goodness looks like.

You might remember the story in 2 Kings about the famine in Samaria when inflation was so high that donkey heads were selling for hundreds of dollars, and dove dung was priced at \$500 per ½ pint. Things were desperate. Elisha, the mouthpiece for God, declared that by morning the inflation would be over and that donkey heads and dove dung would be replaced by reasonably priced wheat and barley. A captain in the king's army heard the preposterous declaration of good news, and he declared that if God should empty heaven such a thing could not happen. Elisha responded, "You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it." Early the next morning some lepers ventured out to the surrounding Syrian army to see if they might spare them. God had sent a sound into the camp that frightened the whole army so much that they panicked and left everything they owned. When the lepers went back into the

city and told the good news, there was a mob of people rushing out the gate. The captain was trounced and died. He saw it, but did not eat. The word of the Lord prevailed. It always does. Good news may be hard to believe because it is too good to imagine. The sound of grace continues to resonate through the scriptures, orchestrated by the Spirit. It confronts and contradicts the sound of condemnation, shame, disgust, and hopelessness. We must not neglect what we have heard from heaven. It is serious to hear the word of grace. When we believe it, we are empowered to participate in the works of God. When we don't, we don't get to eat from the table we saw.



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