

2 Thessalonians 1    “Relief for the Afflicted”  
Joel 3  
Psalm 59

August 19, 2018

In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul will talk about how Christ is coming 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.”

But in order to understand what Paul is doing there,  
we need some background!

How should we think about vengeance?

“Vengeance is *mine*, says the LORD, I will repay.” (Dt 32, Rom 12, Heb 10)  
And so *we* should not take revenge on those who harm us.

But that does not mean that vengeance is bad.

After all, remember what God says:

Vengeance is *mine*, says the Lord.

The reason *why* we are not supposed to take vengeance  
is *not* because vengeance is bad –  
it is because *we* are bad at vengeance!

We tend to overdo it.

If you hit me with a stick,

I’ll hit you harder with a bigger stick.

Everything escalates and the next thing you know, everyone is dead.

Think about all the books and movies that focus on the theme of vengeance.

The question always comes up – when is it going to end?

How is it going to end?

The cycle of vengeance can never stop by itself.

He killed my brother – so I have to kill him –

and then someone will come after me...

And so many people suggest that the solution is to give up on justice.

Let it go.

Everyone makes mistakes...

Seriously?

Does anyone believe that the right answer

to the Catholic church’s sexual abuse scandal is

“Hey, just let it go – everyone makes mistakes!”?!!

NO!!

There are children’s lives at stake!

And so yes, we should pursue justice in this life –  
but with the caveat that we will not attain perfect justice here.  
We need to do the best we can – and then leave the rest to God.

And the prophet Joel explains what this looks like.  
Because Paul *assumes* that you already understand the biblical teaching on vengeance,  
I want you to see three things here in Joel 3:

First, notice the crimes which God says he will take vengeance for:  
Verse 2 – “they have scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land”  
Verse 3 – “they have cast lots for my people and have traded a boy for a prostitute,  
and have sold a girl for wine and have drunk it.  
And verse 19 – “for the violence done to the people of Judah,  
because they have shed innocent blood in their land.”

We’re talking about murder, kidnapping and enslaving people, rape –  
and deporting whole populations  
and forcing them to move hundreds of miles away.

And while the focus here is on “my people” – Israel –  
elsewhere (in the prophet Amos) God makes clear that he considers these things  
just as heinous when done to other nations.  
But when you do it to the people of God,  
you are striking at humanity’s only hope.  
If you obliterate the people of Israel in the OT, then the Messiah would never have come!

Second, notice that God’s judgment is *always* proportional to the crime.  
In the Law of Moses, the language of “an eye for an eye”  
was a way of expressing the principle of proportionality.  
It didn’t mean that if I gouge your eye out – you get to gouge my eye out.  
It meant that the punishment should fit the crime.  
Ancient people understood metaphors just as well as modern people.

So when the prophet Joel says that the God will do to these nations  
as they have done to his people,  
he is expressing the principle of proportionate justice.

Why is this important?  
Because it is important that God is *just*.  
God will *not* let wickedness *slide*.

Those who have done heinous things will suffer.  
And notice that we are not just talking about individual wrongs.  
These are wrongs done by nations (Edom, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, Philistia) –  
and God’s vengeance will be wrought against *nations* as well as individuals.

Of course, national judgments tend to come in the middle of history.

During my sabbatical I was working through the letters and papers  
of Robert Jefferson Breckinridge – a leading pastor, theologian, and statesman  
in Kentucky during the Civil War.

God’s judgment is proportional.

For thirty years before the war, Breckinridge (and others)  
had been warning that if the United States did not do anything  
to correct their errors regarding slavery –  
and other deportations (like the Indian removals) –  
God would require a fearful reckoning.

The Civil War saw around 700,000 American soldiers die.

That’s almost as many deaths as the US has lost in all other wars combined!  
And when you consider the fact that in the 1860s,  
the US population was 1/10 of what it is today,  
that means that nearly one out of every 10 white men of military age  
died during the Civil War.

And in the South, the percentage was far higher.

In the South, over 20% of white men between the ages of 20-24 died in the war.

