

The Justice of God is our Comfort

2 Thessalonians 1

Advent is one of the two great penitential seasons of the church. In Lent, we focus on what our sin cost our Lord. We celebrate His conquering of sin, death and the devil on the cross. In Advent, we focus on what our sin means in light of our Lord's coming again in glory. We celebrate His Kingship and return to take us to Himself in eternal glory. Since both seasons are penitential, we usually use the Wednesday services to catechize. For example, Luther gave sermons during the Advent of 1528 that helped form the Large Catechism. Sometimes during Advent and Lent we focus on the catechism during our Wednesday services.

But there are many ways to catechize. You get to suffer under my experimentation this Advent. In two ways. First, we're going to go through 2 Thessalonians this Advent. We call this *lectio continua* preaching. Many Lutheran churches do this during the summer as well. We may experiment with that also, but we'll start with this baby step of 2 Thessalonians. The second way I'm going to experiment is by expository preaching, or exegetically, instead of thematically. Thematically is how I usually preach and it is a very good way to focus on a particular theme of the Gospel reading each Sunday. Since Scripture is so rich, it's hard to exhaust the themes of Scripture. Exegetically is another fine way to preach. It's usually a verse by verse exposition of the Scripture reading. I think it will serve us well for going through one book of the Bible.

Paul established the church at Thessalonica in A.D. 50 on his second missionary trip. Thessalonica was an important harbor town on the *via egnatia*, or the Egnatian road, which connected Rome to the Eastern Empire which was centered in Byzantium. There was a population composed of both pagan Romans and Greeks, and also non-pagan Jews.

Across the bay you could see the peaks of Mount Olympis. I wonder how much that stirred the religious imaginations of the pagans as Mount Olympis was supposed to be the dwelling place of the so-called Greek gods. Paul spent three Sabbaths there convincing the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah promised by YahWeh and convincing the Romans and Greeks that Jesus is the one and only true God. Jesus remained a stumbling block to most of the Jews there, but many pagans repented and believed in Jesus. There was trouble in the church so Paul sent Timothy back to establish them in the Faith and comfort them (1 Timothy 3:2). Paul sent his first letter to comfort them with the second coming of Christ in glory to right all wrongs and bring His people into the new heavens and earth where sin would no longer reign in their bodies. Then, they were troubled by a fake apostolic letter that claimed that Christ's second coming had already happened. This caused people to doubt their faith so Paul writes them again:

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul starts in the typical fashion for an official letter of his day. I vaguely remember how to format a proper personal letter in school, but we've seem to have lost this art. Paul identifies all three missionaries on their original trip and addresses it to the church in Thessalonica. We can safely infer from the first letter to this church that Paul had desired it to be read to all the brothers and sisters in the church of that region. (1 Thessalonians 5:27) From this, I think it's easy to see that it should be read to us as well. We are brothers and sisters of Paul in Christ. There was confusion in Thessalonica about Christ's second return and it seems like it's only gotten more confused since this letter was written. Paul's words will be good for us as well as the original audience.

Paul starts and ends his letter with what every Christian should start and end with which is the grace of God. God extends grace to us and has made peace with us through the work of His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ! We relish that fact that God is for us and not against us! We relish the fact that God greets us through His Apostle Paul. God is speaking to us personally through His Word. His Holy Spirit works a living faith in us through this Word of God and gives us every good gift. We are a people of joy and hope because we have peace with God! And if we have peace with God, what can ultimately harm us? Can a pandemic harm us? Can corrupt politicians harm us? Even if we suffer temporary pain and affliction, God promises to work it out for our good! What amazing comfort a simple word 'peace' gives to us! Paul continues:

³ 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.

We give thanks to God for those Christians that inspire us! The Thessalonians were harassed and persecuted, but their trust in God remained strong. I hope that you notice that Paul doesn't talk about numbers here. When he talks about how the church there is doing, he talks in terms of their faith and their love for one another and not whether their numbers had increased or decreased. That faith and love exhibited by the Thessalonian church gave encouragement to other Christians. We were inspired by the Christians who were beheaded by ISIS in 2015. Their courage while being executed served as a shining example to the rest of us. The Christians that live under persecution in China encourage us by their strong trust in Jesus despite all the obstacles they face.

Our church hasn't really known persecution in America. But we live in a land of horrible heterodoxy and outright heresy. Our refusal to accept bad or wrong teaching is of great encouragement to the church in the world.

