

WAITING FOR THE LORD'S RETURN, PART 7:
“ENCOURAGEMENT AMIDST AFFLICTIONS”
2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12

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Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 7 of our sermon series called “Waiting for the Lord's Return,” where we're going through the Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians together.

And today's sermon is titled, “Encouragement Amidst Afflictions.”

Sermon Introduction

Have you ever felt like quitting?

Perhaps quitting a job, a musical instrument, or a second language.

Or perhaps it was something weightier and more solemn, like quitting your marriage, your followership of Christ, and even your life.

Usually, quitting begins to cross our minds when pain comes into the picture. When all is well, we have no trouble enduring. But when we begin to face afflictions, we begin to question how we can possibly endure.

In such times when you felt like quitting, what encouraged you to keep going? What enabled you to endure?

For most of us, it probably involved another person—something they said, something they did, something they embodied. When we feel alone, we're more likely to quit. But when we feel the encouragement of those around us, we're more likely to endure, even amidst afflictions.

And that's what we're going to look at more in today's passage.

The One Thing

Let's encourage one another to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12.

Last week, we finished 1 Thessalonians, and today, we're beginning 2 Thessalonians, so just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today's passage.

On his second missionary journey, Paul, Silvanus (also known as Silas), and Timothy shared the gospel of Jesus Christ in the city of Thessalonica, where *many* believed, and a *church* was planted.

But within just a few *weeks*, an angry mob of unbelieving Jews began *persecuting* the Thessalonian Christians, *dragging* them out of their homes and *accusing* them before the city officials.

As a result, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were *urged* to leave *abruptly* when the Thessalonian church was probably only about a *month* old (Acts 17:1-10).

And so, Paul wrote a letter, which we know as 1 Thessalonians, to *encourage* this young Thessalonian church amidst afflictions to continue to *grow* in their faith, love, and godliness, in light of the *hope* that they have in Jesus' second coming.

Now, *after* delivering 1 Thessalonians to the Thessalonian church, whoever delivered the letter came back to Paul and his companions with more news about the church. And so, within a few weeks or months of writing 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote *another* letter, which we know as 2 Thessalonians, to *encourage* the Thessalonian church amidst continued afflictions and persecution (2 Thess. 1:1-12; 2:13-3:5), to *correct* a false teaching or a supposed prophecy that Christ had already returned (2 Thess. 2:1-12), and to *address* a problem of idleness among some in the church (2 Thess. 3:6-15; cf. 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 5:14).¹

So today, as we begin 2 Thessalonians, we'll see Paul primarily *encouraging* the Thessalonian church amidst continued afflictions and persecution.

¹ Robert J. Cara ("2 Thessalonians," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. Michael J. Kruger [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016], 339) writes: "We do not know who delivered 1 Thessalonians to the Thessalonian church. But apparently, after delivering the letter, this person (or persons) returns to Paul with more-recent news about the church and her reception of 1 Thessalonians. Paul is evidently still in Corinth when he receives the report. This assumption is based on both 1 and 2 Thessalonians having the same opening words, 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy' (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), and because Paul stayed eighteen months in Corinth according to Acts 18:11. It is further assumed that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians several weeks or a few months after 1 Thessalonians. This puts the date at AD 50. Paul received a report from Timothy that prompted his writing of 1 Thessalonians. Similarly, this second report that Paul receives prompts his writing of 2 Thessalonians."

Scripture Reading

So let's read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 (ESV)

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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— ⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

This is God's Word.

Overview

So how do we encourage one another to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions? We'll look at *three* ways from this passage:

- I. Give thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another (1-5)
- II. Assure one another of God's perfect justice in the Lord's return (6-10)
- III. Pray for one another to glorify God throughout our lives (11-12)

I. Give thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another (1-5)

Look at verses 1-2:

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is almost the *exact* wording for how Paul began 1 Thessalonians, with just a few changes.

First, he says, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God *our* Father” instead of “God *the* Father” as he did in 1 Thessalonians.

