

CAN GOOD COME FROM SUFFERING?

2 Thessalonians 1

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Paul is writing the Thessalonian letter from the city of Corinth. When he wrote 1 Thessalonians, it probably came a year or year and a half after that church had been founded. He writes to a church, a group of people, who are growing in faith and love and hope, whom he commends and praises for their walk with the Lord. Yet there are difficulties within the congregation.

There are difficulties in regard to belief. Some are concerned, because they have had loved ones who believed in Christ and who have since died. What is going to be the fate of the dead in Christ? There were others greatly upset as to the knowledge of the impending moment of Christ's return. Paul has written to address this subject. There are others who, because of their intense feeling about the Lord's return, had withdrawn from normal activities and affairs in life and had become idle busybodies. So Paul addresses the letter to help correct that situation.

In 2 Thessalonians, we see the apostle Paul needing to give a word of the Lord to the congregation, because of certain problems which continued to persist in the experience of the Thessalonian believers.

One problem was a new problem. It's reflected in 2:2. In fact, I'm sure it led to the potential of a very discouraged Thessalonian church. Paul indicates that they are not to be quickly shaken in mind, or excited either, "not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come" (NIV).

What evidently had happened is that someone, as a forger, had written a letter reportedly in the name of Paul, indicating to the Thessalonian believers that the day of the Lord had occurred. Of course, in 1 Thessalonians we have seen what an awesome thing the day of the Lord is. The day

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of the Lord, for unbelievers, is an experience of wrath. Men will cry for the hills, the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and to hide them from the face of God (Revelation 6). And for the believers, the day of the Lord will be a beautiful and marvelous thing, when we are with Christ forever, secure with Him. And we are kept from His wrath.

You can see the unsettling influence it would have, therefore, on the Thessalonian believers, to have a purported letter from an apostle instructing them that the day of the Lord had indeed already come. Since they were going through persecution, perhaps they would have the tendency to perceive that persecution as an indication of the judgment of God upon themselves. That they in fact had missed God's salvation and God had passed them by. Yet, in the midst of that potential and threatening discouragement, these believers had held true to the Lord in their faith. Chapter 4:1 indicates that they are being persecuted and are having afflictions.

The phrase used at the end of verse 4, "persecutions and trials you are enduring" (NIV), is in the present tense, meaning they're going through troubles for their faith in Christ as Paul is writing the letter. That situation is somewhat different than the writing of 1 Thessalonians, because in it, chapter 2, it is noted—I think in verse 14—that Paul mentions "the things which you have suffered from your countrymen," and the verb is in the past tense. That means that when he first wrote to the Thessalonians they had had a period of persecution, but it had ceased. Now, however, the persecution had revived itself and was going on. Paul therefore writes to a group of potentially discouraged and troubled Christians.

There's one thing that I think we should see by way of application. The gospel of Jesus Christ is one that, for the believer, always brings a word of encouragement. Never in the Scripture is the phrase "Discourage one another with these words" found. There are ways that we relate to one another to help each other grow in the faith and find our fulfillment in Christ. There are many

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words which are employed to bring about, to elicit, the kind of God-like living that Christ asks for. Some of these words are found in the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. He uses terms like “We admonish you” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). “Establish in the faith...to exhort you...” (3:2). And in 4:1, “We beseech and exhort you.” And in 4:18, “Comfort one another with these words.” And in 5:11, “Encourage one another and build one another up.” And in 5:14, “Admonish...encourage...be patient...do good.” All of those are qualities of expressions we may use to help bring spiritual life to other people. But never once are believers permitted the option to discourage one another.

If discouragement is happening in your life as a believer, I want you to check the source. There are two things I can guarantee you that the source is not from. The source of the discouragement for the believer is never God. And the source of discouragement for the believer is never from another believer who really knows God. It is only from a false apostle who would write a discouraging word.

Does God convict us of our sins? Does God point them out? Yes, He does. Is that discouraging? Not at all. Because when God points them out to us, He shows us the way out and the way to leave them behind and the way to go on walking with Him. But when someone else points them out to us or when the enemy points them out to us, he simply leaves us in our sins, with no hope and no way out.

