

## 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[ 0 : 00 ] So, if you haven't figured it out yet, today's the second Sunday of Advent. We've got two candles, that's how we remember. We're in a second week of our sermon series on the second coming of Christ.

Last week, David told us that not everything is revealed to us about the second coming of Christ, but we are told that it will be personal, it will be physical, it will be visible, it will be universal, it will be sudden, it will be final, and it will be the ultimate completion of God's redemptive work.

We are forward-leaning creatures, and our souls starve without hope. If our hope is fragile or false, we're doomed. And so, during Advent, we're asked, where does our hope come from?

Christ came once for his people, and he will come for them again. So, not everything is clear and revealed about the second coming, but we are told in our passage that the second coming will be a clarifying and a revealing event.

We're told this in verse 7. It says, when Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, and the word revelation there is the word from which we get apocalypse.

[ 1 : 20 ] So, apocalypse. It means unveiling of what presently is unseen. When Christ comes, what is truly real about the world is going to be revealed.

So, in a world of half-truths and competing justices, Jesus is going to reveal himself, and he's going to clarify reality in the light of his glory and his power and his righteousness.

Paul uses this language of mighty angels and flaming fire to describe this revelatory event. It's going to be unmistakable that Jesus Christ comes as the supreme Lord over all.

And there's going to be a sifting that happens at Christ's coming. We're told here not so much detail about the nature of Christ's second coming so much as the consequences of his coming in this passage.

And there are two purposes that Paul points us to. When Christ comes, he will come to judge. And when he comes, he will come to be glorified. The judgment and glory are the twin themes of this passage.

[ 2 : 30 ] First judgment. Jesus Christ, now seated at the right hand of God the Father, will come to judge the living and the dead. You get this imagery throughout the Bible. Jesus Christ is not only the Alpha, he's the Omega.

He's not only the beginning, he's the end. He's not only the first word on all of creation in every human life, he is the last word as well. But we do have to admit that when we hear this word judgment, we have strong emotive associations with it.

None of us hear this word in a vacuum. Every single one of us brings a whole set of experiences and baggage when we come and we hear this word. And for some of us, it might evoke anger, senses of injustice.

For others, it might evoke fear and anxiety because the reality is that every one of us has friends and family and colleagues and neighbors that we deeply care about and we're uncertain about what the future will hold for them in the light of Christ's glory and power and justice.

But there's a whole lot of social reasons for this as well. Because I think some of us deep down, we don't want to be labeled as those Christians who are those angry, judgmental, uncaring people.

[ 3 : 40 ] And for some of us, it's not just personal and social reasons. There are theological reasons for this as well. It feels to us that words about judgment evoke really unappealing images about God.

So there was one new atheist who, in a book, he said, the God of the Bible is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. He says he's petty, he's unjust, he's unforgiving, control freak,

he's vindictive, bloodthirsty, capricious, and malevolent, and a bully.

And I think sometimes, I disagree with him, I don't think that's the image we get here in the Bible, but sometimes when we hear the word judgment, that's what's evoked in people's hearts and minds. So it's good for us to be upfront about the fact that we come to this passage with a whole host of personal emotive associations because in our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive beliefs.

For Christians and non-Christians alike. So how do we make sense of this? I want to look at this judgment passage in terms of its context, its content, and some contemporary objections.

Its context is really important. Remember what I said earlier about we are forward-leaning creatures, our souls starve without hope, and if there is anything that will cause hope to dwindle and faith to become fragile in our lives, it is the experience of sustained suffering.

[ 5 : 07 ] Of consistent opposition. Now 1 Thessalonians 1 is not spoken to unbelievers, it's spoken to believers who are suffering. Who are persecuted.

Who are afflicted and defenseless. We see this in verses 5 to 6. You are suffering for the kingdom of God. Verse 6. Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you. When real suffering comes, where someone feels powerless in the face of the forces of evil, it really quickly raises the questions of God's justice and God's timing. Why doesn't God do something? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How long, O Lord? All these things that we hear throughout the Psalms and throughout the whole Bible, and in the Bible, divine judgment is meant to be good news for those who are asking those questions.

It's good news for a people whose hope is dwindling and whose faith seems to be failing because it promises the reversal of the values and the power dynamics of this fallen world. You see this all the way in Mary's Magnificat in Luke chapter 1.

[ 6 : 18 ] She talks about the reversal that Jesus is going to bring. So Paul's words spoken about judgment in 2 Thessalonians come in the context of speaking to Christians who are suffering, and it is a word that is meant to encourage and comfort them in their suffering, and a word that is meant to establish and strengthen them in their faith and their hope in Jesus Christ.