It is generally impossible to predict *in advance*  
how God’s vengeance will be manifested in history,  
but it is remarkable how often you can see that vengeance clearly revealed in hindsight.

But the third thing I want you to notice from Joel  
is the focus on “that day” – the Day of the LORD –  
which is both a day of judgment to those who are hostile to God and his people –  
but it is also a day of joy and peace to those who trust in him!

“So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain.”

On *that day* God will make everything *right*!

It’s not just that God will make everyone “feel better” about it.

He will make it *right*.

He will judge those who did those awful things!

Our Psalm of response give us an example of this.

Psalm 59 is a song of David,

“when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.”

David is singing about those who are lying in wait – seeking to kill him.

And he asks God to deliver him – and to punish those who plot evil.

And he says that when God consumes them in wrath,

then they will “know that God rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth.”

David, of course, was the Anointed One – he prefigured the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we sing this song in and with *Christ*.

Sing Psalm 59  
Read 2 Thessalonians 1

There was once a hot-tempered monk out in the Egyptian desert.  
He had been deeply offended by an outsider –  
and said that he was going to go settle the matter!  
His abbot said, “Wait, I will come and help – but first, let us pray:  
O God, we do not need you – we can take vengeance for ourselves. Amen.”

The monk immediately recognized his fault!

In an angry world – vengeance is dangerous!  
So it is important for us to see how Paul handles the theme of vengeance in 2 Thess 1.

There is no hint of personal retribution –  
Paul is not encouraging the Thessalonians to hold grudges and pursue vendettas.  
Rather, he *comforts us* with the reminder that God *will* make all things right.

2 Thessalonians 1 picks up where Joel 3 leaves off.  
“*When he comes on that day* to be glorified in his saints,  
and to be marveled at among all who have believed,  
because our testimony to you was believed.”

What is meant by “that day” –  
What is meant by “the Day of the Lord”?

Most simply, it is the Day when God makes all things right.  
It is the Day of Judgment when God rights all the wrongs of human history!  
There are *lots* of days that are connected to that Day!

Every time that God gives us a partial glimpse of that Day –  
every time there is a partial judgment of a nation – or an individual –  
we see a reminder of *that Day*.

And Paul is writing to people who are suffering – and who need to be reminded and comforted  
that these afflictions are not going to last forever!

### **1. Paul’s Greeting (v1-2)**

As in most of his epistles,  
Paul’s greeting consists of three parts:  
He first identifies himself and his colleagues.  
Then he says who he is writing to.  
And then he greets them.

There are lots of letters in the ancient world that follow this pattern:

Marcus, to his wife, Lucretia, greetings.

Bob, to his cousin, Sam, greetings.

The fact that this is the standard way to start a letter

only serves to highlight the unique parts of what Paul does.

Because in each part of the “standard greeting” Paul does something interesting.

*Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,*

Most ancient letters just include a single author.

But Paul often includes the names of his colleagues here at the beginning.

Why does Paul include Silvanus and Timothy?

It may be that Silas and Timothy helped write the letter.

As you read through the letter, there are lots of “we” sections –

and only a couple of times where Paul says “I.”

Only at the end does Paul say

that he personally wrote the final greeting with his own hand.

What Paul wants to communicate by saying “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy”

is that this letter is the product of a team.

Whether it was through their conversations over dinner:

(“What should we say to the Thessalonians, Silas?”

“You know, I really liked how Timothy put it in his sermon the other day...”)

Or whether it was actually that each wrote different sections,

the point is that Paul’s ministry is defined by a hearty collegiality.

In the very moment where you might expect Paul to insist on his apostolic uniqueness –

he is writing *scripture* after all! –

Paul has no such arrogance.

Yes, *his* apostolic authority lies behind this letter –

but Paul does not “throw his weight around.”

Instead, he models the very humility that he preaches!

And the reason is found in the way that he changes the standard address:

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

The standard address would have been: “To the church of the Thessalonians.”

And seriously, the rest of the line is – in one sense – redundant.