Who do you receive advice from? Who’s either helping you out of your inferiority complex or perpetuating you in it? Who has the good news for you? The gospel has the good news. It’s even easy in a public worship service, as a minister, to be careless and have people leave with the impression of “I can’t make it. There’s no hope for me.” Such a lofty ideal has been shared and no way out whereby we can actually obtain that which has been spoken of and presented. You

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can leave discouraged. But that's not the character of Christian preaching. It's not the character of Christian testimony. If you ever leave a service and you have felt that I have preached the Word in such a way that you can't attain it, that it's not for you, then one of two things has gone wrong. Either your hearing has been wrong or I've been out of touch with the Lord that day and have not given to you the gospel. The gospel is good news. It searches us in our sins. It finds us there. But it points the way out.

How does Paul seem to bring about an end to this pattern of discouragement in the Thessalonian believers and communicate to them the encouragement that Jesus Christ has to offer?

I. One good thing that happens is seen in the first words of the letter. "Paul, Silas and Timothy..." In the recitation of those three names, we're reminded that, in our discouragement, God has people who are in contact with us.

Somebody needs to get through to the Thessalonians and tell them the day of the Lord hasn't come. Someone needs to get through and lift their faith. Isn't it reassuring to know that when we ourselves are in a jam of despondency or discouragement, God has a way of getting through to us to establish a point of contact with us? And of saying to us, "Hear the Word of Christ!" That may be happening to you today. Anytime we get together, there are represented within our midst a multitude of diverse ways of feelings about life which we have. Attitudes which we bring. And certainly, it would not be unusual at all, in the audience today, for some of you to be very discouraged and despondent. God is using this Word today to find you, to establish a point of contact with you. Paul, Silas and Timothy were the founders of the church at Thessalonica. Even though Paul is writing the letter, he uses Silas and Timothy in the greeting, he uses their names. So establishing a point of contact brings encouragement to the Thessalonian believers, as well as to us.

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II. There's also another way that the Lord brings encouragement to lift the distress of the Thessalonian believers. That is, to bring them a reminder of what they really have in Christ.

There are words we like to hear over and over again. I like to hear "I love you" and "I think you're going to make it." The kind of things you can say over and over again which I suppose I could never get enough of.

Paul's like that with the Thessalonians, because in both letters he starts with essentially the same wording by way of reminder. "To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:1-2, NIV). Words we love to hear. Words which remind us of where we are in Christ. In our discouragement, we are to know that we are in the church of Jesus Christ. We're not in a man's church. We're not in a church which is an institution of man. Ultimately, we belong to a church which is of Jesus Christ. This means that, when we go through things, we're not going through them alone. We're going through them in a company.

The church is never just made up of one individual. The church is the body of Jesus Christ, of which we are a part. It may be that our physical location is Thessalonica, but that is immaterial. Where we are really at is in Christ and in God, the Father. We may be in a whole lot of hot water, but that doesn't matter, because in the midst of the hot water, we are in Jesus. A reminder. And also a reminder that we have God's grace and God's peace. God's grace, which has found us when we were unworthy and unable to do anything for ourselves. But God, in His kindness, acted on our behalf and imparted joy to us. That act of grace has, in turn, given us peace, the ability to put it together. To be at peace with ourselves and with God. That reminder stills hearts in times of trouble.

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III. There's also a third way Paul seeks to bring encouragement to these Thessalonian believers. Not simply by means of establishing contact with them. And not simply by reminding them of things they already knew and were sure of, but he also gives thanks to God for them.

He particularly gives thanks for something that has been happening in respect to their faith and love. Verse 3 says, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing" (NIV).

Notice he says, "We are bound to give thanks." When we read that, it almost seems like he's writing under some sense of obligation, a duty. But that's not really the effect of the Word. It simply means that their faith and love is of such an aggressive variety, that he couldn't help but give thanks to God. There was no way he could avoid it.

