

XIII. The Apocalypse of Christ

April 6/14, 2011

2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

Aim: To derive comfort from the appearing of Christ, who judges His enemies with destruction but glorifies His saints.

A. What Happens at the Apocalypse (2 Th. 1:5-10)

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 is one long sentence in Greek, in which verses 5-10 form a subsidiary clause further developing the theme of verses 3-4. The main point concerning perseverance amidst persecution (1:3-4) prompts a secondary discussion of the justice of God at the Second Coming in relation to the final end of both believers and unbelievers (1:5-10). Paul reminded the Thessalonians of this great hope to encourage them to stand firm despite the severe persecution they were undergoing. Their hope—like that of all suffering Christians—was that Jesus would return and bring them relief; vindication comes on the Day of the Lord.

1. The Justice of God (1:5-7a)

On the surface it does not seem right that a just God can let His people suffer horrible injustice! If God is in control of all things, we reason, and if He is perfectly righteous, how can He let His children suffer totally unwarranted oppression and persecution?

This question has tormented many godly sufferers. Perhaps some in Thessalonica were grappling with it as well. It must have seemed strange to some new believers that the true and living God they now served allowed them to suffer so unfairly at the hands of their wicked pagan neighbors. If He was the sovereign Lord, why did He not do something to stop it?

Paul seems to have questions like this in mind as he writes this second letter to the church. He deals with these questions by helping his readers take a deeper view of their situation. If they could only see their sufferings in the right way, they would realize that God was at work in what was happening to them. Far from letting them down, He was in fact preparing them for glory.

a) *Worthy of the Kingdom (1:5)*

(1) Manifest Evidence (1:5a)

...which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God...

When godly people suffer, they are often tempted to call the justice of God into question. However, they should remind themselves that their experience does not support the idea that something has gone wrong; rather, it is evidence that their discipleship is authentic. Christians are called to be patient, because of the conviction that God's cause is right and that He will vindicate them in His own time.

'Manifest evidence' or 'plain indication' comes from *endeigma* (ένδειγμα), which refers to evidence or proof. The apostle says that this situation which appears to be so unjust is to be understood as open evidence that God's judgment is indeed right. What does he have in mind? Is he referring to the persecutions and trials mentioned in the preceding verse? Or is he saying that the Thessalonians' flourishing spiritual growth and steadfast endurance under persecution is proof that God's judgment is right?

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Some see Christian suffering itself as evidence of God's righteous judgment in action. Understood this way, Paul would here be saying to the Thessalonians that their present sufferings are in fact a display of God's righteous judgment at work. But this is not the only way, and perhaps not the most natural way, of understanding his words. Paul could also be speaking of the patience and prosperity of the Thessalonians in the midst of their sufferings. 'All this' served as a plain, visible token that God's judgment is right.

Since perseverance in the face of persecution includes actions both by Christians (perseverance) and by non-Christians (persecution), this future judgment will relate both to Christians (positively) and to non-Christians (negatively).

How, after all, can their growth in faith and love and their endurance be explained? These things were certainly not the result of unaided self-effort. They were they fruit of God's Spirit dwelling in them (Gal. 5:22). He had not abandoned them in their troubles, but was working mightily in them. And it was this fact that proved that God's judgment was indeed right. He was on their side, as it were, even though outwardly their circumstances seemed to suggest otherwise.

God's chastening of His own proved they were His children (cp. Heb. 12:7-8). Their 'suffering' was not, of course, the basis of the Thessalonians' salvation, but the evidence of it. Believers can face trials joyfully, knowing that God is equipping them for eternal glory.

This reminds us how careful we must be in interpreting the significance of suffering. Persecution and trial are not necessarily signs of God's displeasure. They are certainly never evidence of His injustice. He has many purposes in allowing His children to suffer. As Christians we must never expect to have trouble-free lives. We must not become upset with God and begin to question His goodness when He allows unfair things to happen to us. What counts most is what God does in us and through us by means of our sufferings. We need to look below the surface and see His larger purposes in what we are enduring.

(2) Counted Worthy (1:5b)

...that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer...

One of these larger purposes is preparation for the kingdom. Paul assures the Thessalonians that their sufferings have this end in view. The kingdom Paul has in mind is the future perfected kingdom of glory that will be fully realized at the end of this present age. It is the future kingdom in the new heavens and earth. While recognizing that this kingdom had come in the person and ministry of Jesus, the apostle also understood that its coming, and our entrance into its glory, was also still in the future.