There *is only one church* in Thessalonika!

So you don’t need to identify *which one!*

But Paul is not just specifying *which one*.

Rather, he is identifying who they are – and who *we* are together.

It's interesting, because Paul usually identifies churches by *place* –  
not by people.

So, for instance,

“To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...”

“To the church of God that is in Corinth...”

“To the churches of Galatia.”

“To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae”

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi”

Only *here* (and in 1 Thessalonians) does Paul identify the people with their city.

“To the church of the Thessalonians.”

Why does Paul do this?

This is why I felt the need to have such a long introduction  
about why persecuting the people of God is such a dangerous thing!

The church of the Thessalonians is the *hope* of Thessalonica.

And Paul is doing this very self-consciously.

Because Emperor Augustus (Octavian) had minted coins in Thessalonica

that named his adopted father, Julius Caesar as *theos* –

God – of Thessalonica –

and later coins depicted Augustus and Tiberius in the same way.

These coins were circulating in Thessalonica in Paul's day.

Why do I mention coins?

Well, in a world before the internet, before newspapers –  
*coins* are the most common form of communication.

If you want to do business in Thessalonica,

you will have a purse full of images of Caesar –

Caesar, claiming to be God!

And claiming to be God of the Thessalonians!

And so Paul addresses the church of the Thessalonians

*in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

It's very much like what Jesus had said a number of years earlier,

“render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's –

and to God the things that are God's.”

Why have Christians faced persecution over and over again throughout history?

Indeed, as the story of the Middle Ages and the Reformation indicates,

Christians have often been persecuted even by Christian rulers!

And the reason is simple:

Because Christianity does not allow us to give our *full allegiance*

to any nation or government.  
We can *submit* to any government under heaven –  
because the governing authorities are established by God!  
But Christians are always a potentially subversive group,  
because we recognize that Jesus is *Lord*.

No earthly nation, no constitution, no president, no king –  
is worthy of our full allegiance.

And so Paul addresses the church of the Thessalonians –  
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ –  
as if to point out that this small group of Thessalonian Christians  
is but the firstfruits of the larger harvest –  
a harvest, by the way, that would continue over generations and centuries –  
since the whole region eventually converted to the gospel,

as evidenced by our dear friend and brother, the late John Deliyannides,  
who was a native Thessalonian –  
living proof nearly 2,000 years later that Paul was right!

And so in verse 2, Paul greets these Thessalonian Christians:

<sup>2</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The standard greeting in Greek was “chairein” (greetings) –  
but Paul says “charis” (grace).

The standard greeting in Hebrew was “shalom” (peace).

And so Paul blends together the Greek and the Hebrew greetings –  
and transforms them both into a *gospel* greeting:

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

This functions as an opening *blessing* pronounced upon his hearers.

This is why we use this sort of greeting at the beginning of our worship service.  
It’s not that every interaction we have needs to be hyper-spiritualized!  
It’s okay to say, “Hey, how ya doin” when you are walking down the street!  
But as we gather in the presence of God,  
it is fitting to remember whose we are –  
as God has placed his name upon us and called us to be his.

And as usual for Paul,  
That opening greeting leads him to thanksgiving!

## **2. Paul’s Thanksgiving (v3-10)**

**a. For Your Faith and Love in the Midst of Persecution and Affliction (v3-4)**

<sup>3</sup> *We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.* <sup>4</sup> *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's opening phrase in verse 3 is fascinating:

“We *ought* always to give thanks to God for you, brothers...”

Or “We are bound to thank God always for you, brothers...”

This is *our duty*.

After all, Paul's opening thanksgiving focuses on what is *right* and *just*.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul had expressed concern that their faith was wavering –

“For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction,

just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” (1 Thess 3:4-5)

But now, Paul has been comforted by Timothy's trip to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:6), and the continuing reports from the church there indicate that their faith is growing – even in the midst of the continuing persecution and affliction.

And so is their love.

For Paul, faith, hope, and love are always bound together (He doesn't use the *word* hope in chapter 1 – but the idea runs all through our passage – and indeed, it will be the central theme of chapter 2).