Second, whereas Paul simply says, “Grace to you and peace,” in 1 Thessalonians, here he says, “Grace to you and peace *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

We won’t spend much time here, except to say that, from the *beginning* of the letter, Paul is *encouraging* the Thessalonians with the fact that they can now know God as *their* Father through their *faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ—and how the *grace* and *peace* they need for salvation and for the entire Christian life are not from themselves, from others, or from their circumstances, but they are freely given to them from God *their* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Essentially, their greatest encouragement is in the fact that they belong to *God*. So *close* is their union with him that Paul says they are *in* God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the closest of intimacy and the deepest of securities.

And everything else that Paul will say from here to encourage the Thessalonian church flows from this amazing reality—that they belong to *God* and that *he* provides all they need for salvation and to endure in their followership of Christ even amidst afflictions.

Look at verses 3-4:

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ 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.

Paul gives thanks to God for the spiritual growth in the Thessalonian church—for their *faith* that is *growing abundantly*, and for their *love* for one another that is *increasing*.

This is something that Paul *prayed* for earlier in 1 Thessalonians—that the Lord would make the Thessalonians “increase and abound in love for one another and for all” (1 Thess. 3:12)—and also what he *urged* them to do “more and more” (1 Thess. 4:10).

So, now that Paul has gotten word that *that’s* exactly what is happening in the Thessalonian church, he cannot help but to thank God for their spiritual growth.

In fact, Paul says that “we *ought* to give thanks to God for you, brothers, *as is right.*” He *ought*—or *must* or *should*—give thanks to God when he sees and hears of spiritual growth in the Thessalonian Christians, for that’s the *right* thing to do. That’s the only *proper* response to recognizing God at work in nurturing and maturing the Thessalonians.²

When we see spiritual growth in one another, we ought *not* to stay silent, be envious or cynical, or flatter them.³ Rather, we ought to *encourage* them by giving thanks to God for the growing faith and increasing love that we recognize God working in them.

² David W. Chapman, “2 Thessalonians,” in *Ephesians–Philemon*, ESVEC 11 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

³ David Strain, “Worthy of His Calling,” July 31, 2022, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/worthy-of-his-calling>.

Can we be a church that *encourages* one another in this way? “I thank God for you, brother or sister. I thank God for the gifts he has given you, for his grace in your life, for what I see in you of the love and gentleness of Christ. I thank God for the steadfastness and faith he has given you even amidst afflictions.”⁴

Sometime this week, I challenge you to do this. I did this with a brother in our church over lunch earlier this past week, and I realized that it was long overdue. There was so much for me to give thanks to God for in this brother’s life. My heart was overflowing with thanksgiving to God, just thinking about how God has been at work in this brother’s life over the years and how he’s been such a blessing to me, my family, and our church.

I know this might feel or even sound awkward to you, but think about what it would be like to *receive* such encouragement.

- It helps you ward off discouragement because you begin to see how God is at work in your life.
- It helps you stay humble because you know that God is the one at work in you.
- It helps you to know that you have a spiritual family that cares for you, is praying for you, and is walking alongside you in your followership of Christ.

But in order to encourage one another in these ways, we have to *intentionally look* for spiritual growth in one another.

In almost *all* of Paul’s letters, he intentionally looked for things to thank God for regarding any church. Even the *Corinthian* church, which was divided over church teachers, tolerating incest, bringing lawsuits against each other, excusing sexual immorality, abusing the Lord’s Supper, and denying the bodily resurrection of believers⁵—even a church that was *that* messed up, Paul could still write, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:4), and then begin to give thanks to God for specific ways that he saw God at work in that church.

Now, I know how difficult this can be, as this doesn’t come naturally to many of us. It’s much easier to see what is wrong and missing, and to grumble and be discouraged or angry. But if you’re looking at a true Christian or a true church, then we know that the God of peace himself is always in the process of faithfully sanctifying his child and his church completely until he returns (1 Thess. 5:23-24). And so, *pray* for eyes to see how God is at work in each other and then *encourage* one another by giving thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another—for that is what we “ought” to do and what is “right” to do as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

<pause>

What’s interesting is that Paul doesn’t just encourage the *Thessalonian* church by giving thanks to God for their spiritual growth, but he also encourages *other* churches by *boasting* about what God is doing in the Thessalonian church.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to share at a conference in Asia about what God has been doing in our church here in Jakarta as well as HMCC of Tangerang over the years. And afterwards, multiple people came up to me and different members in our church and in the church in Tangerang who were there, and said something to the effect of, “I’m so encouraged by what you shared. I had no idea that God was doing all that in Indonesia.” And then, when I came back from that conference, I shared at our Members’ Meeting about...

