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Relief or Retribution - 2 Thessalonians 1



By Steven J.Hogan

~ A Saturday Morning Post #120 ~

Ever since the start of the church, Christians have been persecuted. But this should not be a surprise to us, for the Bible told us this would happen. Jesus said to His disciples, *"If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you"* (John 15:20). In his epistle, Peter wrote, *"For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example to follow"* (1 Peter 2:21). The apostle Paul said to fellow Christians, *"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."* Acts 14:22

Paul, who suffered greatly himself, was involved with many churches who were being persecuted, one of which was at Thessalonica. He was there for only a few weeks, but after leaving and hearing this church was enduring much tribulation, he writes a letter to encourage them. *"Grace to you and peace from God the Father... we ought always to give thanks to God for you... we ourselves speak proudly of you among*

the churches of God for your perseverance and faith" (2 Thessalonians 1:2-4). Now God had this chapter written with the big picture in mind, taking us from the time of the Thessalonian church clear up to Christ's return, which means these verses are for all believers living during this church age, but are particularly relevant to those living in the end-times.

What Paul says to the Thessalonian believers is instructive to 21st century saints who live in the midst of persecution. We are to keep trusting the Lord. We are to love one another. We are to persevere, to bear up under unjust suffering. We are to know that suffering is proof that we are true Christians, and are worthy of God's kingdom. And we are to also have hope – we are to know there will be permanent *"relief"* from this suffering. Close to 2000 years have gone by since the church began, which means relief and rest has already come to millions of believers who have died, and are now in heaven with Jesus. But since we live in the end-times, there is a good possibility many of us won't die, but will continue to live on, and suffer for Jesus, and then be raptured and given relief.

There is something else God wants us to know. As Christians we sometimes complain when we suffer. We may even look at unbelievers with an envious eye, wishing to have the comfort and ease which they seem to have. Yes, they may be eating, drinking and being merry, but don't forget, if they don't turn to Jesus, then God *"will cast them down to destruction"* (Psalm 73:18, Luke 12:4-21). God wants us to know that unrepentant unbelievers may afflict us for a short while on earth, but they will be eternally afflicted in hell. It is imperative that we have this perspective, and realize that *"momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory"* (2 Corinthians 4:17), and that the unrepentant unbeliever will receive eternal retribution, God's holy vengeance.

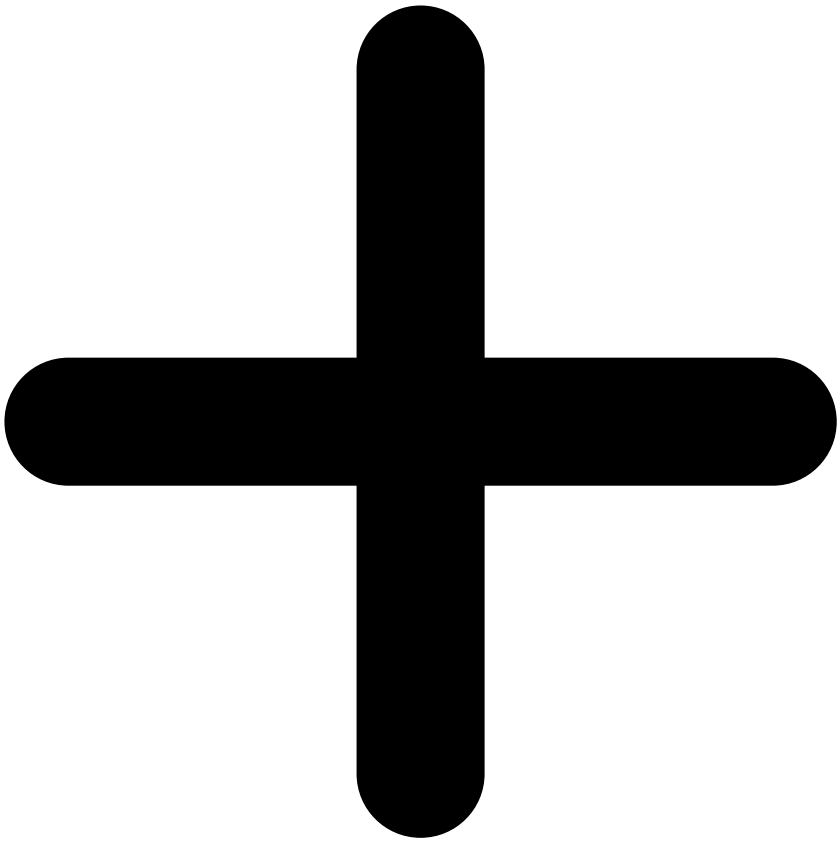
God goes on to explain the who, what and when of His vengeance, His righteous wrath:

* Who receives this wrath? All people who don't know God, who have rejected the gospel, God's offer of mercy, will be judged and suffer His eternal wrath.
* What is this wrath? It is eternal destruction. This does not mean God annihilates sinners, that He wipes them out of existence. It means they will be *"away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power."* It means they will never experience any bit of love, joy, peace, mercy or pleasure. But it's not just the absence of that which is good, it's the presence of eternal pain. Jesus says, *"these will go away into eternal punishment"* (Matthew 25:46). But always remember, when God brings retribution, He is completely righteous, for His wrath is based on His perfect and holy justice.

* When does this wrath, this eternal destruction begin? First, know that all unrepentant unbelievers who die before the return of Christ are cast into Hades (Luke 12:5, 16:19-23). Second, know that 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 has particular reference to the end-time unbelievers who are on earth at Christ's return. Their judgment starts when Christ is revealed from heaven, on that very day when He comes to be glorified in His saints, which is at Christ's coming. The first event to occur at His coming is the rapture of the church, and right after that begins this eternal destruction, which has three stages to it. First, these unbelievers suffer during the day of the Lord (Revelation 8-9, 16). Second, they are cast into Hades, where they will remain for one thousand years. Third, they are thrown into the lake of fire, where they will be eternally punished. Revelation 20:11-15

This last section about the unbelievers is true, and very sad, and most sobering. How then does Paul conclude this chapter? With a prayer, *"that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power."* Jude 21-25 tells you what to do: *"Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire… to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority."*

P.S. 2 Thessalonians 1 tells us that Christians go through tribulation from the beginning of the church age to the end of the church age. We also know that Christians all over the world will go through great tribulation in the time leading up to Christ's return. Two posts that speak about this are: Christians Go Through Tribulation and Christians Will Go Through Great Tribulation.





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