Christ has come for his people once, and he is coming for them again. That's the context. But the content is that he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Who are the recipients of this judgment? We're told in verse 8, In flaming fire, he will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So I think there's a couple things that are really important for us to get straight here. I don't think Paul is describing two different sets of people when he describes those who don't know God and those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because in the very next verse, in chapter, in verse 9, he talks about being sent away from the presence of the Lord and away from the glory of his might. I think he's talking about synonymous parallelism here.

[ 7 : 37 ] So these two phrases, don't know God and don't obey his gospel, are meant to be talking about not two different groups of people, but the same group of people in two different ways.

So what does that mean? It means that Paul here is not talking about people who have never heard the gospel. That's addressed elsewhere in scripture, I think. But he's talking about those who hear and who refuse to obey, which leads to a saving knowledge of the Redeemer.

So at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians, the letter that Paul wrote right before the one we're looking at, Paul commends to the Thessalonian Christians the fact that the gospel came to them not only in word, but it came to them in conviction and with power and with the Holy Spirit.

And this was evidenced because they turned from idols to the true and living God. And here, in contrast, we're hearing that it is possible to hear the word of Christ, but to not respond, to not turn from idols, and turn to the true and living God.

So what's the upshot of this? I think the basis of judgment in 2 Thessalonians 1 is not primarily the doing of evil, although that's true as well, but it is the refusal of God's gospel grace.

[ 8 : 55 ] They refuse his grace. So God will judge, yes, not primarily, not because God only gives people what they deserve, but because some people refuse to receive what no one deserves.

If evildoers experience God's tear, it will not be because, only because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah.

So I think we're discovering something very profound about sin and judgment here. Sin not only spoils creation, but sin refuses redemption. Sin not only spoils creation, but refuses redemption. And judgment is the exclusion of what refuses to be embraced by God's redeeming love. So that's the who. What's the nature of this?

It's variously described for us, this judgment, as repayment, verse 6. Vengeance, verse 8. Punishment, verse 9. Stick with me.

[10:05] I know this is heavy. Stay with me. There's no pictures of fire and sulfur and torment and torture here. Just the sobering sadness of isolation and distance.

I think some of us can feel that a little more after COVID. We know the searing pain of loneliness. Those of us that had loved ones that would die and we weren't able to be by their side.

Or those that died and weren't able to have people accompanying them. I know some of you that are introverts loved COVID and you kind of wished it would come back in some ways.

But there's this sense throughout Holy Scripture that we're made for companionship. We're made for presence. We're made for communion with the holy and living God to know and to love and to enjoy.

And that is our highest goal and our greatest good in life. And the punishment that is being described here is God permanently solidifies a person's choice to live apart from him. And to refuse his redemption away from his presence and his power and his redeeming glory.

[11:13] And this is why it's called eternal destruction. It's eternal because it's permanent and final. And it's destruction because it's totally destructive to our humanity.

God made us for himself. And separation from him destroys and distorts and disorients our humanity. The book of Hebrews says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It's an even more fearful thing to be exiled forever from his presence. This is part of why Jesus came, brothers and sisters. Throughout 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, Paul constantly reminds the people of God that Jesus came to save you from the wrath to come.

Knowing the context and the content, there are many contemporary objections that people have when they hear this. Remember when I talked about emotive associations where we could also talk about intellectual objections.

The first is, doesn't belief in a God who judges lead to a more violent society? It goes something like this. The Christian belief in hell belittles human dignity and the worth of those that are being judged.

[12:33] And then that belief then leads to all manner of exclusion and abuse and division and violence in the world. Doesn't belief in a God that judges lead to a more violent society? And the answer is it's possible.

But the logic of the Christian faith actually runs in the opposite direction. Throughout scripture, you get this clear, you get two things that are held together consistently. God says, Ezekiel 18, a great example.

I do not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that they turn from their wickedness and live. Hear God's heart in that. When he judges, it's through tears. But throughout the Bible, it's also reiterated, both Old Testament and New Testament, God says, vengeance is mine.

In other words, there are some things that God does not delegate to humanity. Humanity is not responsible for taking vengeance. That's God's job. And it's only because God has the knowledge and the wisdom and the compassion and the power that is needed to judge with justice and equity and integrity and rightness.

And in the New Testament, this claim that vengeance belongs to God, not to human beings, undergirds the ethics of nonviolence. There's this wonderful story of Miroslav Volf.