- the Christian publishing work in Thailand and Cambodia;

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed., BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 118.

⁵ Andy Naselli, “10 Issues the Gospel Solved in the Corinthian Church,” November 21, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/10-issues-gospel-corinthian>.

- the ministries of churches in Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Nepal, and the cooperation of churches in China;
- another ministry working to see churches planted and revitalized in the world's poorest communities;
- another ministry that is equipping local churches to care well for the workers they send out through biblical counseling

And more than the ministries and churches, I shared how I was just *encouraged* by hours of conversations with faithful like-minded brothers and sisters serving in these different countries.

And I shared all this because I wanted to *encourage* and *inspire* our church to continue to faithfully follow Christ where he's called us, knowing that we're part of a much larger family of God that is faithfully serving in Asia and all over the world.

That's also one of the reasons we regularly pray for other churches in our city and around the world in our pastoral prayer—because it's not just about what God is doing in *our* lives or in *our* church, but we long for God to be at work in *all* his churches, we give *thanks* to God for that, and we are mutually *encouraged* when we hear of God's work in these other churches.

<pause>

Now, we've been using the term "spiritual *growth*" regarding *faith* that is "growing abundantly" and *love* that is "increasing" because that's how Paul describes them in verse 3. The Greek word translated as "growing abundantly" refers to "an internal, organic growth, as of a tree."⁶

So faith and love are not *static* things that you either have or don't have, but they are living, dynamic, and growing things, like a tree, that need to be watered, tended, and cultivated.

And how do we *cultivate* our faith and love? We do so through the ordinary means of grace, like regularly gathering with your church to worship God and daily reading of God's Word and prayer.

But that's not all. Notice the *context* in which the Thessalonian Christians *grew* in faith and *increased* in love in verse 4. It was in the context of "all [their] persecutions and in the afflictions that [they were] enduring."

<pause>

In the 1990s, a huge glass biodome was created in Arizona to house an artificial, controlled environment with purified air and water, healthy soil and filtered light, which they intended to be the perfect growing conditions for trees, fruits and vegetables, and humans who were living there.

But what ended up happening is that, once the trees grew to a certain height, they started to topple over. This baffled scientists initially until they soon discovered that they didn't include the natural element of *wind* in the biodome.

It turns out that trees *need* wind to blow against them because it causes their root systems to grow deeper, which supports the trees as they grow taller. But with the absence of wind, these trees had shallow roots, and so they started falling over when they got too tall; their roots were not deep enough to support them.⁷

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 98.

⁷ Dennis Merritt Jones, "Strong Winds Strong Roots: What Trees Teach Us About Life," March 31, 2015,

<https://www.naturalawakenings.com/2015/03/31/274262/strong-winds-strong-roots-what-trees-teach-us-about-life>; see also "Biosphere 2," Wikipedia, last modified June 23, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biosphere_2.

Similarly, in order for our spiritual “roots” to grow deep, we need a kind of “wind” to blow against us (so to speak).

Now, this is a *general* principle. Trees need *wind* to grow, muscles need *resistance* to grow, and Christians need *afflictions* to grow.

But we should note that, in *context*, the afflictions that Paul is referring to here are *not* general kind, but he’s referring *specifically* to afflictions *for the sake of Christ*—that is, suffering for being a *Christian*.

That was the context of the Thessalonian church; they were persecuted by unbelievers in their city within just a few weeks of identifying with Christ and starting a church—and so Paul is *encouraging* them to endure in their followership of Christ even amidst those *specific* persecutions and afflictions.

Now, look at verse 5:

⁵ 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—

There are a few key terms here that we need to understand to grasp what Paul is saying here.

First, what does the word “this” refer to here? It’s referring to *everything* in verses 3-4—the Thessalonians’ *growing* faith, *increasing* love, and *unwavering* steadfastness in all their persecutions and afflictions that they were enduring *for the sake of Christ*.

