

Expect An Eternal Turnaround

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 • November 10, 2019 • Last Judgment Sunday



When Jason first heard the good news about Jesus it quickly took hold of his heart. The preaching about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection had completely turned his whole life around. There was a new preacher in town. He had just been there for three weeks. But Jason attended each of those services eagerly listening to it all. He invited the preacher and his travel companions to stay at his house. You can imagine how excited Jason was for the next service. And it wasn't just Jason. Many other people in town were enthusiastically embracing the gospel. A large number of people became Christian in just those short three weeks. I'm sure they all had high hopes for how everyone would get to hear, and everyone would come to faith in Jesus. But things didn't end as Jason and others might have expected. Not everyone was thrilled about the new preacher and his message. Some hated it. So much that they riled up a mob and stormed Jason's house. When they didn't find the new preacher or his travel companions, they dragged Jason out and threw him before the local authorities. They falsely charged him with harboring a dangerous outsider. The church had to stop holding Christian services. The preacher was forced to leave town. Jason and all the new Christians in town no doubt felt crushed. Instead of the gospel spreading freely, their preacher was gone, their message was barred, and they were persecuted. This is not what Jason had expected. I don't think anyone at the church did.

Jason lived in ancient Thessalonica and his church was a synagogue there. The new preacher in town was the apostle Paul. They may have faced some big setbacks in Thessalonica, but when Paul writes a letter to them he reminds them that things will turn around for God's people. Today we read the second letter of Paul to them. And we get to hear the rest of the story and the final outcome for Jason, all the believers at Thessalonica, and for all the rest of us. Things will not always end in the way many might expect. That's especially true when it comes to God's working and his final judgment of this world. As Christians we might face challenges and setbacks. But those times will soon come to an end. We expect an eternal turnaround.

The Christians in ancient Thessalonica weren't facing anything new. Paul and Silas had already faced constant opposition to the gospel. At the previous city they had been beaten, publicly humiliated, and tossed in jail. In place after place they faced painful trials and opposition. They were only able to stay in Thessalonica for three weeks. Then even after they left Thessalonica and were driven out, they were laughed at and mocked by the intellectual minds at Athens. Some people believed the gospel, but many others rejected and even fought against it. It seemed everywhere they went they faced a struggle to preach the gospel. The same could be said for every faithful prophet before and every faithful witness after. The same is true for all of us who give testimony about Jesus and share his Word. The apostle Peter wrote to the scattered believers of the early church, "Don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening you." (1 Peter 4:12) Christians should expect the unexpected. They should expect the good news of Jesus to be persecuted. They should know that as they share forgiveness, peace, and the love of God that they will receive hatred, hostility, and harm. The greatest message of love ever told is often met with the greatest hate of the world.

You will face struggles and trials too for being a Christian. The more you become like Jason and support the spread of the gospel of Jesus the more you can expect to have a hostile crowd at your door. Maybe you've already experienced a taste of what Jason faced. You probably haven't faced a crowd dragging you to court for supporting a preacher of the gospel. But maybe you've but have found the devil already has led people to reject your attempts to witness about Jesus. Maybe you've supported the gospel year after year only to find that it encounters rejection after rejection.

How does Paul help the Thessalonians address all these setbacks? In this letter to the young Thessalonian church he starts by focusing on what is evident. There was more than just rejection of the gospel taking place. There was growth of faith. The persecution and trials never stopped. But their faith didn't stop growing either. In fact, at the start of this letter the apostle mentions how he is thankful to God that this newly formed Christian church was growing. And he wasn't just interested in growth of numbers. Paul was more excited in the growth of faith. Paul and his companions even boasted to other churches how the Thessalonians were growing in love and faith -despite all the opposition they faced. "*Among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*" Talk about an unexpected outcome! Despite every effort to quickly stamp out the gospel, it only grew in their hearts! Yes, they were "*suffering for the kingdom,*" but they were still part of it.

How do we handle the rejection and opposition to the gospel message? We might begin to focus on the negative when facing opposition to our faith. We might note the people in the community, in the congregation, or in the family who have turned aside from the gospel. We might note the name of some antagonist and blame them for it all. We might wisely note that it is really Satan who seeks to destroy us and halt the spread of the gospel. We could then even begin to become bitter, toss up our hands and say, "What's the point? Why bother with the whole worship thing? It's no use. It's all crumbling before us. My family, my friend, my neighbors have all turned aside from it. More than half the town is opposed to it. Why go on laboring for the kingdom of Christ?" But like Paul, we need to look at what God is accomplishing. Look at those who despite it all are growing in faith and love. Look at those who face the same trials you do in their lives but hold onto the same Jesus you do.

