

The Revelation of Christ

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[0 : 00] We'll keep open that passage from 2 Thessalonians chapter 1.

We're beginning tonight a sermon series on this letter over tonight and the next two Sundays. And in recent weeks in the morning, I've preached through the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. And let's pray now that God will speak to us through his word as we come to it together.

Heavenly Father, your word is truth and light. And we pray tonight that you will shine the light of the truth of your word in our hearts, that we may not only believe it, but follow it, so that we may be ready for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes in glory.

Amen. The teenager was converted through Christian friends at school, but the family was not Christian. And didn't allow the child or teenager to go to church, to go to youth group, to even be part of the Christian group at school.

And for that Christian teenager, newly converted, facing such opposition from home, as well as some ridicule from some people at school, it's tempting to think, well, here am I who've turned my life to God.

[1 : 24] Why isn't God doing something here? Why isn't God helping me? Why isn't God converting people around me? Life actually seems a bit unfair. Or for the young Christian adult who's shunned by his or her friends when they refuse, because of their Christian stance, to engage in some of the activities, the jokes, the speech, et cetera, that their non-Christian friends are part of.

Or think of the Muslim convert in our own country, shunned by others, by people with whom he works, shunned by people from that ethnic background with whom he's had association in our own country, all because he's become a new Christian.

It could even be worse, with phone calls that just leave the phone dead, some sort of threatening mail or calls, threatening people driving past or vandalising the house.

Why doesn't God do something? Life seems so unfair and so difficult when I've become a Christian. Or the Christian man who loses his job because he's not prepared to do the things that his bosses ask for, that seem to be a little bit shonky or dodgy, a little bit perhaps corrupt or evasive, or perhaps actually exploiting somebody else.

Or think of the Christian pastor in our own country who has been physically attacked because of preaching the gospel to people from Islamic backgrounds. Or the Christian mother who's ridiculed, perhaps, by her husband, rather, or by family members or friends because of her Christian stance won't have an abortion, for example.

[3 : 10] Of course, think outside our country and the situations are even more numerous and more severe where Christians are imprisoned and impoverished in so many, many countries in our world simply because they are Christian.

Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't he answer the prayers of his people? Why doesn't God make things fairer and make things easier for his people, those who've turned to him? And why is it in this world that the ungodly so often seem to get away with it as well? That the people who are honest in the workplace may be rarely promoted, but the people who are prepared to do the shonky deals seem to live in the nicer houses, drive the faster cars, have the nicer holidays, get the better jobs.

Why is it that those who persecute Christians seem so often to get away with it, unpunished? Why is it that those who afflict Christians seem somehow to be the winners in life?

Since the early days of the Bible, the people of God have cried out to God for justice. How long, O Lord, is the repeated refrain of the writer of the Psalms?

[4 : 29] How long, O Lord, is the cry of the martyrs in the last book of the Bible as well? The church in Thessalonica to whom Paul is writing this second letter is still a new and fledgling church.

This letter is written just weeks or maybe months after the first letter, and the first letter was only written weeks or maybe months after Paul had evangelised Thessalonica, and he was only there for a short time, again, maybe weeks or a couple of months at the most.

So we're looking at writing to a church no more than a year after they were evangelised and probably much less. Paul has been anxious about this church because he was forced out of Thessalonica.

You can read about that in Acts 16 in the New Testament. He'd been forced out of there by the opponents of the Christian gospel, and he was anxious for the Thessalonians who lived there, belonged there, and stayed there because they were facing the same opposition that had forced him out.

How would they stand? Would they survive as Christians in that place? So Paul had sent Timothy back from Athens to find out. Timothy had come back to Paul. By now, Paul's in Corinth, and had reported to him with joy that the Thessalonians were keeping on going in the Christian faith.

[5 : 42] And so Paul penned properly quickly one Thessalonians, and now maybe he's heard some more news. Maybe he's heard some concerns, as we'll see in the next couple of weeks. But soon after that, he writes this second letter to the Thessalonians.

We're dealing with 50 AD, maybe 51 AD, so early in the New Testament times, one of the earliest letters in the New Testament. And it's clear, both from 1 Thessalonians and this letter, that the Thessalonian Christians are suffering opposition and persecution.

Don't think they're being fed to the lions. That's later in the Roman Empire. This is probably persecution and opposition from their neighbours. It would be economic persecution and opposition. You go to buy your meat at the local butcher.

I'm not selling meat to you. You're a Christian. Or you go to get your groceries at some shop. I'm not selling stuff to you. Or if it is, it might be a slightly higher price.