Second, what does “the righteous judgment of God” mean? It’s referring to God as Judge issuing a *judgment*—or *verdict*—on the Thessalonian Christians to be “righteous” or “just” in his sight.⁸

So, putting it all together, verse 5 says that the spiritual growth that the Thessalonian Christians are exhibiting amidst suffering for Christ is *evidence* that they *really* are declared righteous in God’s sight, that they *really* are citizens *worthy* of God’s kingdom, that they *really* are Christians.

We should note that it’s *not* suffering for Christ *in and of itself* that reveals we’re Christians, but it’s *how* we *respond* to that suffering that *shows* or *proves* or *evidences* that we are truly Christ’s disciples.

If we respond to suffering for Christ by *abandoning* our faith in Christ, then we should have *little* assurance that we were ever truly Christians, for God’s Word says that “if they had been *of* us, they would have *continued* with us” (1 John 2:19).

If we respond to suffering for Christ by *hating* our enemies, then we should also have *little* assurance that we are truly Christians, for Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

But when Christians dig their roots deeper into Christ and his gospel even amidst persecutions and afflictions, and they produce the spiritual fruit of growing faith and increasing love, it is a *witness* to the church and the world, and an *assurance* to us that we truly are Christ’s disciples.

And so, Paul is *encouraging* the Thessalonians with this reality.

⁸ James H. Grant Jr., *1–2 Thessalonians*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

This may sound like a strange encouragement, but throughout the New Testament, we see that Christians rightly understood that suffering for Christ was *expected* and *inevitable* (John 15:20; Luke 9:23; 1 Thess. 3:3; Phil. 1:29; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet. 4:12-13). And they could even *rejoice* in it because they knew that if they followed Jesus in *suffering*, they would also follow him in *glory*. That's why the early Christians who were beaten by the religious authorities for their faith in Christ left "*rejoicing* that they were counted *worthy* to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:41).

How in the world can someone respond like that to suffering for Christ? Simply put, because they're *Christians*. Their *response* to suffering for Christ *reveals* (or *evidences*) that they truly are followers of Christ.

<pause>

Now, perhaps you're wondering to yourself, "What about us who may *not* be suffering for Christ right now?"

We should not go *looking* to suffer for Christ. That would be rather foolish, and we see no example of that in Scripture.

Rather, we should begin to ask ourselves, "Am I living in such a way where people in my life *know* that I follow Jesus? Or is the way I'm living *indistinguishable* from the rest of the world?" We should take seriously what Jesus said in...

John 15:19 = If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

If we truly live according to God's Word, and allow God's Word to shape our thoughts, words, actions, and priorities, then, at the very least, it will raise eyebrows, and perhaps bring questions and ridicule.

<pause>

Have you ever been in a situation where people are talking about something or doing something that you *know* is not right according to God's Word—and your heart is thumping and your mind is racing, and you feel like you need to say something?

But then you choose to stay silent. In that moment, you'd rather not let people know what you believe (even though they're all sharing openly what *they* believe and are acting accordingly). In that moment, you'd rather *blend in* rather than *stand out* as a disciple of Christ because you *fear* what people might say or do, if they *really* knew what you believed.

In essence, you were presented an *opportunity* to potentially suffer for Christ, but you chose to remain *hidden* and escape any possibility of suffering for Christ.

Personally, I know what that feels like. I've had some miserable "fails" in times like that.

But every time we allow those moments to pass...

- we diminish our witness for Christ in a world that desperately needs him,
- we lose opportunities to suffer for Christ that are meant to grow our faith, increase our love, and strengthen our steadfastness,
- we miss out on the supernatural joy available to us as we treasure how we belong to Christ more than this world,
- and we deprive ourselves of greater assurance and encouragement in our followership of Christ.

We need to ask ourselves: Am I *hiding* the fact that I am a follower of Christ? Am I *embarrassed* by anything that God's Word says? Am I *ashamed* of the gospel as the *only* means of salvation?

And as the family of God, let's remember that we have brothers and sisters around the world who are *not* hiding the fact they are followers of Christ, who are *not* embarrassed by what God's Word says, and who are *not ashamed of the gospel as the only means of salvation—and they are suffering immensely* for Christ right now. They are being ostracized, ridiculed, beaten, arrested, tortured, and killed by their governments, neighbors, and even their families.

