

# The Gospel and Thanksgiving

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[ 0 : 00 ] In 1644, the cloud of emotional darkness descended on the Puritan minister, Richard Baxter. There are a number of colliding factors as to why life got so hard for him.

! There was a civil war that had basically shut down what was a very successful parish ministry. He was shunned as an army chaplain by the nation's leadership because he was, in their words, too spiritual. Close friends of his, dear friends of his life in the civil war.

His own father at that point was a political prisoner. His health also broke down, rendering him very ill and weak and thinking at the age of 31 that he was near death.

And as all those factors collided and his despair of life set in, Baxter wrote what became one of the most professional books for generations called *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* in 1650.

[ 1 : 22 ] Baxter, in his book, he calls Christians to contemplate our eternal heavenly rest as a way of life now, in the moment.

As an ongoing practice of daily life, constantly recalling the heavenly rest. He exhorts us not to seek our promised rest and comfort here in earth, but to keep the new heavens and the new earth at the forefront of our minds, reflecting on it consistently.

And he says that, in fact, that is what fuels a life of faith, love and hope now. Baxter's book, quite famous even to this day, really is echoing the Apostle Paul in the letters to the Thessalonians.

The moment Paul started this church, as we know from the first letter, there was persecution. In fact, this young, small church in Thessalonica had never known a time of peace at all.

And so Paul's first letter to them was designed to strengthen a church under pressure and to encourage a church that was immature and vulnerable amongst that pressure, in order that they would continue to make progress as believers in the Lord Jesus.

[ 2 : 52 ] Paul urged them, as we know from one of the first letters, to turn away from their sinful life, to walk obediently to God's word and to set their minds and their hearts and their hopes on the return of the Lord Jesus and the future glory and joy that awaits for them in that moment.

And so as we open to Thessalonians, we see their trials have not diminished. Paul again strengthened them by pointing them to the glorious end of all things.

And that is when Jesus returns. And he also encourages them with the perspective of what it means to live the Christian life until the day of Jesus' return.

And what he says is, you will always be at war in one way or another. There will always be a battle. It will always be a struggle in one way or another.

Their trials and their sufferings, crucially, are not a sign that God is not powerful, that he's not good, or that God had abandoned them. But it's how God is gloriously changing them.

[ 4 : 05 ] Their hardship is how God is gloriously changing them. So as we open up to Thessalonians, we've got three points there.

Apologies for those of you who have got the handouts. It's mostly there in those handouts, but I've had some more recent inspiration very early this morning.

Anyway, so three points. First of all, thanksgiving for past grace. So in his first letter, Paul remembered gratefully the Thessalonians, particularly for three things, their faith, their love, and their hope.

The trinity of a healthy Christian life, faith, hope, and love. And the fact that they were productive in their faith, in their hope, and their love.

And now, however, he emphasizes that these qualities from the first letter to the second letter have actually been increasing and growing. So the persecution that they've been experiencing has not been a hindrance to that at all.

[ 5 : 13 ] At all. The original language here, in fact, means that their faith is growing like a plant in the tropics. You just can't stop it. And their love for all is overflowing.

The language is like the floodgates of the dam have been opened and just flooding everywhere. And although he does not mention hope, he does refer to their perseverance and endurance, which in 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 3, he says perseverance and endurance is inspired by hope.

It's a hope, he says, that he boasts about to other churches. And it was flourishing even amongst the persecution and trials which they were enduring.

And so when he jumps into verse 5, what he's saying here in verse 5 is that growth in faith, in love and hope is not just evidence of God's grace in their lives, but it's also evidence that God's judgment is right.

That is, the combination of their trust in Jesus with their current trials, hardships, persecutions they're facing, it's those things together which are producing great, growing faith, growing love, growing hope.

[ 7 : 00 ] And God is right in not just calling them to himself, but he is right in them facing those persecutions, in God gifting them with those persecutions.

What Paul is celebrating here in the first few verses is what you would call healthy Christians and a healthy church. Now, Western Christians tend to celebrate the growth of programs and facilities and budgets and staff and attendance and energy, the worship, quality of the worship as signs of church health.

Not Paul, necessarily. Paul boasts here of their growing faith, their increasing love for each other, and their hope in the face of hardship.