That's the sort of persecution that would be local. It's probably ridicule as you walk down the street and shunning someone's business if they're a Christian. You're a Christian tent maker?

[6 : 45] I'll go and buy my tent over here. You're a Christian butcher? I'll get my meat over here.

Thessalonica was a relatively large city then. It's clear that the Thessalonians are suffering such opposition and persecution.

And yet Paul begins, as almost always he does, with thanks as he writes this letter to them. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, he expresses his thanks to God for the faith, love and hope, the three great Christian virtues or graces that are evident, he's discovered, in the lives of the Thessalonians.

He expressed that in chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians, their work of faith, labour of love and their steadfastness of hope. But in that letter he urged them, as new Christians and a new church, to express faith, love and hope and holiness and other Christian characteristics more and more. That expression occurs at least twice in 1 Thessalonians. More and more. So now see what he says in verse 3 of chapter 1 of 2 Thessalonians.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.

[8 : 06] That is, he's giving thanks because exactly what he urged and prayed for in 1 Thessalonians is in fact now happening. He wanted their faith and love to be more and more and so now he's giving thanks because it is.

More and more. It's growing and it's increasing. Notice that he's not praising the Thessalonians. He's not saying, well done you guys, because your faith's growing and your love is growing. He's thanking God, but he's telling them that he's thanking God. So he's not praising them or flattering them. He's thanking God, but he's encouraging them by telling them that he's thanking God for these virtues in their life.

It's a great way of Christian encouragement that's a good balance. It doesn't fall into the flattery, well done, you're doing a great job. But on the other hand, it doesn't go the other way that sort of ignores the encouragement.

It's a Godward encouragement for the Thessalonians' benefit. Well, what about hope there? Only mentions faith and love in verse 3. But though the word doesn't occur, verse 4 demonstrates the hope that is evident in the Thessalonian lives.

[9 : 14] Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. Steadfastness of

hope is what Paul commended in 1 Thessalonians.

Here their steadfastness is evident in the midst of the persecutions and afflictions that they are enduring. That is, they're not giving up on their faith, they are enduring them with steadfastness, that is an expression, evidence of Christian hope.

And so Paul gives thanks to God for that as well. You see, not every Christian survives persecution. Not every Christian survives opposition. Not every Christian survives affliction.

There are many who profess Christian faith, but under pressure from family, friends, schoolmates, colleagues, work pressures, actually give up and dry up in the Christian faith.

Some are worn down by opposition. Some feel the acute absence of God. Some feel their prayers are unanswered. Some end up embittered and soul destroyed.

[10:29] Something that God doesn't care. Something that God's not fair. Something that God's not there. Paul wants the Thessalonians and us to have a right framework for understanding this sort of opposition and persecution so that we endure and persevere through it without losing our faith.

When we see the big picture, then we'll be strengthened in our own individual circumstances. That's why he says at the beginning of verse 5, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God.

What's evidence of the righteous judgment of God? The opposition and persecution? Is that the righteous judgment of God against Christians? No, that's not what Paul means.

Both the persecution and the faith and the endurance is evidence of the righteous judgment of God at work.

Well, how can persecution be evidence of God's righteous judgment? How can Christian suffering be a token, that's what the word evidence means, of justice?

[11:40] How can the afflictions that they're undergoing be proof of God's righteousness? Well, the this is the whole package. The opposition plus the faith plus the endurance.

And it's evidence of God's righteous judgment precisely because as Paul goes on in verse 5 to say, it is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering.

You see, God's intention is to use the opposition, the affliction and the persecution to make Christians worthy of the kingdom.

God uses those circumstances in preparation for their worthiness to enter the kingdom.

He's making his people ready for that kingdom. It's to hone their faith, to strengthen it, to sharpen it, like you sharpen a knife against a flint or stone or something to make it sharp.

[12:41] In a sense, the persecution, the affliction, the opposition is sharpening faith and hope to strengthen it, to persevere in the Christian's life. Paul's also saying here that, in effect, suffering is part and parcel of being a Christian.

That's not new in the New Testament. It's there on almost every chapter from the words of Jesus and Paul and almost all the other writers of the New Testament. We must expect suffering if we're Christians.

It's part and parcel, pioneered indeed, by the man of sorrows who suffered for us. So in answer to the question, why doesn't God do something when these people are facing opposition or persecution or when we are?

The answer is God is. This is evidence of God's righteous judgment at work already. God is working. He's working to make his people worthy of the kingdom of God.