Paul has previously made the same point that the Thessalonians' tribulation is proof of the genuineness of their faith (cp. 1 Th. 2:14; 3:3-4). The Thessalonians are to understand that what is happening to them now will stand them in good stead when the time comes to inherit that kingdom. But more than that, they can be sure that their patient endurance of persecution and trial for the sake of the kingdom will mean that they will be 'counted worthy' (*καταξιωθέντες, kataxiōthentes*) of it when it comes.

Christians can be considered 'worthy of the kingdom of God,' not in the sense that they deserve their place in it, but rather that they can rest content that there is convincing evidence that their Christianity is genuine. It is not that their suffering will actually merit admission into the kingdom. Ultimately they are able to enter only through the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Paul is saying that their perseverance in suffering for the kingdom will be seen as evidence that they are those to whom the kingdom belongs.

The main thrust of Paul's case, however, is that Christians must learn to take the long view. The apostle bids us consider the approaching end of human history (vv. 6-7). When that day dawns there will be no lingering doubts about the way that God has dealt with mankind.

b) Tribulation for Troublers (1:6)

...since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you...

In grappling with this question of the justice of their sufferings, the Thessalonian Christians are to take comfort in knowing that God's final judgment will surely bring retribution upon those who have opposed them. God will pay back their troublemakers. As unpopular as the idea may be, there is such a thing as the retributive justice of God. He does repay evildoers for their wrongs. 'Those who trouble' believers is a broad category, including all who attack the people of God.

Every culture, no matter what its laws, ethics, or morals, punishes criminals. People have a sense of justice, including capital punishment, because they are made in God's image. What is imperfectly true in the human realm is perfectly true in God's realm. When Paul wrote that 'since it is a righteous thing,' fitting, and proper for God to repay with retribution those who violate His law (as it is also right for God to reward believers with the kingdom; v. 5), he was stating a self-evident truth. God's retribution is not petty vindictiveness or an emotional frenzy. His retribution is the calm, controlled, just punishment meted out by the perfectly righteous Judge to those who have willfully violated His perfect law.

Antapodounai (ἀνταποδοῦναι; 'repay') means 'to give back,' or 'recompense.' It is a strong, compound word that conveys the idea of a full and complete repayment. *Thlibousin* (θλιβουσιν; 'tribulation' or 'affliction') can mean 'trouble,' 'distress,' 'difficult circumstances,' or 'suffering.'

At the last day the settling of accounts will take place. Those who trouble believers will be paid back in their own coin, and in full. One day their oppressors will reap what they have sown, because God is inflexibly just. Note that the role of persecutors and persecuted will be reversed in the future. For those who persecute God's people, the Second Coming will involve punishment for this persecution.

c) Rest for the Troubled (1:7a)

...and to give you who are troubled rest with us...

At the last day believers will see an end to their trials. God's justice at the Second Coming will involve relief for Christians. *Anesis* (ἀνεσις, 'relief' or 'rest') expresses the idea of relaxation, loosening, easing, freedom, refreshment, restoration, and rest. It is the lifting of the pressure caused by their persecution. Those like the Thessalonian believers and the apostle and his helpers will at last know relief from their troubles. God promises eternal rest to all believers, for all believers can expect to be 'afflicted' or 'troubled.' The long years of oppression will be over; they will all be able to 'rest' and be at peace. Paul is comforting the Thessalonian Christians by noting that, in the long run, rest is in sight (cp. Heb. 4:8-10; 1 Pe. 4:12-13). Paul associates himself with the Thessalonians as one who will receive a future rest when he adds, 'along with us.'

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The fact that they were being persecuted for their Christian confession, and were enduring the persecution with fortitude and faith, provide firm evidence not only of the genuineness of the Thessalonians' commitment to the gospel but also of the certainty of their inheritance in the coming kingdom of God. The outlook for persecutors themselves was not hopeless; one of the writers himself had been an outstanding persecutor, until he was conscripted into the service of the risen Christ on the Damascus road. For them as for other sinners the way of repentance is wide open.