Those things may flow over into progress in other things, but they may not. And the fact that there are growing budgets and so on and so forth are not necessarily a sign that the church is growing in faith or love or hope.

And Paul is very keen for them for this growth that they're seeing to continue. And once again, what he does is he gets them to fix their eyes on the hope of their future glory, which is the section, the most of this chapter.

[ 8 : 39 ] And we're launching into a topic that our world society does not like the Christian to talk about.

And unfortunately, way too many Christians are embarrassed by. That is the concept of future judgment.

All religions in the world believe in some concept of judgment. Or for some, it's the idea of karma. For others, Christians, it's a judgment day. That is, all religions have this concept of a reckoning of some description or accountability of some description.

That is, every person will have a day in a cosmic court, face their record, and to satisfy the demands of an eternal absolute justice of some degree, whatever it might be.

[ 9 : 43 ] The secular worldview, however, which is dominant in our society at the moment, rejects the concept of a final judgment because it asserts there is no moral absolutes.

And so you cannot have a cosmic judgment if there are no moral absolutes that all people must comply with. So there is no final reckoning.

For instance, Sam Harris, a prominent atheist, begins his book, Free Will, by recounting a set of callous crimes committed by two men against an innocent family.

And if you read it, it is stomach-churning stuff, awful stuff. And he concludes that while we might seek some level of restorative justice to stop those people doing that again, he says you cannot hold those people morally accountable, however.

Sam Harris, secularism. And Western civilization generally hates the idea of judgment. Why would we want to believe and embrace the Bible's teaching on Judgment Day?

[ 11 : 12 ] There are multiple reasons, and I just need to exercise the spiritual gift of superficiality this morning and just mention two. It's not a spiritual gift.

Don't need to look that one up. Give me that gift. First of all, because the Bible's teaching on Judgment Day is actually good news.

That's the first reason. The problem with removing a final Judgment Day is it doesn't just mean that moral wrongs are never made right.

That in itself is a problem. But it also means that no act or life of moral courage is rewarded either.

It means both of those things. Not just that there's no accountability for wrong, but there's no reward for right. In fact, removing of Judgment Day means there's nothing at all.

[12:14] Nothing at all. So if you want to remove the concept that, well, I don't like the idea God's going to judge me, but I don't want him to reward me, you remove both when you remove a Judgment Day.

You've gotten rid of both. Judgment Day means that every sacrifice we make for others actually matters nothing in the end.

It means that no one notices it at all in the end. Those sacrifices are forgotten. But Judgment Day means that those sacrifices will never be forgotten.

That there is a reward. There is someone who sees and so everything means something.

Everything means something. If, on the other hand, there is no Judgment Day, there is no judge in the end, and human suffering and injustice goes on until the sun burns out and history ends, and that means, according to the Nealist, nothing means anything.

There are only two, ultimately, views of life. Either everything means something or nothing means anything. And the difference between the two is Judgment Day.

[13:39] That's the difference. You see, the big secular thinkers of history, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russell, all explained away this concept of a final Judgment Day, and all of them were honest enough to suggest that when you do, it takes away all meaning in history.

At least they were honest enough to say that. Jean-Paul Sartre once said that atheism is a long, hard, cruel business. And he says, I've lived it to the end.

I'm not sure what he was celebrating in that moment, but Judgment Day is good news. But it also is good news because it means that forgiveness is possible.

Have a look at verse 6 there. God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. Now, when you read that, you go, hang on a bit. That seems really harsh.

But it's actually liberating. It's meant to be liberating for the Thessalonian Christians. The liberation here is God is just.

[14:51] He's the one who pays back. You don't have to. You Thessalonians, you Christians, don't need to be in the position of judge of humanity. Being the judge of someone else when they've wronged us is a job that we are not qualified for.

Potentially, you know the experience of being in a job that you're not qualified to do. I've known that experience myself when I first became the minister here and other, for instance, when I first became a dad.

It's like, what do I do now? This is the ultimate job we are not qualified for. You see, if we keep putting ourselves in the role of judge, jury and sentencer of other people, then we are the ones who become imprisoned in our own bitterness.

It destroys us, not them, when we are the judge. And the reality is, some of us just cannot get past the wrongs that have been perpetrated against us because ultimately we don't believe in judgment day.