God is active because he's making them sharper and deeper and stronger in their faith and love and hope and that is strengthening their character of godliness and holiness, ready for the kingdom of God at the end of their lives.

[13:51] He is making them more like Jesus who suffered even unto death for us. When you think about it, questions of justice play a large role in public debate in our life, in our society and in our world.

It's rare in effect that there's not some public issue of opinion and debate in the papers or on the TV news or current affairs that is related to issues of justice.

There's always something bubbling around. Whether it's the issue of David Hicks and what is just for him, punishment or otherwise. Or should Saddam Hussein be hanged or not?

What about the Bali Nine? What sort of punishment should they get? Or Chappelle Corby? Was it fair that Van Wyn was executed in Singapore in December last year? What about for Martin Bryant? Should he be in prison or in this hospital that he's just been put into?

The issues of justice are actually frequent in our public debate and in society. But even in local contexts that never make the media, the same issues are there and we grapple with them day by day.

[14:59] The issues of what is fair and just in our workplace. Who gets promoted and who doesn't? Why do they get promoted and why don't we or someone else? Within our families, amongst our neighbours, at school, who gets the better marks?

Is that fair or not? When so much is subjective. Or in sports selection, why is it that I was never in the school cricket team when I'm the best player Australia's ever had?

It just strikes me as totally unfair. Well, it did one day and then I realised the truth. See, injustice often irks us. It's often something that makes us quite irate when somebody gets something that we feel is not quite right.

When people who seem to have dodgy character are actually the very wealthy in our society and in our world. Life isn't always fair and issues of injustice and justice come frequently in public debate in our news and current affairs.

But life is not always fair for Christians either. It's easy to feel hard done by sometimes. It's easy to wallow in self-pity as a Christian sometimes. Because actually, by entering Christian faith, we often actually end up being worse off in this world than better.

[16:15] Paul is saying here for those who are suffering opposition as Christians, the righteous judgement of God is not a myth. It's a reality. Yes, God is already demonstrating that and your opposition that you're facing and your own endurance and steadfastness is evidence of that as God is preparing you for the final day of judgement.

Paul switches now to look further ahead as he says in verse 6, for it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you.

Not right here and now necessarily, but God will repay with affliction those who afflict you. That is, there's a quid pro quo, there's a punishment fits the crime that's apparent in these words.

Paul is saying that the persecutors, the opponents, the afflictors, they will get their just desserts. You can be sure of that. In fact, the way your faith is being strengthened helps you to see that that future day of judgement is certain and coming.

But on the other side as well, verse 7 says there will be relief to the afflicted. So it's not just that they will get their comeuppance or just desserts, but those who are persecuted for their Christian faith, they also will get relief.

[17:43] The tables will be turned is what Paul is saying and he's saying we can bank on that. We can be certain of God's just judgement in the end. That's quite an important theme in fact.

When we're certain that on the final day justice will be meted out to each and every person, that's a transforming and a liberating thing for us today.

Especially when we suffer opposition and affliction at the hands of others. Think about what sort of change you ought to make in your daily life. If you're opposed by somebody because you're a Christian, we can turn the other cheek as we're told to by Jesus.

Not because we're soft and weak because we're wusses, but because we know that on the final day those who oppose us for our faith will stand before the judgement throne of God.

Vengeance is his not ours. So it makes a difference for us you see. We can endure opposition and persecution. We don't have to fight back. We don't have to wreak vengeance.

[18:57] We don't have to claim our rights. We don't have to race to the courts to get what is perhaps righteously ours. But we can turn the other cheek knowing that on the final day God will bring proper judgement and justice.

That's why Jesus could submit himself to death on a cross that was manifestly unjust and unfair because on the final day God will judge the living and the dead.

so as Paul says it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to give relief to the afflicted and that day is coming and the evidence of that is that you are enduring opposition now with steadfastness and hope with faith and with love and indeed Paul knows what it's like for the Thessalonians he suffered himself that's why the end of verse 7 says or the middle of verse 7 says as well as to us Paul's been afflicted in many places not just in Thessalonica in Philippi as well and Paul says well I'm in the same boat as you and you can learn from me we're in this together so the doctrine of God's judgement actually ought to influence our daily behaviour when we're under attack it ought to strengthen us and give us resolve as we look for with steadfast hope to the day

when God will judge the living and the dead it deprives us of our need for vengeance and retaliation and that's very liberating and very healthy it gives us endurance when we're afflicted and hope to persevere so a bit more about this righteous judgement that is coming