The Parousia, then, will be the occasion for equitable retribution and reward. Having in this way alluded to a future retribution and deliverance, the apostle expands on this more fully in the verses which follow (vv. 7-10). He shows how God intends to accomplish these things and what it will mean both for those who are the objects of His judgment and for those who experience relief from persecution. Paul's description of the twofold nature of Christ's return—relief, refreshment, and peace for believers; retribution, judgment, punishment, and vengeance for unbelievers—was not new teaching (cp. Mt. 13:40-42; 24:31). Christ's return will thus produce two radically different results.

2. The Apocalypse for Unbelievers (1:7b-9)

a) *Apocalypse (1:7b-8a)*

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire ...

Paul mentions first when these coming events will happen. Punishment for the oppressors and relief for the oppressed will come about when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven. Paul had already discussed the return of the Lord in his first letter, in connection with fears about Christians who had already died (1 Th. 4:13-18). Here, however, His return is connected with the punishment of persecutors and the relief of Christian sufferers. Correspondingly, the imagery Paul uses to describe this same event is strikingly different.

First, he speaks of the Lord Jesus being 'revealed' from heaven, not simply as making an 'official visit' (*parousia*) from heaven. By using 'revelation' (*apokalypsis*, ἀποκάλυψις), Paul emphasizes the revealing, or disclosure, of Christ, who is no visibly hidden from us. This word, which means 'revelation,' 'unveiling,' or 'uncovering,' has the idea of manifesting what was previously hidden or secret (cp. Rom. 2:5; 16:35; 1 Cor. 14:6; 2 Cor. 12:1, 7; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:3). The idea conveyed is of His coming out into public view from a place of concealment. Jesus will be 'revealed' in the same way that a statue is unveiled. What was once hidden from sight will be in the full view of all.

Secondly, His coming is 'from heaven' (ἀπ ούρανοῦ, *ap ouranou*). Just as He ascended visibly, bodily into heaven, so Jesus will return from heaven visibly, bodily to earth (cp. Acts 1:9-11). However, this phrase is meant to suggest more than merely His place of origin. It points rather to His authority, power, and exaltation (cp. Acts 4:11-12; Mt. 24:30). Heaven is the dwelling place of God, and the Lord Jesus comes from God invested with divine authority to judge.

Thirdly, Jesus will not return solo on the Day of the Lord, but 'with His mighty angels' (lit., 'the angels of His power', ἀγγέλων δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, *angelōn dynamēōs autou*). Angels are instruments through whom the Son's power is delegated to accomplish His purposes, in this case, judgment.

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Finally, the Lord is revealed in blazing fire. The fire described here is the fire of judgment (as in Is. 66:16; Mt. 3:12; 13:30; Heb. 10:27; 2 Pe. 3:7, 10). ‘In flaming fire’ (*ἐν πυρί φλογός*, *en pyri phlogos*) is a frequent symbol of God’s special presence (a theophany). It is also a symbol of judgment. Isaiah 66:15 especially emphasizes His flaming appearance in judgment. Malachi 4:1 describes the Day of the Lord as a day burning like an oven. Even believers are given the salutary reminder in Heb. 12:29 that ‘our God is a consuming fire.’ The use here of ‘flaming fire’ further emphasizes Christ’s power and alludes to His divinity. These images, drawn from Old Testament theophanies or appearances of God (cp. Ex. 3:2; 19:18), reinforce the idea that the Lord Jesus comes with the full splendor and majesty of God Himself.

b) Vengeance (1:8b)

...taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One purpose of this unveiling will be to punish or avenge, which is an outworking of His justice (cp. v. 6). *Ekdikēsin* (*ἐκδικήσιν*; ‘retribution’), meaning ‘to give full punishment,’ is variously translated ‘justice,’ ‘punishment,’ ‘retribution,’ ‘vengeance,’ and ‘avenging of wrong.’ Again, this is further evidence of the deity of Christ because the Bible assigns the giving of vengeance to God (e.g., Rom. 12:19; Ps. 94:1; Nah. 1:2), a task which is more specifically carried out in the person of God the Son.

God’s retribution is not like the unruly, hostile, selfish, sinful passion that causes people to retaliate against others. God’s vengeance is untainted by vindictive passion. When He pays sinners back for their offenses He never acts arbitrarily or in what we would call a spirit of revenge, but always in terms of strict justice. He repays people exactly what they deserve. Because sinful humans are not perfectly holy, completely just, and omniscient, they cannot render perfect judgment. Therefore God reserves vengeance for Himself (Rom. 12:19; cp. Dt. 32:35; Is. 66:15-16; Heb. 10:30).’