And that's one of the reasons that we regularly pray for the *persecuted* church in various places around the world each week. We pray for *their* spiritual growth and encouragement, and we pray that we would *also* be prepared to suffer for Christ—that we might be mutually encouraged by one another's growing faith, increasing love, and unwavering steadfastness amidst such persecutions and afflictions.

<pause>

So how do we encourage one another to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions?

First, give thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another; and second...

II. Paul's joy in the Thessalonians' faith (3:6-13)

Look at verses 6-10:

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Here, we see that, when the Lord Jesus returns, he will come with his army of angels to make all things right—those who have afflicted the Thessalonian church will be justly afflicted, and the Thessalonian church will finally experience relief from their afflictions.

In the immediate context, “those who do not know God” and “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” are the *persecutors* of the Thessalonian church. And one thing this tells us is that the Thessalonians have been faithful in making the gospel *known* to their persecutors—and yet, they have refused to “obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus”—that is, they have refused to *believe* in that gospel and *submit* to the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives (Rom. 10:16; John 6:29; cf. 1 Pet. 3:1; 4:17; Rom. 2:8; Gal. 5:7).⁹

And so, they—along with *all* who have not believed in the gospel—will suffer just punishment for their sins in hell for all eternity; while those who have believed in the testimony of the gospel—as the Thessalonian

⁹ David W. Chapman (“2 Thessalonians,” in *Ephesians–Philemon*, ESVEC 11 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018]) writes: “The good news of Christ requires submission to its message, for submission is the proper response once one believes in the truth of the message (note how Paul connects all of these themes in Rom. 10:16). Eternal punishment awaits those who refuse to follow the good proclamation of the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord.”

Christians had—will *glorify* and *marvel* at their Lord and Savior whom they have trusted and loved and longed for all throughout their suffering for his sake.

<pause>

From these verses, we can note *four* things about hell.

First, hell is *deprivation*. Being away from the presence of the Lord speaks of a *negative* relationship with God, where hell is the deprivation—or the *lack* or *absence*—of all the kind blessings that we experience from God that make life bearable and worthwhile.

Edward Donnelly, author of *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell*, writes this:

For no-one lives without God. No-one ever has or ever will. He gives you every breath you take. His kindness surrounds and sustains every moment of your existence. He makes his sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on the unjust as well as on the just (Matt. 5:45). He gives you the beauty of a summer evening, the coolness of a refreshing breeze, the splendour of mountain scenery. He delights you with the taste of fresh crusty bread or the juice of a ripe peach.

Perhaps you have experienced the ecstasy of love. Your heart has melted in affection towards husband or wife, parents or children. Doubtless you have warmed yourself often at the glow of true friendship. These are God's gifts. You may appreciate art, literature or music. You may enjoy the exhilaration of sport and bodily exercise. You probably have ambitions in life, you may be fortunate enough to have work which challenges and satisfied you, projects or hobbies which you find stimulating. You laugh and feel happy. You lie down in bed at night and are restored by sleep. All of these are blessings from God. You are indebted to him for everything that makes life bearable and worthwhile.

But in hell all of this will be taken from you. Everyone you love, everything you value will be removed from your experience. No sun will shine. No flower will bloom. There will be no laughter, no excitement, no fulfillment of any kind. These things are from God and to be separated from him is to be separated from all his gifts. You take them for granted now; you never thank the Giver and you have no idea of the extent of your indebtedness to him. But, when they are taken away, what poverty!¹⁰

When verse 9 says that hell is “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,” this speaks of *deprivation*; it is the absence of God's *grace*. It is not the *absolute* absence of God, but he is present in *wrath* (Rev. 14:10).

Second, hell is *painful*. It is not merely *deprivation* of God's blessings, but it is *presence* of God's wrath. Here, hell is described as “destruction” (cf. 2 Pet. 3:7; 1 Thess. 5:3), but in other parts of Scripture, hell is described as a place of fire and darkness (Jude 7, 13), of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), and of torment (Rev. 20:10; Luke 16:23).