Paul goes on to talk in effect about when and who and what the when and who comes at the rest of verse 7 and in verse 8 when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire who is this who brings the judgement it is the Lord Jesus Christ the same Lord Jesus who lived on earth who died was buried and rose from the dead who taught his apostles and ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven the same Lord Jesus is coming and will be revealed he is coming as the judge God's righteous judgement will be manifest by the Lord Jesus Christ on the throne of judgement in the future it will be visible he will be revealed this verse says not because well he's invisible from our sight now it's not a new Lord Jesus he's hidden from our sight in heaven but when he comes it will be visible he'll be revealed for all to see as the New Testament makes abundantly clear it will be a public event there will be no doubt in the minds of any person on earth who has lived or died it will be a glorious thing he is coming with mighty angels and flaming fire standard biblical symbols for God's holiness and presence in both Old and New Testaments but we don't know the day

Paul made that clear at the last chapter of 1 Thessalonians we don't know the day when he comes we'll know but we don't know the day but he is coming it's certain that he's coming and indeed in 1 Thessalonians 5 he said the day is in a sense already coming it's in process somehow it's not just that one day God will decide to flick a switch it's already beginning in one sense it's already coming that day when Jesus will return we don't know when but we do know it's certain and that's what matters most this is not a day to take lightly I've often heard people say oh I'll worry about it on the day it'll be too late this is something we need to prepare for for when the day comes it'll be too late to change our minds see what the end of verse 8 says on that day God the Lord Jesus in fact will be inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord

[23 : 16] Jesus Christ we might think that vengeance sounds a slightly harsh or malicious word but it's simply the just punishment for those who do wrong Jesus will bring the punishment of God on those who do not know God and the same group of people described in a different way who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ if they don't know God then they are ignorant of him if you don't know something you're ignorant of it so if they don't know God they're ignorant of God but ignorance will be no excuse on that final day it's the same in most of our laws if you drive under the influence of alcohol down the road and the policeman stops you and breathalyses you and says you've broken the law and you say I didn't know what the law was ignorance is no excuse or you go out shooting a few people and you get arrested and they say you've done the wrong thing I didn't know that was the wrong thing no one ever told me the law ignorance is no excuse when you arrive into

Singapore airport they tell you on the plane that Singapore has very harsh penalties for those who are carrying drugs and you better be aware of that and as Van Wyn who was executed last December knew he knew the punishment that faced him if he was caught ignorance is no excuse and ignoring God is a fatal ignorance and on the final day if you don't know God it's too late the judgment of God will come upon you you ignore God now at your peril and what is this punishment verse 9 describes it in these words these will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might eternal destruction and separation from the Lord that is the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore from God the Father himself to be cut off from God is the ultimate punishment think back to the beginning of the Bible when Adam and Eve broke God's command the punishment was separation from God expelled from the garden of God's presence and blocked from re-entry by cherubim with flaming swords cut off from God and in fact the Bible's story is the story of humanity that is in many senses cut off from God and yet God in his mercy keeps making approaches to bridge the gap but the day is coming where no more approaches will be made and on the day when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead that's the final day beyond that there are no more approaches by God in his mercy and so the result then of those who have ignored God who do not know God will be eternal destruction and separation from God's presence there's debate in church circles about what the nature of hell is it's too hard from this simple verse to get much eternal destruction some may mean that some think it means that you're destroyed and therefore annihilated and have no understanding of hell so maybe it's not

that much punishment but let me assure you that when we put together all the Bible statements about the punishment of those who do not know

God you cannot for a second wish that upon anyone to be cut off from God is to be cut off forever from everything that is good often people joke about hell they joke about what it will be like you hear people joke that all my mates are going to be in hell so it will be a pretty good place there will be beer and sex and all those sorts of things I think it will be alright you know don't be fooled don't be deceived by the devil's temptation there was no good in hell there is nothing that is righteous in hell there is no enjoyment there there is no holiness there there is no purity there there is no love there there is no hope there there is no faith there there is no fellowship there don't think for one minute that it won't be too bad either for yourself or for any person you know we would not want to wish hell on anyone what about for the believers verse 10 is an astonishing contrast when he comes that's Jesus comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who believed because our testimony to you was believed it's a slightly puzzling verse at one level it looks as though that we who believe will marvel at the Lord Jesus Christ who is glorified by us but actually the word is to be glorified in us and to be marveled at on that day in all who believed what that means is that on that final day the glory of Jesus Christ is not just seen by us looking at him but is shared by us who are glorified in him the splendour of Jesus will be seen in you and me who are believers will not only see the glory but will share it I remember when my sister got married 20 years ago