Paul further describes those who will face God’s retribution by using two phrases. The judgment is destined for ‘those who do not know God’ and ‘those who do not obey the gospel.’ The first phrase describes those who do not have a personal relationship with Him. They may know facts about Him, and even imagine that they are serving Him by persecuting His people. The reason they do not know God is not ignorance but wickedness that causes them to suppress the truth that they do know (cp. Rom. 1:18-21). It is not simply inferring the existence and power of God from the works of creation; it is the ethical fruitful knowledge of God that changes lives. The second description intensifies their guilt. It is damning to reject an innate knowledge of God; it is to incur severer judgment to openly reject the gospel. Those who remain disobedient to the command to believe the gospel will face God’s retribution.

It is unclear whether two different classes of people are in mind here, or one group described from two different angles. If the former, those who do not know God are most probably Gentiles, and those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, Jews. If, on the other hand, all unbelievers are in view, they are considered as those who have willfully rejected the knowledge of God and spurned His mercy offered in the gospel.

Some see both expressions as referring to one general group made up of those who have explicitly heard the gospel and have rejected it. They argue that Hebrew parallelism explains why Paul appears to speak of two distinct groups. This view sees the passage following the typical style of OT prophecy and poetry with synonymous parallelism. These two parallel

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references point to Jews and Gentiles indiscriminately. Among those to whom retribution will be meted out, the persecutors of the Thessalonian believers are more immediately in the writers' minds.

However, it is more probable that the text does refer to two groups. 'Those who do not know God' include all who should have clearly known God by His general revelation in creation, but have suppressed this knowledge (cp. Rom. 1:18-23). 'Those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' are all those who have explicitly heard and rejected the gospel message of Christ.

Do you know God? We cannot overstate the importance of such a relationship. Everything hangs on it. To know God is to be secure for eternity; to be a stranger to Him is to face the certain prospect of eternal misery. Those who do not know God are in that position because they have steadfastly refused to have anything to do with Him. In effect, they have banished God from their lives.

Unbelievers are those who 'do not obey the gospel.' The gospel message makes demands upon us. A response is required. This judgment is not rendered by God because He is angry at unbelievers for hurting His children, but rather because the persecutors did not come to the Lord Jesus Christ and embrace the gospel.

c) Punishment (1:9)

These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power...

We have already encountered the idea of 'everlasting destruction' in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Th. 5:3). 'Destruction' (*ὀλεθρον, olethron*) does not refer to the complete dissolution of existence (annihilation), but to absolute loss and ruin. It does not mean the cessation of existence but rather the loss of all that makes existence worthwhile (cp. 1 Tim. 6:9). The lost will not cease to exist, but will experience forever a life of uselessness, hopelessness, emptiness, and meaninglessness, with no value, worth, accomplishment, purpose, goal, or hope. They will be ruined forever.

In recent years, annihilation has gain favor even among some evangelical theologians. In context, it is clear that 'eternal destruction' refers to eternal and conscious punishment. It is the alternative to God's gift to believers—'eternal life.' Since one aspect of the punishment is separation from the Lord, this would make little sense if those who were being punished were not conscious of the separation. Hence, 'destruction' is considered as a quality of existence. This is similar to 'life' in 'eternal life'; 'life' is considered as more than just breathing, but a wonderful quality of existence. To suffer eternal destruction is to suffer the eternal loss of all that is truly worthwhile and meaningful. Since *aiōnion* (*αἰώνιον*; 'eternal') refers to things of endless duration, the 'destruction' of the wicked will have no end but last forever.

The idea of never-ending torment is clearly so dreadful that we shrink from it. Paul takes his description of this punishment directly from Isaiah 2:10, 19, and 21. 'Everlasting destruction' translates a Greek word which means that the thing in question is not so much obliterated as ruined. It becomes the wreck of what it once was. This destruction is linked with the fact that the souls in questions are cut off from the presence of God. It is implied that this is an absence from the *goodness* of Christ which results in terror and punishment. Just as the believer finds his true humanity through union with Christ, the unrepentant sinner will be separated from the

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source of all good and ultimately from the fountain of true personality. Hell is full of the debris of humanity!

