

THE COMING KINGDOM

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

As I expect most of you know, today is Advent Sunday. Now many people associate advent with the celebration of the first coming of Christ nearly 2,000 years ago – and it is partly that, but actually it's mainly looking forward to Christ's second coming when his kingdom will finally be established. Paul talks about this in our reading today from his second letter to the Thessalonians and as we study this together you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles or all the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen.

Paul begins by associating his fellow missionaries with his letter and sends the Thessalonian church a greeting – look at verses 1-2:

“Paul, Silas and Timothy, 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.” (verses 1-2)

Paul's greeting is almost identical with that of his first letter to the Thessalonians and again he associates Paul and Silas with his letter as these fellow missionaries were well known to the Thessalonian church, having shared in the initial evangelisation of the city. He describes the church there in the same way as before, indicating that it owes its existence to, and draws its life from, God the Father and the Son.

Paul continues with a thanksgiving to God for his blessings on the Thessalonian church in verses 3-4:

“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. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.” (verses 3-4)

Paul is proud of the Thessalonian church. He's learned from Timothy that their faith is growing progressively as they persevere in their trials and their love for one another is also growing. Paul sees his thanksgiving to God as actually a debt owing by him to God. A

couple of weeks ago Roger spoke to us about how the trials and troubles of this life shape us and strengthen our faith – and that’s what Paul is saying here. Our faith is a relationship of trust in God, and like all relationships is a living, dynamic, growing thing. So our faith is not fixed and also there are degrees of faith, as Jesus implied when he said ‘You of little faith’ and ‘I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith’ (Matthew 8:26; 8:10). We need to work at continually strengthening our faith, particularly as we suffer the pains and tribulations of this life, and endure and persevere through these trials. Equally love is also not fixed and we need to work at nurturing loving relationships as well.

Here Paul affirms and encourages the Thessalonians in the most Christian of all ways: ‘I thank God for you, brother or sister. I thank him for the gifts he has given you, for his grace in your life, for what I see in you of the love and gentleness of Christ’. He’s affirming them without flattering them, and encouraging them without puffing them up. I think there’s a lesson for us all to learn there, we should encourage and affirm our Christian brothers in the same way that Paul does.

Paul goes on to speak of God’s judgement and his coming kingdom in verses 5-10:

“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. 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 marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.” (verses 5-10)

In verse 5, Paul is saying that both the fact that the Thessalonians are suffering for Christ and the faith, love and endurance they are displaying in the midst of these sufferings are evidence that God's judgement is just or right.

Jesus had taught that suffering was the unavoidable path to glory, both for himself and for his followers (Luke 24:26; Mark 8:31). Similarly, Paul had insisted that it is only through many tribulations that we can enter God's kingdom (Acts 14:22), and that only if we share in Christ's sufferings will we ever share in his glory (Romans 8:17). So suffering and glory, tribulation and the kingdom, are inseparably joined together. Therefore, since God was allowing the Thessalonians to suffer, they could know that he was preparing them for glory. Their suffering was itself evidence of the justice of God, because it was the first part of the equation which guaranteed that the second part (glory) would follow.

In verse 6 Paul makes it clear that God will eventually bring his judgement on those who are persecuting the Thessalonians. Indeed, because *God is just*, he will vindicate them publicly one day. He will reverse the fortunes of both groups, the persecutors and the persecuted, when Christ comes. In the meantime God is perfecting them and making them fit for their heavenly inheritance. Paul sees *evidence that God's judgment is right* in the very situation in which we might see nothing but injustice. We need the same spiritual discernment and godly perspective that Paul had.

God's future righteous judgement will be enacted when his kingdom comes, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels". This second coming of Christ will be personal, the same Lord Jesus who lived, died, rose and ascended, will come again. It will be a visible coming, having disappeared from sight at the ascension, Christ will reappear. It will be a glorious coming; Christ's first coming was in weakness and obscurity, his second coming will be in power and public magnificence.