[29:10] I was quite taken aback in a way to be honest when I saw her on her wedding day dressed as a bride I hadn't realised before then how beautiful she was I mean she was my sister and I was quite taken aback by that how beautiful she looked on on the day of Jesus return we with Jesus will be marvelled at because we will be glorified in him we will be perfect in him we will be blameless and spotless and pure and holy we will be glorious in him as he is glorious that is there is almost an inseparability about the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ will be even more glorious and more splendid and more marvellous because you and I will stand there perfected and clothed in glorious robes of righteousness that we are far from wearing here on earth it would be an astonishing day not that we are the focus of it not at all but that as our glory is seen it will direct our attention to the glory and as we are marvelled at it will add to the glory of the

Lord Jesus Christ on that day but the preparation has begun you see that's why verse 5 says this is the evidence of the righteous judgment of God the preparation has begun because under opposition and persecution and affliction the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is gradually being sharpened and honed in the believers under duress on the final day you see God's already acting for that final day in us by his grace so that we will shine in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ on that day culminating on the day of his revelation that's why Paul prays at the end of this chapter in verse 11 to this end we always pray for you asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith you see being ready or made worthy for that final day is God's work in us not our work in us and because it's

God's work in us Paul prays and to be fulfilling every good work in our lives the idea is that our intentions and desires actually get fulfilled in actions that are good and righteous that's ultimately God's work in us not ours so that's why Paul prays to God put together verse 11 is praying two things that character and action will be perfect in the life of a believer and that's God's work ultimately not ours so that's why Paul prays but the ultimate reason for the prayer is not human centred it's not for the Thessalonians benefit or even for their glory the ultimate reason and logic is for the glory of Jesus Christ for on that final day that we will be glorious that will only really contribute to the ultimate glory of the Lord Jesus Christ universally and publicly invisibly seen so that's why Paul's prayer continues in verse 12 so that the purpose of verse 11 is so that the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and you in him that is Paul is saying the final day is sure when Jesus comes the believers will be glorified in Christ and Christ in them so he prays for it to happen when God says something's going to happen we are to pray for it to happen we're expressing our faith and confidence in the words of God for what he will do for us and for the Lord Jesus Christ in the end ultimately see that final day is the day of vindication not primarily our vindication so that those who afflict us will be afflicted and will be vindicated though that's part of it the primary vindication is the lifting up in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ the one who suffered and was put to death unjustly and unfairly the one whom our world today still ridicules and uses as a

swear name he will be lifted up in manifest glory and splendor before every person on this earth to the shame of many and to the glory of those who believe in him you see this final day is thoroughly Christocentric Christ centred and that's what our hope is to be that's what our steadfastness is to be our endurance under affliction is not just to be so that you and I will get relief at the end of it all and our afflictors will be punished our endurance and hope is to be Christ centred that at the end of our lives our endurance faith and love will be for the glory of Jesus Christ not for our own relief not for our own pleasure but for his for the sake of his glory so when we are opposed and afflicted when people ridicule us for our Christian faith at school or on campus or in our family or in our workplace or in our sporting team or wherever it is when we see Christians being ridiculed in the media and the press and by politicians in our country let alone in other countries how do we respond we can endure with steadfast hope even turning the other cheek confident because the Lord Jesus Christ will bring vengeance on those who afflict will bring

[35 : 17] God's just judgment on that final day we can persevere because we fully expect with absolute confidence the vindication of Jesus and thus those who believe in him on the day when he is revealed in glory we can keep longing for the glory of Jesus Christ to be made more and more manifest in us now as God prepares us for that final day of Christ's glory at the end of history that is we keep seeing the big picture and what the final day will be like because it spurs us on to endure with faith love and hope here and now you see how essential the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is to Christian faith and doctrine we're not dealing here with a sort of an appendix to faith it's there in all the ancient creeds it's on almost every page of the new testament the coming again of the Lord Jesus and yet so often lost in modern Christian faith so rarely sung about in modern Christian songs it's not there in one of the most popular evangelistic courses that's being run around the world these days it's absent but such truncated

Christianity is ruinous when we live in a world so hostile to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ when we live amongst people who are so opposed to the glory of Jesus Christ such truncated Christianity deprives us of real hope of real justice of vindication deprives us of a motivation for holiness so these words are to spur us on for Jesus is coming on a day we do not know but certainly he is coming he's coming in visible manifest glory to bring vengeance on those who do not know God relief to those who are believers and even more astonishingly his glory will be seen in our glory that is God's work in us so let us pray more and more urgently and daily come Lord Jesus Amen Amen