Two conditions under which the lost will serve their eternal sentence reinforce the horror of their punishment. First, they will be forever ‘away from the presence of the Lord.’ There will be no vestige of goodness in hell. The lost will also serve their eternal sentence ‘away ... from the glory of His power.’ Jesus described hell as a place of darkness (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; cp. 2 Pet. 2:4; 17; Jude 13), cut off from the visible display of God’s splendor and majesty. There will be no relief from hell’s horrors; nothing of God’s glorious presence to bring any shred of beauty, pleasure, joy, or peace.

Paul’s emphasis here is upon their tragic and irreversible loss. That loss appears to be intimately connected with being permanently excluded from the Lord’s presence. Those who do not know God will get their due reward when they are banished from His presence forever. The climax of Christian hope and blessing is to be forever with the Lord (1 Th. 4:17). Conversely, the greatest loss anyone can experience is to be deprived of that privilege.

3. The Apocalypse for Believers (1:10)

a) *The Day of the Lord (1:10a)*

...when He comes, in that Day...

Other more positive events are also associated with the revelation of the Lord. In this verse Paul turns his attention to believers. ‘That Day’ is one of many designations for the Second Coming (cp. 1 Th. 5:2, 4). For the believer, the day of Jesus’ return will be the best of days, ‘our day.’ It will be a day of vindication and honor.

b) *Glorification (1:10b)*

...to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe...

Instead of being punished, believers will be joyously praising Christ. The day of the Lord will be the day in which He is glorified in His people and marveled at among believers. The same revelation that excites terror in one class of people will prompt adoration in another. His glory will far surpass anything they could have imagined and leave them struck with wonder.

When He comes, two things will happen that will bring relief to believers. First, Christ will ‘be glorified (*ἐνδοξασθήναι*; *endoxasthēnai*) in His saints on that day.’ There is coming a day in which God will be glorified through believers in a manner never before seen. This is the glorious manifestation of believers that Paul wrote about in Romans 8:18-19. This glorification will be the final and full redemption of all believers when Jesus comes in glory. When He appears in glory, He will be glorified in His persecuted followers; they will share and reflect His glory. Second, believers will be ‘marveled at among all who have believed.’ The redeemed will wonder at the glory of Christ that is fully revealed in the resurrected saints.

Paul says that Jesus will come to be glorified ‘in’ His holy people, not simply ‘by’ them. We know believers will be transformed into His image in that day, and that they will radiate His glory forever (Phil. 3:21; cp. Col. 3:4). They will be glorified with Him; He will be glorified in them. But all the same, here the focus is upon the Lord Jesus and the accolades He will receive from His people when He appears. While He comes to punish, He also comes to be praised.

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Not only will Jesus affirm them, honor them, vindicate them, and proclaim before angels and men that they are His, but He will bestow His glory upon them so that they are transformed by it. The people of God will be lit up with glory; they will glow with His radiance.

The waiting multitudes of Christian people will gasp in delighted astonishment. Jesus will exceed all their expectations. There will not be room in a single believing heart for disappointment. Every one of them will be thrilled with His magnificence.

c) Belief (1:10c)

...because our testimony among you was believed.

This phrase is almost a parenthesis, explaining and amplifying ‘those who believe.’ Those who have believed the gospel (‘testimony’; *μαρτύριον, martyrion*) have taken the opposite decision to those who disobey it (cp. v. 8). The Thessalonians themselves can be confident of being among the adoring assembly that welcomes the Lord. Their glad reception of the gospel (1 Th. 1:6) guaranteed their joyful future. Nothing matters more than what happens to us when Jesus is revealed from heaven. Our destiny then hinges on our response to the gospel now.

B. What Happens before the Apocalypse (2 Th. 1:11-12)

1. Paul’s Prayers (1:11a)

Therefore we also pray always for you that our God...

Confident as he is that the Thessalonian Christians will share in the blessings of that day (v. 10), the apostle nevertheless does not relax his concern for them. Certainty of being in the presence of Christ in the future does not breed complacency in the present. This outlook prompts the apostle and his helpers to keep on praying for their friends in Thessalonica. This second sentence is a report of Paul’s prayers that the Thessalonians will persevere until they meet God and receive His blessings.

In addition to a thanksgiving-type prayer, Paul reports that his prayers ‘also’ include various petitions on behalf of the Thessalonians. ‘Therefore’ probably loosely refers back to the Thessalonians persevering and the blessings they will receive.