[13:45] He's a theologian at Yale, and he's a Croatian who grew up in the former Yugoslavia. His dad was tortured in a concentration camp, and his older brother was killed at six years old by a careless soldier.

And he struggled with this question with his family. How can we forgive? How can we deal with the feelings of wrath and the desire for revenge and justice that are deeply seated in us?

How do we pursue justice and extend grace? And Miroslav Volf talks about how it's both in light of the cross and in light of the second coming of Christ to judge that makes this possible for Christians.

He writes this in a moving passage out of his own experience. He says, Since the search for truth and the practice of justice cannot be given up, the only way in which nonviolence and forgiveness

will be possible in a world of violence is through displacement or transference of vengeance, not through its complete relinquishment.

Inflicting vengeance, verse 8, is legitimate only when it comes from God. So belief in God's judgment should make society more peaceful and not more brutal, because it takes judgment out of the hands of humans and leads it to God.

[ 15 : 13 ] But there's a second objection that often comes. How can a loving God send people away from his presence for eternal destruction?

As I hinted at earlier, judgment in two Thessalonians is an aspect of God's loving care for his suffering church. And I think in the Bible, God's holy wrath flows from his holy love for his people and his creation.

God sets himself against all that spoils his creation and refuses his redemption. And we could talk about this for a long time.

But the reality is, is that there is something deep in the human psyche, ever since the Garden of Eden in chapter 3, that we resist the idea that love includes moral accountability and responsibility. We don't want to believe that God is going to hold us accountable, and that that is part of his love. God's essential character throughout the Bible is that he's gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[ 16 : 21 ] But part of his character is that he will not allow his people or his creation to be destroyed, to destroy its peace and integrity forever.

And this is something that we have to reckon with even as we approach Christmas. You know that great Christmas hymn, Joy to the World? Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Let earth receive her king. He talks about the trees and the forest clapping their hands. You know that great hymn is based on Psalm 96. Psalm 96 ends with a celebration of God's judgment.

It says, The trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord when he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in faithfulness.

And so in the scriptures, there's this sense in which God's cleansing judgment, his holy judgment, is reason for rejoicing, because it is an expression of his love for his creation.

[ 17 : 28 ] He will not allow it to be spoiled forever. But one of the beautiful things about our passage is that judgment is the dominant note, we might say.

But it is not the final note. Glory is that. Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead, but Christ will come to be glorified. Glory is the ultimate purpose of his coming.

And you see this in verse 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 has been believed.

And that's where this joy language comes in. Joy to the world. That language of marvel is language of wondering and admiring. It's seeing a vision of Christ's glory that produces deep delight in the one who beholds it.

As one pastor said, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. And part of the wonder and beauty of this passage is that there is this reference to the beginning of the Christian life all the way at the end at its completion.

[ 18 : 41 ] There's this sense here in verse 10 that the people of God have had to learn to be satisfied in him through deep suffering and opposition over a lifetime. And now they are seeing the one who has been their satisfaction all the way through.

In their weakness, they had to discover his sustaining strength. In their suffering, his power. In their sin, his mercy. In their sorrow, his joy. In their anger, his peace.

In their apathy, his conviction. In their salvation. And now they see him in all of his glory. And that's what leads Paul to prayer in verses 11 and 12.

He's holding before the people the glory of what's to come. But he's mindful that they're still living in the present world of pain and affliction and suffering and complication. And he realizes that people can never live in this world with hope for the world to come on their own strength.

They need the strength that God supplies. And so Paul prays. That God would see his friends through to the very end. That God's calling in our faith would be fulfilled.

[ 19 : 53 ] That Jesus would be glorified in us and we in him. And that we would live by the power of God and in the confidence of his glory to come. Someone once said that the goal of preaching is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Paul's teaching in this text does both. But the main purpose was comfort. There's this implicit warning that those who refuse the grace of Jesus Christ, it's an eternally serious matter. But then again, God says in his patience right now, before that day, I do not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that they turn to me and live.

But the dominant note is the explicit comfort that he gives to those that are seeking to follow him faithfully. Those who share in Christ's suffering here will share in his glory hereafter.

That is the comfort for the afflicted. And I think this is a welcome comfort in a season where many feel heavy-hearted and easily distracted.

[ 21 : 02 ] In a season when hopes wane and where faith wavers. 2 Thessalonians 1 awakens us and quickens us to see the present world in light of the end.

It speaks a word of comfort and encouragement and endurance and peace. Christ came once for his people and he will come for us again. It reminds me of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians.

My brothers and sisters, it's for this reason that we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is being wasted away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen and eternal.

My brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[ 22 : 11 ] Amen. A