

Landing in the Mud and the Second Coming

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So I kind of feel like I should begin this morning with something of an apology. Of an apology. We're back to the lectionary readings. Our 1 Peter series has ended.

And what does the lectionary give us for our epistle this week? Well, it gives us a passage that talks about suffering. Sorry. I felt the Lord leading me to preach about this.

And I'm starting to feel like we're having a topical sermon series that has been unplanned, at least on our end. Now, if it's any consolation, the passage doesn't just talk about suffering.

It also talks about other cheery topics like God's righteous wrath and the coming judgment. Now, these cheery topics are the sorts of issues that some preachers who pack stadiums would like to avoid at all costs.

[1:31] The Bible gives us a steady diet of these topics. So it's not as though we can overlook them, can we? Now, as we think for a second about the suffering of believers, think about the suffering, the affliction, the persecution of God's people, we have to realize that what the world sees in those circumstances, looking at the surface, not seeing from the perspective of eternity, isn't what it looks like when we look at it from an eternal perspective.

Now, that doesn't always keep us from being frustrated when we face hardship, though, does it? So there's this story about the famous Spanish Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila.

One day she's traveling, she's riding along on the back of a donkey. Now, in this really unfortunate turn of events, she finds herself thrown from the donkey and she lands with her face in the mud.

And it's reported that as she's laying there in the mud, she looks up to heaven and she says to God, if this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them.

Have you ever found yourself face first in the mud, wondering why God allowed that to happen to you? Especially when you look around and you see other people who are still sitting happy on their donkeys.

[3:03] What gives with that? When we look at our trials, we look at our afflictions in light of eternity, the picture starts to look a little different. Now, I'm not going to lie, face planting in the mud still stinks.

There's no getting around that. But it takes on a different significance. We see that reflected in our passage from 2 Thessalonians this morning. In light of the coming of Christ, which we see in our passage, the suffering of God's saints, along with the arrogant boldness of those who would persecute or ridicule or afflict God's people, that all starts to look different, doesn't it?

Paul is telling us this morning that we can suffer affliction, we can suffer persecution, we can suffer ridicule, and still be blessed. He's telling us that those who afflict us, those who appear to prosper at our expense, those who arrogantly scoff at God and scoff at His servants and appear to get away with it, He's telling us that judgment is coming for those who refuse to repent of those things.

He's telling us that in all things, God will be glorified. Now, as in much of the New Testament, Paul's words are being written to a persecuted church, a church that knew suffering, affliction, hardship, and persecution.

This isn't just theoretical stuff to them. Paul's addressing them where the rubber meets the road. And it's not theoretical in our world either.

[4:46] Our fellow Christians around the world continue to face persecution that is unprecedented in modern times. There are brothers and sisters in the Lord, and we need to feel their pain.

We need to sympathize with them. Even if we aren't bearing persecution personally, we hurt with them. And we, of course, have afflictions of our own.

So let's hear what St. Paul has to say. Because we need to hear it too, don't we? Starting in verse 3. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers.

This is right. Because your faith is growing abundantly. And the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Now, why are Paul and his companions giving thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers?

Well, their faith is growing. Their love for each other is increasing. Now, those reasons for thanksgiving might be what Paul would expect to find in the church.

[5:49] Because that's generally how Christian life goes if we're really rooted in Christ, right? We grow in faith. We grow in love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we're sanctified by God's power.

But as we'll see as we go on, there is something extraordinary about their situation. And that's this. They are facing affliction and persecution.

And they're still growing in faith and love. Faced with adversity, they're not only not backing down, they're moving forward by the grace of God.

We see that in verse 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 is telling them, hey, we boast about you guys. Perhaps you're standing firm. You're keeping the faith, even though you're facing trials and afflictions.

[6:51] We might have to ask for a second, what is it exactly that Paul is really boasting about? Is he saying to the churches, man, these Thessalonians are absolutely awesome.

They know how to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. I'm thinking that's probably not what he's really boasting in. Isn't it Paul, after all, who refused to boast in anything other than the cross of Jesus Christ?

So what's he boasting about here when we get down to it? Especially when we consider that he goes on in 2 Thessalonians to give the Thessalonian Christians some gentle correction.

I think we'd have to say that he is boasting, ultimately, about God's faithfulness to the Thessalonian Christians.

God's power to preserve and uphold them. God's power and God's grace working in and through them. He is boasting because God is upholding them.

[7:53] The Spirit is at work in them, even though they are afflicted. And that should be an encouragement to us when we're faced with afflictions, with trials, with suffering.

If God could do that in them, why couldn't he do that in us too? Brothers and sisters, we have the assurance that if we are believers, God is determined that we will glorify him in our lives, regardless of what comes.

So we don't have to be afraid or discouraged. Because God is steadfast, he can keep us steadfast. Because God is faithful, he can keep us faithful.

No obstacle is too big for him, is it? Paul goes on, verse 5. God is glorified in their steadfastness, their firmness in the faith.