Notice two things that are happening: Faith is growing and love is growing. In fact, a word used to describe faith growing abundantly is the same word which can be used to describe the luxuriant growth of a plant. It just simply fills up every square inch of space and just keeps growing and growing. That's the kind of way faith is growing. And love is increasing. It's normal, natural growth. Is it any wonder that their faith and love are increasing? It's no wonder at all. It has been something which, from the beginning of their walk in the gospel, has been present and it has been something for which the apostle has been praying.

In 1 Thessalonians, we see the evidence of where faith and love are at work. In chapter 1:3, he states, "Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love." In 3:2, "We sent Timothy to establish you in your faith." In 3:12, "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all men." In 4:9, "You have no need for

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anyone to write to you about love of the brethren, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.”

What does the growth of love mean in the Thessalonian experience? That love is a gift from God, which is given to us at conversion, which we seek then to develop and to grow in. In essence, love has been placed in our lives as a seed. There is no way you can ever grow to have enough love, because love demands constant growth. So does faith. The Thessalonians had not arrived at a place in their experience where they had said, “We’ve come this far in faith and we think we’ve come far enough. Our love is pretty healthy. We’ve loved enough.”

Often, in measuring the growth of the church, we do so by worldly means. We’ve all been in churches where they put a sign up, “Attendance...” “Attendance last Sunday...” “Record attendance...” “Goal...” “Offering...” It’s interesting that the thermometer of success, the measurement of success in the Thessalonians, is love and faith. Wouldn’t it be great if we could put a thermometer here and say, “The faith of the congregation is ‘this’ much. Look at where it was a month ago. It isn’t the same. It has grown.”

As I’ve indicated in 1 Thessalonians, God knows we can never get enough love. We must go on growing and developing and developing. Woe to the Christian whose memories of the past experiences in God are more fresh than his current encounter with God or what he expects in the future. Faith and love grows. And if faith is growing, what does that mean? That we’re taking on more and more responsibilities. That we’re taking on more and more pressures, and that, in the midst of them, we are having the faith to believe that God will reach us in them. Certainly the fact that faith is growing may mean that another person’s faith may be more developed than your faith. Instead of being discouraged while looking at the greatness of their faith in respect to your

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own, be encouraged that you are moving in that direction and God has a plan for you to walk and to grow.

Faith grows. Love grows. It's the quality of a congregation that moves in the Spirit, that walks in the Lord, to see these things at work. It ought to be happening in our families. Our love ought to be growing for one another. It's a beautiful quality that God has put within man, that even though our bodies decay, our spirits don't. While we may reach a saturation point in terms of physical maturity and quit growing on the human side and actually start declining on the physical side, we can never quit growing right on into the ages, in love toward one another and toward God.

That's something to be thankful for. Something we're to keep in mind in respect to our own walk with God and one another. Paul encourages them by giving them thanks in this respect.

IV. And he also gives praise (verse 4).

“Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:4, NIV). Paul had a little rule against boasting. He said, “I shouldn't boast about myself,” and he only pulls it out in the second Corinthian letter, when the super-apostles are exalting themselves beyond means. Paul says, “I'll start boasting a little myself” (2 Corinthians 11:30). He does so to establish his authority as an apostle. Some of the things he boasts of are his weaknesses. He makes it a rule not to boast of his churches. With Thessalonica, he in effect breaks that rule, but in a sense, he doesn't. Because what he's boasting of is not the exploits that he accomplished among them. But rather, he's boasting because they stood firm in persecution and affliction. All that has happened and he hasn't even been there. So legitimately he can boast without saying anything about himself. He

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says, “I just can’t help but tell everybody and all the churches of God”—the churches Paul was ministering to in the Greek world—“Your steadfastness has become known.”

There are times when we need to have a Paul walk into our lives. Or when we need to be a Paul. Sometimes we can get so fraught with afflictions and persecutions that we may not even see the great work God is doing in our life at that moment. It takes someone else to come along and say, “You’ve grown.” Paul, as a Christian, shows the positive characteristic of lifting out of trouble and depression and despondency, by saying, “I see something about you that is worthy of praise.” Is there a lot that might not be praised? Yes. I suppose, if we’re looking for things to criticize, we can always find things to criticize. We’re human. But remember when you criticize me, you’re only criticizing me. But when you praise me, you’re also praising God. Because God is responsible for all of my virtues, but He’s not responsible for any one of my failures. So build one another up in the faith by praising one another for your virtues.