It's not close on the forefront of our minds. Or we haven't understood it. We're not constantly reflecting on it right now.

[16:20] The more the good news of judgment day goes deep into our hearts, ultimately what it means is the more patient and loving and forgiving we will be.

The Christian who is harsh in their proclamation of the gospel condemning humanity has not understood judgment day.

They've not understood it. It hasn't penetrated to the depths of their hearts. Now, the second reason to believe in this final judgment day is that Jesus tells us so.

He reveals the reality of it. Judgment day is good news, but we also need to believe it. In order to believe it, we need evidence for it.

And like millions and millions of people throughout history, I myself came to believe in who Jesus is and what he did because of the facts about him, the facts of who he is.

[17:31] You see, when you look at the person of Jesus Christ, you see this combination that you don't see in anyone else in human history.

He's incredibly confident and centred on himself and who he is and what he declares about himself, and yet you've never met anyone who is at the same time more humble.

He combines both the confidence and the humility. He combines courage to death and incredible tenderness for the sinner and the sufferer.

People become overwhelmed by his moral perfection and attracted by his love. And yet it is Jesus who talks about judgment day more than any other biblical writer, more than any of them put together.

You see, what we read in the Gospels is that Jesus has come to us not just as a saviour and as a friend, but as a judge.

[ 18 : 48 ] He said that. His salvation absolutely means nothing without judgment. What the Bible says about judgment day is, however, quite distinctive and is often misunderstood and it has massive implications for how we live right now.

And the first distinctive compared to other religions is the nature of God's judgment. Have a look there at verses 8 and 9.

It says, He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They'll be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.

Now, sentences like that stir up an emotional response. I could stand on the street corner in Chatswood and talk about God's love and people walk past and go, you know, I'll ignore you, but that's okay.

Read this, however, and you're going to get a response of some description. It should, in fact, stir up an emotional response.

[ 20 : 07 ] And, in fact, if you're a Christian and it doesn't stir up an emotional response, it means you need to understand judgment day a bit deeper.

The reality is there's no nice way to smooth over words like everlasting destruction. What is important here is to see what this everlasting destruction actually is.

Notice the statement. It's actually described for us. Shut out from the presence of the Lord. In other words, everlasting destruction in biblical terms is the removal of God's presence.

To not have God is to be eternally destroyed. The presence of the God, of God, is the source of all life and love and beauty, of all goodness, whether we realise it or not.

You see, a person walking in the countryside on a beautiful sunny day is living off the presence of the sun in the sky. They feel it.

[ 21 : 28 ] They experience it. They know it. They can see it. But in that exact same moment, a person working in a mine shaft three kilometres under the ground is also living off the presence of the sun even though they don't experience it.

They can't feel it. They can't see it. They don't know it. They're both living off the presence of the sun. If in that moment, the sun disappeared, the sun ceased to exist, both of them would freeze to death instantaneously.

It matters not whether you are three kilometres under the ground or you're walking in the countryside. It matters not. You're both done.

It's not where you are on the face of the earth because you are both living off the sun's presence.

You see, what the Bible tells us is that every person in history has lived off the presence of God while they have lived, whether they know it or not, whether they acknowledge it at all.

It matters not whether you have sought and trusted and followed him or you instead have existed in darkness and you've rejected him and gone your own way in life.

[ 22 : 59 ] It matters not. Now, every person has breathed his air, drunk his water, lived off his gracious presence. And if God's presence goes, everything goes.

There is no life. There is no joy. There is no beauty. There is no good. And so the Bible's teaching on God's judgment day is the thing that all of humanity actually want deep inside of their hearts. Perfect justice. It's what we want. Perfect justice in the sense that the punishment truly fits the crime.

The Bible often uses imagery of fire for eternal destruction. Lake of fire, burning fire, Jesus here coming in, blazing fire.

It is figurative language. It's figurative language. Now, number one, stick with me in case you think I'm moving into heresy here.

[ 24 : 21 ] Secondly, if you think, oh, phew, great. It's only figurative. Figurative language in the Bible is always used to explain something that is far worse.

So figurative language is not better. It's actually far worse. It's symbolic of something that's so much more worse. So the picture of everlasting destruction that you have in the Bible is not God poking people with pitchforks or employing people to do pitchfork poking.