The Fort Wayne seminary is seen as a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. Through toil and support of the LCMS, the Lutheran Church in Madagascar has thrown off the shackles of the Lutheran World Federation or LWF. The LWF is the world's equivalent of ELCA. Both ELCA and the LWF have abandoned the Lord Jesus Christ and teach false doctrine which means they teach a false Christ. The church in Madagascar has rejected that false teaching and is now in fellowship with the LCMS. Thanks and praise be to our God! Paul continues:

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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—

Paul boasts about the church in Thessalonica because it has endured persecution and proved itself to be true to the Lord Jesus Christ. That kind of steadfastness should be boasted about by others to others. Paul is not recommending that the Thessalonian church start boasting about itself, but that it continue steadfast in clinging to Jesus through the one Faith handed down by the Apostles. We confess the same thing every time we confess the Apostolic or Athanasian Creed.

Their faith has proved genuine. They are worthy of the name they received in Holy Baptism. The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The first thing that came to my mind was a marathon which I've never done. The medals received by those who finish the race show them worthy to be called marathoners. And that medal doesn't just show the work on the day of the marathon, but all the work that went into preparing to run 26.2 miles! When Christ comes again and you receive your crown of glory it won't just show the grace you receive on that final day but the grace you've received again and again since your Baptism!

That grace works itself out in your life and continues to be tested. Through testing your faith is proven to be genuine. Paul continues:

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ 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 ⁸ 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.

The Thessalonians were afflicted by those who hate Jesus. As Jesus says, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (John 15:19) Dear Christian, you are not of this world because Christ has chosen you from before the foundation of the world. You are His. And because you are His, you will suffer affliction. You might not suffer the same affliction as the Christians beheaded by ISIS or as Christians who live in China, but you will suffer affliction by sinful men. And when you suffer affliction, remember what Paul says in Romans: "vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (12:19)

Because you belong to Christ, you are precious to God our Father. He cares about the fatherless, widow, and sojourner. (Deuteronomy 10:18) He cares for the poor. He cares for the downtrodden. He cares for you. And because He cares for you, He will inflict vengeance on those who have afflicted you. He will make every wrong right. He will dispense justice to all men. Not justice as men construe it, but the perfect, blameless justice of a holy God.

This gives us hope in the midst of our afflictions. Jeffrey Epstein seems to have gotten away with destroying many lives. He will not escape God's judgment. Career politicians seem to get away with anything they want. They will not escape God's righteous judgment. Many people in our lives seem to get away with all manner of sin, but they will not escape God's righteous judgment. God's justice is perfect. We can trust it.

Judgment for you and I is something wonderful to look forward to. Our trust in Jesus will receive its final vindication and we will live in the house of the Lord forever! (Psalm 23:6) Paul continues:

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

The wicked will be cast out into the outer darkness to receive the punishment commensurate with their sin. The righteous who are made righteous in Christ will glory in the full presence of their savior Jesus. We will marvel at how Christ worked in the lives of the Thessalonians. We will marvel at how Christ worked in the lives of those who have come before us, those who surround us, and those who will come after us. We will marvel at those who have shared God's Word with us. We will marvel at those with whom we shared Christ's saving Word. First and foremost, we will marvel at our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom we wouldn't even be able to marvel! Paul concludes today's reading:

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

Paul ends this section of 2 Thessalonians the exact same way he starts the entire letter: with God's grace! Grace is not something we can possess. It must be given to us as part of our daily bread. We must continue to have God's grace just as we must continue to eat. We can't live without it. Thanks be to God His grace is not based upon our efforts or intellect but it is based on His kindness. God is the One who makes you worthy. He works in you to will and to do good works. (Philippians 2:13)

The chief work that you do is believe in Jesus according to Jesus Himself in John 6:29. And according to His will, He continues to dispense grace upon grace upon you. And because it is according to God's will and not our own, we can trust it. As you live out your life trusting in the promises of God, Jesus is glorified in you. And you in Him.

And this is the great hope of Advent: Jesus returning in glory!

Our sinful flesh, the devil, and the world wants us distracted from our Lord's return. They want us focused on satisfying the desires of our flesh. Stay steadfast in your baptism. Stay focused on Christ's return. Paul uses the return of Christ as the reason for hope for those who are afflicted for their faith. The return of Christ again in glory is your hope too. Continue to trust in Him.

In Jesus' name. Amen.