V. Another encouragement that the apostle brings to the Thessalonian believers and to us is assurance.

Assurance of God for us. An assurance which is in the here and now and which also comes in the future, when God’s righteous judgment is disclosed on earth. Verse 5 speaks of the assurance in the here and now for believers who are undergoing pressures and persecution. “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering” (NIV).

As Christians, I know we have a great problem with intellectually understanding the purpose of suffering. I’m sure that for every intellectual problem we have with the subject, the person who’s not a Christian has far more. For only in the person of Jesus Christ can the whole aspect of suffering somehow be resolved. Christians may not even know themselves the ultimate details of

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the “why” of suffering, other than the broad outlines that God created the angels and man free. God gave both the angels and man the freedom of choice. Both sinned. Both the angel Lucifer and his hosts. Then man. As a result of that choice, evil has come into the world. Beyond those details, it’s difficult to press in terms of “why.” But the Christian ultimately, from the Scriptures, is not told so much the answer to the question of *why* he suffers as to *how* he suffers.

The Christian is assured that in the midst of his suffering he may find the reality of the work of God in new and deep and powerful dimensions. So that through suffering we may be made worthy of the kingdom of God. Before we were a Christian, we can say with Paul, we were unworthy—“I am the least of all the saints...I am the greatest of sinners” (Ephesians 3:8; 1 Timothy 1:16). But when we come into Christ, we’re no longer worms. Any Christian hymns we sing which emphasize the worm-like aspect of our nature are really not true of Christians. Once Christ is in us, we’re worth something. The process of suffering further complements that worth. There’s an interesting phrase used in the Book of Hebrews, that Christ, through suffering, was made perfect (Hebrews 2:10). How in the world? Christ was already perfect, even before He suffered. How could suffering make Him perfect? The word “perfect” is a word which designates one’s arriving at his purpose for being. It is not a word which designates the idea of being without fault, but it designates the idea of arriving at your purpose for being. Jesus’ purpose for being is to be our Savior. To die on the cross for our sins. There’s no way He could get there without suffering. He was made perfect in suffering.

God is also, through suffering, allowing things to be brought into our lives which could come to us in no other way except the successful Christ-like ability to handle it. God is always able to do something good in us through whatever tragedy happens to us. If you’re intellectualizing about suffering, you’ll never move an inch toward understanding suffering. You have to have more

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than an intellectual curiosity about suffering. You need to encounter God in the midst of your suffering, in order to cope with it. There are people who are suffering in the here and now and God is saying, “I’m doing something in your life as a result. Never forget that.”

There is also this aspect of the assurance that comes to the Thessalonian believers. They serve a God who is in control of the future. A God who has a place of rest for them and a God who has determined within His heart to bring about an equitable judgment upon the whole world. Verses 6–10 talk about this. “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you” (2 Thessalonians 1:6–10, NIV).

There are no words in the Scripture more awesome than the words which pertain to God’s final judgment upon the world. The scriptural witness is clear and unequivocal on the subject, that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. That ultimately God will sentence evil men who have committed evil deeds to a painful eternal existence without Him, so that those who do not know God and those who do not obey God suffer the eternal destruction and punishment of God.

We should look carefully at what is involved here, as well as attempt to raise questions which come to our mind. The phrase is used “those who do not know God.” And “those who do not obey God.” Perhaps by the term “do not know God,” Paul is referring to the heathen world who do not really seek to acknowledge God and what they did know about Him. God had revealed

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himself in creation and in our conscience. The term “do not know God” indicates that, by their own choice, they have elected not to know God and nor obey God. There were some in Paul’s world who reputedly knew God but did not obey God. These were members of Paul’s own kindred, who had the Scriptures but did not obey. Paul indicates that in both worlds there comes the judgment of God.

Questions have to be raised about God’s judgment and the whole doctrine of eternal punishment or the doctrine of hell, as we call it. There’s perhaps no more unpopular doctrine to speak of and to preach on in our modern culture than the doctrine of hell. That God has a day when He will judge the wicked and there will be eternal punishment. There is no doctrine that grates more on the sensibilities of modern culture. None which would be easier to disbelieve. If it were possible for me to remove the doctrine of hell, I would remove it. If it were personally possible for me to say to you, “There is no hell, there is no eternal punishment,” I would do that. That would be my feeling.