It is far worse than that. It is his presence removed. Far worse. It's his presence removed.

There is only two ways to live in this life. It's either God's will be done or it's my will be done. There's only two ways to live.

It's either facing God or it's turning your back and facing away from God. That's only two ways to live. And the person here described, destined for eternal destruction, are getting what they have chosen and what they have wanted for all of their life.

[ 25 : 56 ] Existence without God. God throughout their life has been facing them, facing them, facing them and they have turned their back and faced the opposite direction and then when they eventually on the judgment day turn to face God's ability for their life, God will turn his face from them.

Perfect judgment. And as C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Great Divorce*, once they get what they want on that moment, on the day of judgment, when they receive it, they still won't change their mind.

They still won't change their mind. They will still have for eternity the very thing that they wanted and they will not change their mind.

You see, what this means is, this is really important, the Christian teaching on judgment day is not about good and bad at all.

It's not about whether I've done enough good and it balances out my bad. It's got nothing to do with good or bad at all. Judgment day gives us what we have been after all of our life.

[ 27 : 22 ] That's what judgment day is. If we have sought communion with God or we have sought distance from God in life, then we will get that on judgment day.

It's what we have chosen in relation to God. It's unbelievably just. And the confirmation of this is Jesus Christ on the cross.

That's the confirmation of it. That's the evidence for it. And that's why the Christian teaching on this is so distinctive. Because Jesus is the only person in history who has ever gone through judgment day.

The only one who's ever gone through the judgment day that's described here. He's the only one in history to be abandoned by God in the most final way.

And when Jesus Christ was being crucified, there was no sulfur, there was no burning fire, there was no pitchforks, what happened is God turned his back on him.

[ 28 : 39 ] In fact, his ultimate cry of dereliction, the thing that caused him to scream from the cross was not the spear in the side, was not the nails, it was not the crown of thorns, the thing that called him to scream from the cross is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The cry of dereliction as his father turns his face away. Judgment day. The hell that Jesus experienced on the cross was deeper than any hell than anyone will ever experience in life or the afterlife.

on the cross Jesus faced God. You see, Jesus in his entire perfect life lived the life facing God in perfection.

Perfect obedience. He obeyed his father all the way to the cross facing God in obedience all the way.

His father turned his back on him. and that will never happen to another person in human history.

[ 30 : 04 ] That will never happen to a Christian who looks facing to Jesus in all of their life when judgment day come and that's the confirmation here for the Thessalonians.

Jesus, your life of suffering in this moment is not a wasted life because when judgment day comes your father will not turn his face from you and the confirmation he will not turn his face away from you is because he turned it away from his son.

Jesus is the only one who experienced the presence of God perfectly. He obeyed God perfectly and on the cross the sun went out for him.

He was facing God and God turned his back at him. His hell was deeper than anyone's and his hell pays for all of our sin and guarantees that God will not turn his face away from me on judgment day.

No matter who I am no matter what I've done in my life. See the Bible's teaching on judgment day is justice.

[ 31 : 21 ] The punishment fits the crime it explains the cross judgment day explains the cross and the cross explains what happens on judgment day and it is profoundly good news to those who face Jesus now.

Turn their face to him and the encouragement here for the Thessalonians is you need to keep your eye on that end.

in the midst of suffering temptations sin in this world. Verse 10 is the perspective the good news the outcome if you like on that day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

There's a little word in that verse that's so easy to miss but it's absolutely essential it's very crucial in fact the way it's put together here in the original language is so unique it's only used two times in the New Testament here in verse 10 and again in verse 12 two verses later and it's so unique it's it's the word in in what it's saying here is that when Jesus comes on that judgment day Jesus will not be glorified among his holy people as if they will be the stadium in which he appears neither is it by them as if they will be spectators who applaud him for his glory everyone look at his glory kind of thing neither is he glorified through them as if they are the mirrors reflecting his glory he will be glorified in them in that sense his people are like a filament in a light globe which itself glows with light and heat when the electrical current passes through it you see a stadium is never itself changed by the activity of the stadium a theatre is never changed by the play that's played there whatever you call it in there performed in the theatre an audience is never necessarily changed by the drama in the theatre itself a mirror is certainly not changed by the image it reflects in that moment in any moment the mirror of my home is going to get me one moment not the next and the mirror is still the same but a filament in a light bulb is changed dramatically it's actually changed when the electricity flows through it and it glows you see when