If you know the pain of even the *smallest* burn—the blister that throbs when you touch a hot stove, the few drops of boiling water that make you cry out—what must be the excruciating agony of the fires of hell that will burn but never consume the resurrected bodies of the condemned?¹¹

¹⁰ Edward Donnelly, *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 35-36.

¹¹ Edward Donnelly, *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 37. J. I. Packer (*Concise Theology* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1993], 262) helpfully notes: “If, as it seems, these terms are symbolic rather than literal (fire and darkness would be mutually exclusive in literal terms), we may be sure that the reality, which is beyond our imagining, exceeds the symbol in dreadfulfulness. New Testament teaching about hell is meant to appall us and strike us dumb with horror, assuring us that, as heaven will be better than we could dream, so hell will be worse than we can conceive. Such are the issues of eternity, which need now to be realistically faced.”

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Third, hell is *eternal*. Here, when it describes hell as “destruction,” this does not mean that those in hell will be annihilated or cease to exist at some point, nor is hell some temporary purgatory where sinners are purged of their sins before going to heaven. No, it is “*eternal* destruction,” or in other places in Scripture, it is “*eternal* fire... *eternal* punishment,” in contrast to “*eternal* life” (Matt. 25:41, 46). Just as the *joys* of heaven are eternal, the *pains* of heaven are also eternal.

And finally, Fourth, hell is *just*. In verse 6, “God considers it *just*.” Hell is described as “repayment” in verse 6, “vengeance” in verse 8, and “punishment” in verse 9. These are all terms for *justice*. We *deserve* hell as the consequence for our sins against God and his people, that he so closely identifies with (cf. Acts 9:4, body of Christ, bride of Christ, other union with Christ language).

It is *justice* carried out by the perfectly holy and righteous God, who knows the depths of our hearts. And Scripture tells us that there will be *degrees* of punishment in hell, where God will deal with sins committed in ignorance *less* severely than with acts of conscious disobedience (Luke 12:47-48), and he will deal *more* severely with those who have been exposed to the Scriptures and the gospel message of salvation and yet have never personally embraced it themselves (Mark 12:38-40).

We should remember that the key factor in any offense is: *Who* is the one being offended? If I cut down a tree, step on an ant, or kill a mosquito, there will probably be no outcry of injustice. But what if I intentionally kill someone’s dog or cat? What if I destroy another human being made in God’s image? These are injustices that are felt in the most gut-wrenching of ways. We know in our heart of hearts that these are objectively wrong and deserve retributive justice.

Now, what if I hate, reject, and try to destroy the Creator himself? If the offense is against the *infinite*, holy, and good God, then punishment for such sin can never be satisfied, which is why hell is *eternal*. That is, *unless* One who is of *infinite* worth fully absorbed the weight of our sin, which is, of course, the gospel.

We should also remember that nobody is ever condemned to hell *because* they did not believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us stands condemned before God because of our *sins* against him. I think we wrongly assume that our default destiny after we die is *heaven*. No, *hell* is the default destiny that all sinners deserve—not heaven. God is perfectly just to condemn us to hell. But the surprisingly good news is that there is *any* way to heaven at all for sinners like us—that hell is avoidable, if we would only repent of our sins and trust in Christ as our Lord and Savior.¹²

<pause>

So, how was the doctrine of hell an *encouragement* to the Thessalonian Christians?

We have to remember that the afflictions that the Thessalonians were undergoing were not *generic* sufferings, but they had been experiencing continual persecutions and afflictions for their faith in Christ, and there was

¹² For a brief, helpful resource to learn more about the doctrine of hell, see Dane Ortlund, *Is Hell Real?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

no sign that things were going to change. They were experiencing *grave injustice* simply for being followers of Christ.

Just imagine that you lived with loved ones being beaten, imprisoned, tortured, and killed for simply professing faith in Christ—and you never knew if you or one of your other loved ones might be next. Would you not cry out for justice? And let's say these persecutors were brought to court, and the judge just said, "Oh, everyone makes mistakes. It's not a big deal. All charges are dropped." How maddening would that be!

And yet, that's perhaps what some of us would expect of *God* as Judge. But if we would expect a human judge to be just and cry out against him if he just overlooked sin, how much more should we *expect* and *rejoice* in the divine Judge who is perfectly just and who cannot simply overlook sin?