Paul goes on to address the setbacks and suffering with a reminder of the greatest turnaround in history. It's an outcome which many fail to foresee: God's payback. *"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ 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. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."* God will payback all who opposed the gospel. He will deal with it for us. But don't expect that to happen through ordinary events. Paul refers to the time of payback as the last day. It will be on the great day of judgment at Jesus' return. And he will return in glory with fire and his holy angels. He will come as judge. At that time he will cast away all his enemies to hell. And the suffering of hell will be a horrible and awful fate which will never end.

I've had people tell me, "You're too gentle. I don't picture you as being one of those fire and brimstone preachers." And I'm glad they noticed. My goal is to preach the gospel, just like all who give testimony about our Lord Jesus. Yet that doesn't mean that I hold back any part of God's Word. Instead I proclaim all of it as clearly as I can. And Paul reminds us that behind the good news of Jesus is the terrifying backdrop of what many don't like to talk about. I certainly don't. And without the gospel I couldn't bear to even mention it. Yet it is a topic that is found throughout Scripture and is part of today's focus in the church year. It is the topic of God's judgment and his curse of hell. God's judgement is a terrifying ordeal. It will bring about an extreme turnaround of events for this world. All of God's enemies will be judged. All have sinned and rebelled. And all have lived as enemies of God whether they like to admit it or not. The end result is an almost unfathomable fate: eternal destruction, everlasting separation, being shut-out forever from the goodness of God. As unpleasant and terrifying as the thought of hell may be, it is brought up often in Scripture. And Paul brings it up at the start of this short letter.

He mentions God's final judgment day and hell with a purpose. He wants to highlight the extreme and eternal turnaround for God's persecuted people. The Thessalonians Christians would not be included among those who will be punished when Jesus returns to judge. They would not be included among those who would be shut out from the presence of the Lord. Instead Paul says that they would marvel at him. At Jesus return to judge they get to glory in his appearing. It would not be terrifying. They would marvel at Jesus' coming in glory and with his holy angels.

What made them different? Nothing is said about them doing anything different than their persecutors. Nothing is said about them pleasing God in any way to earn pardon from hell. But they will stand in the judgment of our Lord without fear. Why? The only thing that separated them from the rest of the world was *faith in Jesus*. They were included among those who believed. And so they are called "his holy people." Instead of finding the judgment unexpected, they expect it in faith.

Through faith in the gospel of their Lord Jesus they were made holy. The testimony of the Lord Jesus which they believe is a message of deliverance in Jesus. He came visibly to this world, not in glory and to judge, but in humility and to save. The testimony of his first coming is not one of blazing fire and powerful angels coming at his side to judge. It is one of a humble birth with angels saying, "Don't be afraid I bring you good news." The Thessalonians believed that this man Jesus was their Lord, the very Son of God who came to this earth. He came to live the holy life we could not, and to give that holiness to us as a free gift. Now all who believe are considered his holy people. He came to take that punishment of hell away from us. He did this on the cross. *The result?* He came that all who believe in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

The world sees only the appearance of defeat and loss. But Jesus our Lord accomplished what should be considered one of the biggest turn arounds in history so far. He rose to life in victory. He went from killed and tortured on a cross to living and enthroned above all the universe. He went from lowering himself and enduring persecution and pain to holding all power. He ascended to heaven in authority. He now reigns in all majesty as our God and Lord. And he will return in holy majesty to judge. He has made you holy, and when he returns, we will give him all the glory for doing so! And we will marvel at his glory and his grace in saving us from the punishment of hell. His justice will reign forever, *along with his mercy* displayed in how he treated us along with all believers.

So how do you handle rejection of the gospel? You could have a short-sighted view which feels like persecution and sufferings are unexpected for the Christian. You could focus on the negative and lose sight of the greatest turnaround that has taken place and the next greatest turnaround yet to come. But you, like Paul, marvel that faith and love are still growing in the hearts of those persecuted today. You know that God will deal with the opposition to his kingdom. And you live in confidence so that you continue to testify about Jesus no matter who tries to stop you. You don't shy from being labeled too religious. You boldly speak of Jesus as your humble Savior who will return as your glorious deliverer from every evil.

That's because *"you also are among those who have believed."* You have joined Jason and all the early Thessalonian Christians in holding on to the hope of the gospel and of our victorious Lord Jesus. He has turned around your life with the gospel. And you know he's coming again. So, don't let setbacks get you down or discourage you. Don't let opposition silence you or cause you to give up on your Christian witness. Endure opposition. Share the gospel. Support the spread of the gospel. And expect an eternal turnaround.

"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you." (2 Thes 3:16)