But here in his opening thanksgiving Paul highlights *faith* and *love*.

Because where faith is growing, so also will love.

If you are growing in faith – if you are trusting God more and more – if you are believing his promises and drawing near to him daily –

then you will also be *loving* one another more and more – because you love God –

therefore you love those who are made in his image –

and especially, you love those who share the same precious faith, whose hope and trust are in your beloved Savior!

A saving faith is *always* a faith that works by love.

And I can speak confidently for the whole session, when I say that we rejoice to say with Paul,



that 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.

When we see the way in which your faith has grown –  
when we watch the way in which your love for one another has increased –  
how you care for each other in the sorrows and trials of life –  
we marvel – and we give thanks to God for the grace he has given you!

Now, it's also true that we don't face *much* persecution in our daily lives –  
certainly nothing compared with the life-threatening persecutions  
that others have endured –  
but I daresay that much of the persecution faced by the Thessalonians  
was more petty and personal than it was life-threatening.

We see in the book of Acts that the Roman authorities  
*generally* preferred not to get sucked into religious disputes.

But, of course, Christianity was an illegal religion.  
While the Romans executed relatively few Christians –  
there was always the *threat* of death looming over you.  
And that also meant that your neighbors – whether Jew or Gentile –  
could use your faith as a weapon against you.  
“If you don't do what I want, I can make your life miserable!”

Today, Christianity is not illegal –  
but certainly it is rather unpopular in some circles.  
And particularly, what the apostle Paul would recognize as Christianity  
faces considerable opposition in the public square.

And so most of the “persecution” that we face  
consists of societal pressure to conform to the dominant political/cultural paradigm.

Every time a Thessalonian pulled a coin out of his purse to pay for something  
he was reminded of Caesar's claims to his allegiance.  
Every time we read the news, scroll through Facebook, walk into a store,  
we are reminded of the claims of our political-economic system.

We face serious pressure to conform to a social-political-economic system  
that has no place for King Jesus.

**b. For the Lord Jesus's Vengeance Against Those Who Afflict You (v5-8)**

<sup>5</sup> *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—*

Verses 3-10 are all one sentence in Greek!

Let me say it really simply right now – and then we will dig in deeper next week.

<sup>6</sup> *since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,* <sup>7</sup> *and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels* <sup>8</sup> *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.*

We don't have time to cover the whole sentence –  
but I want you to see what Paul is doing  
because what he is saying to the Thessalonians  
is *exactly* what you need to hear!

You can endure in the midst of the trials and afflictions of this age  
because you know that God is just –  
and he will make everything right.

The cross of Christ is not the end of the story.  
Suffering, humiliation, affliction, and death –  
is not the end of the story!!

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that death is defeated –  
and so when Jesus returns – when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven  
with his mighty angels in flaming fire,  
he will inflict vengeance on those who afflict you!

It's worth remembering that Paul himself was once a persecutor.  
Paul himself *deserved* the fiery vengeance of Jesus.  
But instead the Lord showed mercy.  
Likewise, I don't doubt that Paul regularly prayed for the conversion of other persecutors.  
But the fact remains:  
those who *refuse to repent* –  
those who refuse to obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus –  
will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction.

Why is this?

Well, those who seek to overthrow Christ and destroy his people  
are engaged in a self-destructive endeavor!  
Jesus Christ is the *only hope* of humanity!

Because if the wages of sin is death –  
then how can I survive the just judgment of God?

This is why the Day of the Lord is all bound up in the Cross of Jesus.

As Paul says in Romans 3:26, the cross of Christ – his sacrificial death –

“was to show his righteousness at the present time,

so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Jesus does not say “Oh, don’t worry about your sin.”

He says, “I came to die in your place – so that I might pay the penalty for your sin.”

**c. For His Coming on That Day to Be Glorified and Marveled At (v9-10)**

*<sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, <sup>10</sup> when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

**3. Paul’s Prayer (v11-12)**

*<sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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.*