But whatever I feel, God has already felt more deeply than me. God also wills that there not be a hell. God also wills that there be no eternal punishment for you. So deeply has God willed this that He allowed His Son, our Savior, to come into the world and die for us, that He might cease hell’s existence for us who believe. That’s how much He is concerned. How much He’s involved.

As much as you might wish there were no hell, God has acted so that there would be for you no hell. His act has gone deeper than your wish. In respect to eternal punishment and hell, we raise questions. Questions which we face, which we come face to face with, who object to Christian teaching in this regard. The first question: “How could God do a thing like this? How could God

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love us *and* have eternal punishment?” Yet so very pointedly, Paul insists and points out that this is the just judgment of God (verse 6). He is just in doing this.

God can only be just in making the provision of hell, in order that we might be saved from it. In no way could He be called just if He had not provided a way of escape. But He has provided a way of escape. So His judgment is just. He is determined that men—with their flippancy, with their attitude toward God, with their persistence to walk away from God and not be in a relationship—should be granted their desire. Hell is ultimately God saying to man, “Thy will be done.” And it’s God ratifying our choice. If we don’t want Him in this world, we don’t want Him in the world to come. God is therefore just in the exercise of His judgment.

The question also arises in respect to a subject like this: “Is there more than one way to God?” If there were more than one way to God, Jesus would have never left His place with the Father to assume a relationship in a house of mortal clay and dwell among us and suffer for us and die for us, being in the form of God in His eternal existence before He came to earth. If you had the wisdom to perceive that man had more than one way to get to God, His death and resurrection were of utterly no necessity. For He simply would be providing one way among others that had already been established. Yet Jesus himself bears witness, when He says in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” The witness of the Scripture is clear on this. No one will want to be caught meeting God in the eternal day without knowing Jesus Christ.

The question also is raised in respect to this doctrine of eternal punishment. What about the good man? What about the person who doesn’t beat his wife, who doesn’t cheat in his business, who is a philanthropist and contributes to charity? Where is he? Ultimately, the Scripture answers back, “No man is good who says no to Jesus Christ. No man can really be called good who does not

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perceive the goodness that is in Him.” “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”

(Romans 3:23).

Perhaps getting to heaven on a natural term would be somewhat comparable to trying to swim to Hawaii. Some of us could make it a few yards. Some probably could make it 5 or 10 miles. But ultimately, no one could swim to Hawaii. The distance is simply too great. The good swimmer and the bad swimmer will perish on this side of Hawaii. Thus, the Scripture witness to mankind and their relationship to God. Some may be good and be able to swim further toward God. But ultimately, the distance between here and Hawaii is the distance which can only be bridged if someone else will take us there. We can't make it on our own. We need another means.

The distance from here to eternity, the difference from my sin to God's heaven, is bridged by Jesus Christ. No matter how good I am—the best man in the Scripture is Nicodemus, who is a religious ruler, an outstanding, upright citizen, but a man to whom Jesus talks in reference to the fact that he needs a new birth if he's to enjoy and see God. The question also is raised in respect to this doctrine of eternal punishment, what about the person who has never heard the gospel? Will God also condemn Him? Is he also lost? Hypothetically, Paul holds out the hope in the Roman letter that a person in that condition might be saved. He says, “On that day, if man has acted in light of their conscience and obeyed the law of conscience, their thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when God judges the secrets of man by the gospel of Jesus Christ.” But realistically and tragically, the Word of the Lord comes through the apostle Paul and is confirmed by Jesus in saying that all men have fallen short. Within every culture, man has not lived by the knowledge of God which has been there. Therefore, the preaching of the gospel is needed.

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How this cuts into our experience as Christians, how it would cut into any easy concept of missions which simply says, “We’re tokenly committed to the work of God and evangelism because the way of Jesus Christ, after all, is better than other ways and it would be a good idea if man came to the freedom that Jesus brings. It would be better than their pagan darkness.”