Jesus revealed in his glory on judgment day he will be glorified in his people we will not only see his glory but we will in fact share his glory that's what it's saying we will share his glory and much more than a light globe where the filament glows temporarily but it only becomes dark and cold again once the electricity stops the Christian will be radically and permanently changed into his the best example of this I think in the Bible is the transfiguration of Jesus where on that occasion Jesus was glorified in his physical body his face just radiated like the sun his skin and clothing gleamed became as white as light in other words his body became a vehicle for his glory and that's the best picture in the

[ 36 : 07 ] New Testament that we can find what will happen on the day when Jesus comes we will be transfigured by the glory of Christ eternally everything that attracts a person to the person of Jesus will become ours it will be ours because verse 10 says we are marvelling at him now stick with me here because this is the really really important bit what is it we are marvelling at in particular what we are marvelling at is the love of God for us displayed what Jesus done for us on the cross to marvel is not just to go that was good as you might as a spectator in a stadium watching something before you or in a theatre watching something before you go that was good

I admire that they did that well to marvel is so much more than that it is to have our expectations our desires our imagination explode exceedingly that's what it means to marvel it means to have our heart and our mind overflow beyond comprehension and Jesus will be glorified in the Christian on judgment day because we are marveling at him one of the most unpalatable!

teachings of the Christian faith in our modern day is what we have just looked at here in the God as judge and there being a judgment day many in our society are very willing to accept a God of love a God of love not a God reject Jesus the cross judgment just a God of love and unfortunately way too many churches want to just talk about a God of love in the end what that means is a God that reinterpreted as I see love a God who just approves of me a God whose face is towards me and my face is away from him and he just says well that's okay that's alright I want to affirm that person's choice in life a

God who doesn't mind if I live life my way and God's love becomes about what I want him to be not about who he is and so therefore if you look at those people and you look at those churches and look at those people who want to downplay the judgment of God what you see is no change in their life at all at all there is no change change because the love of God does not exceed their expectations their desires or their imagination there is no marvelling and so there is no change Christian it is the marvelling at the gospel that brings change the marvelling of the gospel

I want to ask you do you as a Christian do you see that your life is changing are you seeing that you're becoming more compelling as a Christian people noticing the glory of Christ being in you right now there is so much pressure in our world to conform to the values of this world and to reject things that are unpalatable even in good churches the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has become an accessory to middle class values where it affirms my choices in life where we are culturally captive to consumerism and convenience and comfort and maybe we're not seeing the growth in faith we are not increasing in our love for all and we're not enduring with hope and we're not seeing evangelistic fruit because as churches we are not looking much different to the world around us this is the consequence of redefining

[ 41 : 12 ] God's love as him being the great permission giver this is the consequence of taking our eyes of judgment day being embarrassed by judgment day there is no glory without a cross there is no glory without a cross there is no good there is no grace without judgment it is the marvelling at the wonder of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ where justice and mercy meet that brings transformation in life if we don't see what it costs God to love us we have nothing to marvel at which brings me to my third point Paul ends this section by praying and let me be very quick here he prays he doesn't just give them a vision of their future glorification he prays that that future glorification will be starting in them now that the power from

God to be changed now he does that in verses 11 and 12 he gives thanks for their growth and he prays that it will continue growth in faith love and hope he wants them to see them grow in that way and so let me just leave you with a very quick challenge it could be unpacked in so many ways! is the marveling at the love of God displayed in the cross of Christ that transforms us now now if there is no marveling there's no change and in a day when we are bombarded with competing objects of focus in our lives email social media breaking news all the time millions of other things in our lives there has never been a greater need to lift our eyes to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ consistently day in day out moment by moment to fix our eyes on the gospel and the eternal hope of glory that awaits all those in him you we us

Christians will never see change in our lives while ever we have dust forming on our Bibles this with that future glory this tells me there should be dust on our technology but not on our Bibles that's what this is telling me and if it is not happening we are being captive to the culture of our age we need to be walking with God in prayer we need to be lifting our voices to him in worship and we need the fellowship of brothers and sisters consistently pointing us to the gospel and to the future glory and so I commend to you our next steps here as a church pursue them and be changed