This second coming echoes many thoughts from Isaiah (chapter 66:4, 15) and is very similar to what Paul described in his first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:14 – 5:2), but here different details of Christ's appearing are selected for mention. Instead of the loud command, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God (1 Thessalonians 4:16), we now read of *blazing fire*, which is a regular biblical symbol of the holy, consuming nature of God's presence. Also in 1 Thessalonians it's specified that the Christian dead will accompany the Lord, whereas verse 7 only mentions God's powerful angels – although both saints and angels may well be included in the expression 'all his holy ones' (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

Verse 8 tells us who will be punished when Christ comes again as judge. Paul writes:

“He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (verse 8).

I think this means that God's judgement will rest on unbelievers who have wilfully rejected both the knowledge of God and the gospel of Christ. I like the way the REB puts it, bringing out the *willfulness* of such persons, by describing them as 'those who refuse to acknowledge God and who will not obey the gospel ...'.

Verse 9 again echoes the language of Isaiah, this time from chapter 2:10, and tells us what the judgement on such persons will be:

“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (verse 9)

although I think the emphasis here is on being excluded from God's presence rather than on eternal destruction. These people will be forever 'shut out' or 'cut off' from God's glory and presence. I don't think this verse tells us anything about the nature of Hell, but since God is love and goodness and righteousness, being cut off from these things will be decidedly unpleasant.

In contrast to the appalling nature of hell, Paul goes on to portray the glory of heaven in verse 10 in language which echoes Psalm 89:7 and Psalm 68:35:

“on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.” (verse 10)

when Christ *comes*, he will not only judge those who reject the gospel, but he will also *be glorified in his holy people and ... be marvelled at among all those who have believed*, which *includes* the Thessalonians who, on hearing the apostle’s *testimony* to them (the gospel), had *believed*.

That is to say, not only will the Lord Jesus be ‘revealed’ objectively in his own splendour, so that we see that splendour, but his splendour will be revealed in us, his redeemed people, so that we will be transformed by it and will become vehicles by which it is displayed. It’s not absolutely clear what Paul is saying here, but I believe he means that Christ will be glorified *in* his people rather as if we were a filament glowing with light and heat when an electric current is passed through it. This is important because it implies a real change in us. We will not only see, but share in, Christ’s glory. We will be more than a filament which glows temporarily, only to become dark and cold again when the current is switched off. We will be radically and permanently changed, being transformed into Christ’s likeness, and in our transformation Christ’s glory will be seen in us, for we will glow for ever with the glory of Christ, as indeed he glowed with the glory of his Father at his transfiguration. On that occasion Jesus was glorified in his physical body. His face shone like the sun, while his skin and clothing glistened and became as white as light. In other words, his body became a vehicle for his glory. At his second coming it will be the same with his spiritual body, the church. The Body of Christ, that’s all believers, will be transfigured by the glory of Christ, not temporarily as at the Transfiguration, but eternally.

In verses 11-12 Paul prays for God’s power, bringing in thoughts from Isaiah 66:5:

“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this 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.” (verses 11-12)

Bearing in mind the future glorification of believers in Christ, Paul constantly prays for them. It is prayer which links the future to the present, the vision of what is to come with the reality of what is. Paul prays both that in and through God’s grace they may be counted worthy of their high calling and that by his power God may fulfil all that God’s goodness desires to do and that the Thessalonians faith makes possible.

Paul prays like this so that Christ may be specially glorified. What Paul is saying is that when by God’s power God’s people live a life worthy of his call, and when their resolve issues in goodness and their faith in works, then Jesus himself is seen and honoured in them, and they through union with him are seen in their true humanness as the image of God.

Isn’t it amazing that even now, before Christ’s second coming, this double glorification can take place – though only according to God’s grace. As always, grace and glory go together. Glory is the end; grace is the means to it. There can be no glory without grace.

So to sum up what we’ve learned this morning, God’s kingdom will be fully established with the second coming of Christ. At that second coming the Lord Jesus will be revealed in his glory and will be glorified in his people, but those who reject God and the gospel of Christ will be excluded from that glory and from God’s kingdom. Meanwhile, Jesus Christ must begin to be glorified in us, and we must begin to be glorified in him – in and through our prayers, our faith and our good works.