At the very cutting edge of the gospel is the truth. Not only is the gospel of Jesus Christ better than any other way, it is the only way. We are not to lull ourselves to sleep with the notion that men without God are being saved. The gospel, the preaching of Jesus Christ, is needed. What about the pagan who really has questions in his heart concerning God? That pagan, when the gospel of Jesus Christ is announced to him, because he is already seeking the light, will receive the greater light and walk in Jesus. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is necessary to be saved. It is necessary if men without God who have never heard of Him are also to be saved.

There is also this question which is raised in these days. It’s known by the general topic of “universalism.” Essentially, universalism says that ultimately all men will be saved. Ultimately, God will reconcile all things to himself. Even the devil one day will be reconciled to God and back in a place of being with God. What do the Scriptures have to say in this regard? The Scriptures bear witness to the utter impossibility of reconciliation. In fact, a term is used in reference to man, in verse 9, and in reference, possibly, to those supernatural beings who are rebellious and have sinned against God. These three things will happen. There will be punishment, eternal destruction, and exclusion from God.

Punishment. What is involved? In the whole teaching of the Scriptures, regarding the fate of those without Christ, Jesus—at the very close of His teaching on the future in Matthew 25—said of the wicked, “They will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous into eternal life.” If Jesus would use “eternal” in reference to life, speaking of our being able to live with the Lord

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forever, then that term “eternal,” when used of punishment, means what it does in reference to life. Some say God annihilates the wicked, but He keeps the righteous alive for eternity. Those two terms are used similarly—eternal punishment and eternal life. Since eternal life is eternal, eternal punishment also means eternal.

There is also the idea of destruction. Jesus talks about destruction in Matthew 10:28, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” The term “destruction” does not mean annihilation. It means “the utter devastation of all that gives worth to life.” The utter ruin of all that is noble and right.

The term “exclusion” is also used. “Excluded from God.” Jesus uses the term “exclusion” in reference to the concept of outer darkness. It’s the person who shows up at the wedding without the garment of salvation. He’s cast into outer darkness. The five foolish bridesmaids are cast into outer darkness. What does that mean? Essentially, it means that the Scriptures see earth as a middle ground where we make the choices that hang for eternity. On earth, don’t we see a mixture of good and evil? Heaven is removing all that is evil, so that only the good remains. Hell is removing all the good, so that only the evil remains. That which is good on the physical level in this life—sunshine without which we could not exist—will be gone in hell. Hell is outer darkness. Every good gift that God has given on earth is withdrawn in hell, so that there is exclusion from God, separation. God knows how to create distance. That separation is intensified all the way back in the teaching of Moses, in Deuteronomy 29:18,21, when the Word of the Lord, coming to ancient Israel, declares, “Beware, lest here be among you, a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away this day from the LORD our God to serve the gods of those nations...The LORD will not pardon him...All the curses in this book will settle upon him and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.” Removed, no longer remembered.

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Regarding this concept of no longer being remembered—I believe the Scriptures do suggest to us the possibility that existence in hell is to exist without God ever knowing that we're there. If Revelation 21 says, in reference to man, that all tears will be wiped away and all suffering will cease, and good-bye to all pain and death forever, if that's said of us, then I wonder also if there's not a day when God himself wipes away His tears—for mankind, where His suffering and His care and His concern are also wiped away, and into eternity, He might have all tears wiped away with us. No longer remembered. Exclusion from God. No longer our name being called. No longer the faithful Holy Spirit wooing and seeking to draw us to himself. Excluded. How are the doors of hell locked? They're not locked on the outside. They're locked, first of all, by us on the inside. In this age, we're given the opportunity to be released. But the witness of Scripture is clear. How is this a comfort to believers? It is a comfort only in the sense that we are saved from the wrath of God. These Thessalonians who are in the midst of all that the world can dish out, in reference to persecutions against the body. Ultimately, to know that there is one who can destroy both body and soul. Therefore, the assurance to the believer comes. Why is it that believers through the ages have been able to march to the stake with songs of praise and hymns on their lips and shouts of triumph? It is because of this very thing. Knowing the fear of the Lord, we have our relationship right.