The essence of prayer is not demanding things from God but listening to discern His will. The deeper believers’ prayer lives become, the more they line up with God’s will as revealed in Scripture, the less inclined they are to ask for trivial things. Verses 11 and 12 do not record one of the many prayers that mark Paul’s epistles, but rather are a general report of how he habitually prayed. The passage shows that he prayed for the right things with the right motives. It also reveals that for Paul prayer was not a ritual or a routine but a way of life.

The end or goal of the apostle’s prayers for believers was their spiritual growth. Paul petitioned the Lord for His people’s maturity because he understood that sanctification, like justification, comes only through God’s sovereign grace, though not apart from human obedience.

2. Paul’s Petitions (1:11bc)

The specific petitions in this prayer-report are that ‘our God’ would do two things.

a) Worthy (1:11b)

...would count you worthy of this calling...

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Conscious that the end of all things was approaching, Paul prayed for his friends. In particular, he prayed that God may count them worthy of His calling. As he mentions this, Paul still has in mind the Lord's appearing. Restating aspects of 2 Th. 1:5, 'count you worthy' is referring to God's evaluation at the Second Coming of Christians' good works as evidences that they are truly connected to Christ. He and his colleagues want the Thessalonians to be able to appear before God in a condition that will win His approval. He has already expressed this wish for them in his first letter in terms of them appearing holy and blameless before God at the coming of the Lord with all His holy ones (1 Th. 3:13). He is repeating that same desire here.

This comprehensive request encompasses the entire spectrum of Christian character. Paul prayed that God would enable the Thessalonians to honor the name of Christ. *Axiōs* (ἀξιῶς 'count worthy') can also be translated 'make worthy.' Either sense is appropriate here, for God makes worthy those whom He counts worthy. As is always the case in the New Testament epistles, the 'calling' in view here is the irresistible call that infallibly results in salvation. Theologians refer to it as the effectual call, as opposed to the general call which is the open invitation of the gospel.

The call of God has the irresistible drawing power of unconquerable love. It comes as a summons from the throne room of the universe, a powerful word of command which overcomes all human resistance. It is a noble calling; it is a call to a life of holy excellence.

A call like that would demand all that the Thessalonian Christians could give and more! That is why Paul made it his regular practice to pray that God would count them worthy of it. In effect, this meant that he asked God to work within them in such a way that their lives would increasingly bring credit to the great God who called them. We should not confuse Paul's prayer here with the idea of earning salvation by works. Our salvation is grounded in God's election and subsequent calling to faith in Christ through the gospel. Our lives should be consistent with our calling.

They were certainly not worthy when they first heard the call of Christ! Paul did not mean that his friends might eventually reach the stage where they did merit His attention. It was a plea that God would make his friends what they had not been before. In effect, it was a prayer for spiritual growth so that their lives would not bring shame upon the gospel.

God takes sinners, worthy only of death (Rom. 1:32), and makes them worthy of His kingdom by imputing Christ's righteousness to them (2 Co4. 5:21). But Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would also prove worthy in practice through Holy Spirit sanctification (cp. 1 Th. 2:12; Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10).

We are called to resemble Christ. How can we do that without His help? By all means, let us pray for one another! So often when we pray for others, our focus is not on the people themselves but on the things they have (or don't have) or their personal circumstances. This kind of thing is not altogether wrong, but Paul had something else in mind. He was not so much concerned with asking God to smooth their path, but with what He would make them.

b) Fulfilled (1:11c)

...and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power...

But how can we live such lives? The rest of Paul's prayer gives us the answer. Paul's readers will be counted worthy of their calling as God works in them powerfully to fulfill their good purposes and their acts prompted by faith.

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Plērōsē (πληρώση; ‘fulfill’) could also be translated ‘complete,’ or ‘accomplish;’ *eudokian* (εὐδοκίαν; ‘desire’ or ‘good pleasure’) could be translated ‘purpose’ or ‘choice.’ Paul asks that the Lord would bring about all their longings for goodness. Paul also asks that God would complete the ‘work of faith’ He had begun in them (1 Th. 1:3) ‘with power.’

May God bring their plans and activities to fruition when they are prompted by faith! At the core of Paul’s thinking lies the notion that people who are truly converted have a different set of goals and ambitions from those who are not. Christians, at least in measure, will want what God wants.