If God simply overlooked sin, he would be *unjust*, and he would not be a God worth following.¹³

If you *still* can't possibly see how hell could be *encouraging* to the persecuted Thessalonian Christians, then perhaps you speak from the position of *comfort* and don't know what it's *really* like to personally experience this kind of *injustice*.

When you know *grave injustice*, sometimes your *only* consolation is to know that there will one day be *justice*. It may not be in this lifetime, but one day, God will carry out perfect justice in the Lord's return.

For the Christian, the doctrine of hell is meant to be an *encouragement* to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions, and we do one another a *disservice* to downplay it.

Not only does it give us the consolation to know that God will one day right every wrong, but when we think of the *horrors* of hell, we cannot help but to think that no matter how bad our persecutions and afflictions may be in this life, they do not compare to the hell *I* deserve and that, through faith in Christ, I have somehow escaped.

It also encourages us as we begin to recognize how deep the *love* of Christ is for us that he would endure hellish suffering for me on the cross. I cannot even begin to grasp the depths of his agony on Calvary for me, as he let out his painful cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Yet, because *Jesus* suffered in my place for my sins, I will *never* know such infinite *torment*, such *deprivation* and *forsakenness*, but I—with all the saints—will forever know God as "our Father" (2 Thess. 1:1).

And even more, if the excruciating agony of hell is *avoidable*, this should *encourage* us in our love for *others* and our zeal for *evangelism*.

Remember *who* is writing this. This was *Paul*—also formerly known as *Saul* the *persecutor* of God's church (Acts 8:1-3; cf. 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13). He was just like the persecutors of the Thessalonian church, *yet* through the grace of the Lord, he believed in the gospel, and he was saved from the hell he justly deserved.

<pause>

I know this was a lot to take in, and it's not easy for me to preach, but this is the serious, undeniable reality that Scripture teaches—hell is *deprivation*, it's *painful*, it's *eternal*, it's *just*, but it's also *avoidable* through faith in the gospel.

¹³ Miroslav Volf (quoted in Michael J. Kruger, *Surviving Religion 101* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021], 99) said, "If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship."

So if you're here today and are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, *this* is the gospel that we want to share with you.

God created you. He loves you. But we all turn away from him. We sin against him. And we all deserve to be punished in hell for that. But instead of *us* receiving that punishment, God came in the person of Jesus Christ to be our substitute—to live the perfect life we could not, to die on the cross to bear the hell we deserved, and to resurrect three days later.

So now, if you repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can be forgiven. And so, when our Lord Jesus one day returns, you will *not* be condemned to eternal punishment in hell, but you will forever enjoy eternal life in heaven, where there will be no more tears or pain or suffering anymore.

I pray that you would believe in that gospel and submit to Jesus alone as your Savior and Lord today, and that you too would have this great salvation and encouragement that we have in him.

<pause>

So how do we encourage one another to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions?

First, give thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another; second; assure one another of God's perfect justice in the Lord's return; and third...

III. Pray for one another to glorify God throughout our lives (11-12)

Look at verses 11-12:

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

So "to this end," or "in light of all we just talked about in terms of what will take place when the Lord returns... we always pray for you."

And Paul prays for two things—that our God may (1) make your worthy of his calling and (2) may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.

For God to "make [them] worthy of his calling" simply means that God would sanctify them—that he would make them more like Christ; that he would grow their faith, increase their love, and deepen their steadfastness. The spiritual growth that Paul previously gave thanks to God for is what he continues to *always* pray that God would do in them.

But notice what Paul does *not* pray for them. Remember, the Thessalonian church was enduring persecution and afflictions because of their faith in Christ, so you would think that Paul's prayer for them would be for God to *take away* their suffering—to *remove* their afflictions.

But that's *not* what he prays at all.

Rather, Paul prays that God would make the Thessalonian Christians *worthy* of his calling—that he would continue to *sanctify* them more and more until the day he returns.

And then, the second thing Paul prays for is that God “may fulfill [their] every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.”

He’s praying that their *resolve* (or desires, NIV) would be for good and that their *faith* would compel them to do good works, and that God would *empower* them to follow through on those good desires and to be successful in those good works.