The assurance is not only given in respect to teaching of the future. And, by the way, in Ezekiel 33, in talking about the death of the wicked, chapter 33:11 says "'As I live,' says the LORD God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. But that the wicked may turn from his way and live.'" That's God's attitude towards each of us today. But the day when God reveals himself is spoken of as revealing himself with His mighty angels and flaming fire—God and His retinue in heaven are encased in fire. That's the imagery that's being projected here, that is sent from

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heaven in fire. Fire, of course, means there is no way into the flame without Christ. The wicked are kept outside of the flame of His revelation. But for those who have been sanctified by Him, purified as if by fire, there is an ability to join that retinue and be with Christ. He will come.

What about the believer? Rest will be granted to him. Not simply physical rest, but spiritual rest. Rest from temptation. Rest from suffering. Rest from persecution. To be with God and granted rest.

Also in the coming of the Lord for believers, God will be glorified in His saints. What does that mean? The coming of the Lord is described as being glorified in us. So, in a sense, God is already glorified in us. In fact, as we understand the meaning of the word “glorified,” when we think of Jesus in John 17, as He was finishing His life, He said to the Father, “I have glorified Thee.” By that phrase, He meant to say that all that the Father is, He has manifested. All that God is like, what His character truly is—Jesus had shown. So that, when Jesus had finished His life, man really knew what God was like. There is that sense that God is now being glorified in us. Others are able to see in us the living Christ. But there also will be a time in which He will be clearly seen with no imperfection of our own. Christ really dwells in us and Christ will be fully glorified in our body. Glorified to the extent that the things which have torn at us physically, which cause us to move toward death, will no longer be there. Glorified in us spiritually in that the temptations and the forces which sought to move us toward death are no longer there. He completely will be seen in us. So that the result will be that all men will marvel at those who have believed. Stand back and gape in awe at one another, as we see what Christ has really accomplished in our lives.

VI. Then Paul prays.

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Sometimes, you wonder as a Christian what to pray for. We forget to pray for obvious things, things that are already in God's will. It's interesting that Paul prayed for the things he knew to be in God's will anyway. It's God's will for us to grow in faith and love. But that growth in faith and love doesn't occur without prayer. It's impossible to grow in faith and love without prayer. Therefore, the apostle Paul prays that these believers will grow in faith and love. When he prays in respect to faith in love, he now prays in regard to some other clear areas which are in God's will for us.

“We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling” (2 Thessalonians 1:11, NIV). What does it mean to be “worthy of the calling of God”? God has called us, Jesus has spoken to us, “Follow Me.” In the course of following Him, we are to live for Him, to actually let Him make us worthy of Him, so that we might really realize and fulfill His call for our lives.

What else? “And that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11, NIV). What's that saying? That God wants the believer to constantly fail in every endeavor? That every idea that is good and right and true should collapse? Not at all. But that God would grant each of us, in every determination of our life which is good and godlike, that success might be granted. And that every work of faith would grow. God help us if works of faith didn't grow. God help us if when we planted seeds, they died. And God help us in respect to our faith as a congregation and as individuals, if every time we reached out to believe the Lord, the enemy was allowed to frustrate us and deny us our intention. No. Every good work of faith shall be accomplished by His power. The end result of all this being, “so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him” (verse 12, NIV).

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Closing Prayer

Our Father, we would confess to thee once more, and as the apostle said, “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11). We thank You for Your righteousness. That You have an end to the designs of evil and an age in which Your righteousness will be completed forever in us. Today, as we have shared these enduring eternal truths before this congregation, I have attempted, within the limits of my ability, to share the good news which You have given. I have not, by any means of trick or guile, attempted to play on the emotions of individuals here with horrendous stories. I have simply, in obedience to Your Word, sought in this moment to be sober and to speak of the things which are to come as You have taught. So, Lord, because there has been no guile used in respect to Your Word, and because it has been presented honestly, Your Word also now comes to us in power. We sense the force of what You are saying to us. We know within our hearts the witness the Spirit is bringing now, which so clearly tells us that You loved us so much that we should not perish.