Through His Spirit living in us He implants good purposes within our hearts as we respond in faith to His word. But these purposes and their associated desires and plans must be carried into practical action. At this point we need to look beyond ourselves to God in prayer for His enabling to do even the things that He has already made us want to do.

Putting the two petitions together, we see that it is God who considers us worthy because He does good works through us. Hence, it would make sense that, if ultimately it is God who is doing it all, Paul should pray to God to accomplish His calling. Therefore, it is clear from the context that when God counts us worthy this is not based on any merit of ours, because it is by His power that good works are done and this is the outworking of an effectual calling by God.

Paul knows they need the power of God to work out their faith in acts of practical service. The apostle and his fellow missionaries pray constantly that God would supply what their converts need. Only through His enabling will they be able to do the things that will make them worthy of their calling.

3. Paul’s Purpose (1:12a)

...that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him...

The aim of all this is not the final happiness of the Thessalonian Christians, so much as the glory of the Lord Jesus. Paul wanted the name of the Lord Jesus to be glorified in their lives. The point of their living holy lives is not firstly for their own sake, but rather for the glory of the Lord Jesus when He returns.

One thing mattered over and above everything else: the glory of Jesus. The apostle’s petitions were shot through with requests that the eternal Father would promote the reputation of His Son. This outcome mattered more than anything else. To glorify the name of the Lord means to honor and exalt all that He is. To do so should be the deepest desire of His people. When believers glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, they in turn will be glorified in Him. Paul has in view here both eternal glory and temporal honor.

Is this glorification something that occurs now, or does it take place at the Second Coming? It has been stated in verse 10 that Christ at His coming will be glorified in His people. But there is no difference in principle between His being glorified in them then and His being glorified in them now. Paul is probably emphasizing a present glorification here. The good works of verse 11 that will be recognized at the Second Coming also result in Christ’s name being glorified now, even though He is not visibly present. His ‘name’—i.e., His reputation—is ‘glorified’ when those who bear the name bring credit to it by their lives. Note that Isaiah 66:5 includes the words ‘name’ and ‘glorified,’ but it is not clear whether Paul is alluding to this verse.

Thessalonians – Lesson 13

Paul alludes to the same idea of glorification that he mentioned in verse 10. He is referring to the way in which holy, fruit-filled lives will be to Jesus' honor when He returns. They will glorify His name because they are the product of His work as Savior and Lord. The apostle has in his mind the picture of his readers, many of whom were once crass pagans, standing before the Lord as transformed people, trophies of His own redeeming grace. And it is the glory of the Lord displayed in such lives that spurs Paul to pray for them.

But that is not all. He knows that it will be not only the Lord who will be glorified at His appearing, but also 'you in Him.' Then they will have the joy of inheriting with Him the kingdom prepared by the Father.

It may be surprising that the apostle should go on to pray that his friends should be glorified too. There is a marked difference between our glorifying God and His glorifying us. When we give glory to God, we simply give Him what is His by right. To do anything else is actually to rob Him. He is glorious and deserves to have this fact recognized. When God glorifies us, He bestows something that we do not deserve. The glorification of a Christian is not a statement about the person's worth or merits, but about the kindness of a generous God who lavishes love upon the undeserving.

4. Paul's Power Source (1:12b)

...according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul closed the passage by reminding his readers that the ability to glorify Jesus Christ comes only through 'the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Like salvation itself, everything in the Christian life comes by grace—God's unmerited favor. Our God is kind. He showers mercy on pitiful specimens like us. Not for a moment, however, will all this be considered the reward of their own efforts. God's grace, His underserved favor in action, is the source of every spiritual blessing. We recognize that grace is the only explanation for our glorification. Praying for the right things is inseparably linked with holy living. The godly Puritan John Owen noted, 'He who prays as he ought will endeavor to live as he prays.'

This prayer report emphasizes again the ethical implications of the eschatological prospect held out to the Thessalonian Christians in verse 5-10. This prospect is not only an incentive to the patient endurance of affliction for Christ's sake; it is also an incentive to a life of positive action in keeping with the purpose for which God has called them. God requires in them conduct worthy of His call, and He provides the necessary motive power for such conduct by His Spirit who indwells them. If their Lord is to be glorified in them at His Advent, He must be glorified in their present way of life. The missionaries' prayer has the Advent in view, but it will be fulfilled then only as their converts are progressively transformed by the Spirit here and now into the image of Christ.

For next time: Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.