They are demonstrating through their perseverance by grace, through their suffering, demonstrating God's righteous judgment. Even if they're suffering for doing good, suffering for their faithfulness to the truth, as they are bearing witness to the incredible truth that God will indeed have the final word.

[9:21] God's justice and God's mercy will have the final word. Bearing witness to the reality that the kingdom really does belong to those who suffer for righteousness' sake.

Even if they have to go through that suffering to get there. They will have to go through that suffering. Let's face it, this is a sinful, fallen world that we live in.

Jesus told us that the world hated him and will hate his disciples. If that weren't enough, there are deeper spiritual forces at work. The devil is real, the devil is active, the devil wages warfare, and he does not fight fair.

We are in a spiritual battle, brothers and sisters. Don't be surprised when you're wounded, when you have cause to be discouraged, when the way ahead is difficult.

That is what life in a war zone is like. But that is not all there is to the story. Because the righteous judgment, the justice of God is real.

[10:33] God is our defense, as we see in verse 6. Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you. If we suffer for righteousness' sake, we can be absolutely certain that God will vindicate us.

Those who would persecute or scorn us for our faith, those who would seek to turn us from the path of following Christ, they will not be able to do that, to behave that way, forever.

One way or another, they will bow the knee to Jesus. Hopefully they will be brought to repentance. That's what we pray for those who would persecute believers.

But if not, God will repay them with affliction for the affliction that they have caused. We think of the example of the world today.

The terrorists who are persecuting our brothers and sisters in places like Nigeria, and places like Syria, and doing it in the name of their false God, and thinking that they can boast about it, guess what?

[11:44] They too, one way or another, will bow the knee to Jesus. Even the devil, who wages war against us, who deceives many, who rages against the servants of God, he too will be repaid for what he has done.

Now the battle might rage on for a time, that the war is already won, because Jesus is risen and ascended, and he is reigning seated at the right hand of the Father, until his enemies are made a footstool.

And brothers and sisters, the amazing thing is that he is on our side. Jesus is coming again, and will be both a day of salvation, and a day of reckoning.

God will, as we see in verses 7 and 8, 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 Christ. He is coming, brothers and sisters. He is coming to save those who have been washed in his blood, to save us from every enemy, from every evil, coming to put an end to sin, death, and the devil forever, coming to deliver those who put their trust in him.

[13:16] At the same time, make no mistake, and there is no way to sugarcoat this, he is coming in righteous wrath, in flaming fire, to inflict vengeance, on those who have refused to repent, and believe the gospel.

As verse 9 tells us, they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his might. Or as Revelation 19 puts it, he will tread the winepress of the fury, of the wrath of Almighty God.

But on that day, as we've seen already, he is not only coming in wrath, he's coming in mercy, and coming gloriously, coming for us, for all who believe the gospel, for all who put their trust in him, all who have been washed in his precious blood, all who have received the forgiveness of sin in his name.

Verse 10, 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.

If you're a believer, he is coming for you, not in judgment, but to be glorified in you, perfectly glorified in you, forever.

[14:41] You will look on him, on that day, you will see him as he is, not through a glass darkly anymore, but face to face. You will see the one who suffered for you, the one who died for you, who rose again for you, and whoever lives to make intercession for you.

You will see your Savior. You will see your soul's first love, and you will marvel. Free from sin, because of what Christ has done for you, you will be able to look on God, and live, finally.

And you'll live in his presence, forever. What will that be like? I don't think that we can wrap our minds around it, but I think that Revelation 22, gives us the clearest image that we can understand, where we read, his servants will worship him, they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads, and night will be no more, they will need no light, a lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign, forever and ever.

And I wonder, when we look back from there, what the sufferings, the afflictions, the losses of this life will look like, what will they look like then?

What do you think? We'll see then, by sight, not just by faith, as we do now, that this light, momentary affliction, really was preparing us, for an eternal weight of glory, beyond all compare.

[16:20] We'll look back on the pain, on the losses, on the consequences, of the stupid mistakes that we made, the things that men meant for evil, the things that the devil intended for our destruction.

We'll look back on all of it, and we'll see that the Lord somehow worked through it all, through the hard things, through the painful things, through the heartbreaking things, to lead us home, to lead us to that place, where there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain.

Jesus, is coming again, that changes everything, changes even the difficult, and the heartbreaking things in our lives.

But we have to ask, are we ready when he comes, for when he comes, are we trusting in him, trusting in his blood shed for us, trusting in his perfect righteousness, standing firm in faith in him, so that when he comes, we meet him as merciful savior, instead of meeting him as righteous judge?

Are we trusting God, to finish what he has started in us? And are we pursuing intimacy with him, pursuing a relationship with him, growing in holiness, preparing to spend eternity with him, for what we were created for?

[17 : 45] My prayer for each of us this morning, much like Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians, is that we are. Like Paul's prayer, that God would bring his work in them to completion, that they would glorify him in their lives, and that they would be prepared to meet him, when he comes.

So we read in verses 11 and 12, 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. 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. May the name of our Lord Jesus, be glorified in us indeed. Amen.