Paul is basically turning what the psalmist said into his own prayer for the Thessalonian church.

Psalm 37:4 = Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Paul is praying that the Thessalonians would so *delight* in the Lord, would so desire to *please* him, that God would be pleased to *give* them—or *fulfill*—the desires of their heart (cf. Ps. 90:17).

[¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.]

But there’s a specific *purpose* for Paul praying this for them. Look at verse 12—“so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him.”

Paul’s desire for the Thessalonians’ sanctification and good desires and good works was not ultimately about them or him, but it’s ultimately about Christ—that *his* name may be glorified in his people, that others may see their good works and give glory to *God* (Matt. 5:16).

Now, an important question to ask ourselves is this: If God were to fulfill your *every* resolve (or desire) and to make successful your *every* work, would it really bring glory to *God*?

We often pray that God would give us the desires of our heart and to establish the work of our hands, but sometimes, if we’re honest with ourselves, our desires and works are coming from an *idolatrous* heart. God becomes more like a *means* to an end—to serve the idols in our hearts—when we should be asking him to use *us* to be a means of serving *him* and glorifying *him*.

<pause>

But there’s more! It’s not just “so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be *glorified in you*,” but also “*you in him*.”

The reality is that mankind *is* glorious; we are uniquely made in the image of God and have been given unique prominence among all God’s creation (Gen. 1-2). But just like Adam and Eve forgot the source of their glory being God himself, we also forget that our glory is found in God alone and that there is no glory to be found or had *apart* from God. Just as there is no *good* apart from God, there is no *glory* apart from him.

Our glory is *not* found in our good desires, good works, good name, good health, good family, good family, good legacy, or anything else that is *from* us at all. Rather, our glory is only found in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And one day, we finally behold the glory of God not by *faith* but in the *face* of Jesus Christ, and we *ourselves* will be transformed completely into his image—even as we are now being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, as we continue to wait for the Lord’s return.

<pause>

So what about us? How can we *apply* this to encourage one another to endure our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions?

The most obvious way is to *pray* for one another and let them *know* that you're praying for them. When you're going through afflictions, it's already hard enough; but what often compounds the pain is when you feel like you're going through it alone. But just to know that someone else *knows* and *cares* and is *praying* for you—that can mean the world to you in that moment of suffering.

Another way to encourage one another is to pray for their *sanctification* amidst suffering—not simply for the *removal* of their suffering (though we long for that as well). It's discouraging to *know* the godly ways we should respond, but not be *able* to respond in those godly ways. And especially when you're going through unjust suffering, it is impossible to respond in Christlikeness without reliance on Christ. But what is impossible with man is possible with God (Luke 18:27). In order for us to respond with “every resolve for good and every work of faith,” rather than repaying evil for evil (cf. 1 Thess. 5:15), we need *others* to pray for us—and *we* need to learn to pray for *ourselves*—that God would sanctify us “by his power.”

A third way to encourage one another through our prayers is to point them toward their own *glorification* in Christ. Just as God's perfect *justice* will one day be carried out when he returns, so we will also be perfectly *glorified* in Christ when he returns. What a glorious day it will be! And so, through our prayers, especially amidst afflictions, we want to encourage one another to continue to fix our eyes on *that* day and to bring *that* future hope of glorification into our present situations.

Conclusion

As we close, I want us to notice that *last* part at the end of verse 12: “according to the *grace* of *our* God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This brings us back to where we began in verse 2: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Our salvation is not earned in any part, but it is the free gift of God from start to finish. The entire Christian life—from *justification* (being *considered* worthy of the kingdom of God), to *sanctification* (being *made* worthy of his calling), to *glorification* (being *glorified* in Christ)—it is *all* by the *grace* of *our* God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the encouragements of giving thanks to God for spiritual growth in one another, assuring one another of God's perfect justice in the Lord's return, and praying for one another to glorify God throughout our lives... all of them flow from *this* central reality—that we belong to *God* and that *he* provides all we need for salvation and to endure in our followership of Christ even amidst afflictions.

The One Thing

***Let's encourage one another to endure in our followership of Christ
even amidst afflictions.***

Let's pray.