

You Will See Our Lord Jesus Return

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 • 2022-11-13



The heroes run out of the exploding building. There is gunfire everywhere. They are surrounded. They are outnumbered. The bad side has nearly won. But we know as we stare at the screen that the good side always wins. We know that in the end, the roles will reverse. So, what keeps our eyes glued to the screen? It's not that we don't know that the hero and good guys will win. It's that we wonder how and when that reversal will take place.

Whether you consider yourself the good-guy or not, that is what you now are in Christ. You are called by God to be his own people. It's like we are on the side of that hero who we know can never really lose or die –no matter what things appear like at the moment. But do you sometimes find yourself wondering, "How? When?" How will we see everything reverse as Christ and his people win and all the enemies of God lose? We find the answer in our reading from 2 Thessalonians this morning. There we see how Jesus will return as Lord to judge his enemies and to be glorified and marveled at by his people.

The Christians living in ancient Thessalonica weren't living on easy street simply because they believed in Jesus. In fact, they came to experience firsthand what Paul had once told other suffering believers, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*" One of the Thessalonian Christians was a man named Jason. Because Jason had supported Paul, Silas, and Timothy, he was dragged off and put on the spot before an angry crowd. Jason and the rest of their group knew one thing for sure: it wasn't going to be easy being a Christian in Thessalonica.

Nor would it be easy for any others! Everywhere Paul, Silas, and Timothy went they shared Jesus, and they faced persecution. Before they arrived at Thessalonica they had been beaten with rods and then tossed in prison. And they were forced to leave Thessalonica because of heavy persecution. When they arrived at their next stop they were laughed at by some Greek intellectuals. That is why Paul, Silas, and Timothy could write to Jason and the rest, "*you are troubled along with us.*"

They could have actually written, "*along with all of us – all Christians everywhere.*" We shouldn't be surprised that we won't always be living on easy street. There will be times when we understand why the apostle Peter had to write, "*Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*" We might read about the sufferings of Paul and the apostles. We might ponder the sufferings of the early Church. But do we seriously think it will happen in our lives? We shouldn't!

Don't think that Paul and Silas were the only ones ever to be laughed at for talking about our risen Lord Jesus. Don't think that Jason was the only one ever facing difficulty because he supported those who taught about Jesus. Don't think it strange when people accept Muslim practices, admire Buddhism, tout humanism and evolutionism, and praise many types of faith. But when it comes to Christianity, they warn you not to get too carried away with your Bible, not to get too religious. Don't think it strange that you are made to feel out of place if you are too Christian. The suffering will come. We're not on easy street, we're on the road full of those who will openly or subtly stop us from growing in faith. What Christ calls a narrow road, the Christian faith, is also a bumpy road. You may not be dragged off by a mob or forced to leave town, but don't be surprised if it ever does come to that! I'm sure many of you have felt various kinds of trials and sufferings as you follow Christ. Are you ready for more? No wonder fewer and fewer seek to travel it!

What does it look like from what we see now? It looks like we're surrounded, outnumbered, and outgunned. But if we begin to handle persecution for our faith by losing confidence in Jesus, what have we really lost? Haven't we then begun to lose sight of the fact that we are on the side of our God, who will always win in the end?

Imagine the temptation that faced the Thessalonians Christians. "If this testimony about Jesus as our Lord and God is real, then why are we facing all this opposition? Should we continue strong in our faith in Jesus amidst such opposition? We don't see things right now as they ought to be. It doesn't appear that Jesus is Lord of all."

But how did they handle it? Despite all the struggles they endured! Paul and his companions wrote, "*We ourselves boast about you in God's churches in regard to your patient endurance and faith in all your persecutions and in the trials that you are enduring.*" (1:4) In fact, their suffering and their perseverance only served as evidence that they did not belong to this world. They belonged to Christ. "*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.*"

If you suffer ridicule, pain, loss, or any type of trouble for following Christ, it is just evidence of who you are. You are not doing anything wrong! The suffering will come. But it will only serve to demonstrate your status as someone who follows Jesus. That should offer some degree of comfort when you suffer. You're not out of place. You're in the very place every Christian is called to be. You like that character in the movie screen who has bullets flying everywhere and attacks on every side from the world, the devil and all the enemies of God.

But there is more comfort. The struggle will be reversed. You know you are on the winning side of history. You cannot lose if you hold onto Christ. *“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.”* Unbelievers cannot and will not be able to deny it on the last day. God always wins.

When will we see this? *“This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.”* It is easy to deny Jesus as Lord now, while he waits patiently and even allows the persecution of members of his own kingdom. But he will visibly return. The Thessalonian believers weren’t so much as to gloat over unbelievers on this day but to take comfort that their Lord would come visibly. And this coming would not be like the first coming of Christ. He would not be veiled of glory, gentle and humble. His return would be with blazing fire of judgment with his multitude of powerful servants, his angels, at his side.

As for those who rejected Jesus as Lord: *“He will punish those who do not know God.”* This refers to all who rejected his gospel. It doesn’t just mean here those who never heard of him, but those who don’t know him in faith.

The apostle reminds suffering believers that God will punish their enemies! I’ve had people tell me, “You’re too gentle to be one of those fiery preachers of judgment.” I’m glad they noticed. I preach the gospel. Just as all of us do who share the testimony of our Lord Jesus. But the gospel is illuminated out of this terrifying backdrop: God will judge us. When we see our Lord Jesus return, he will come to judge this world. His patience will have come to its conclusion on the last day. Then his justice will be seen. The punishment of hell will be carried out.

And hell isn’t just a finite sentence like we find in our jails and prisons. When Jesus comes to judge time as we understand it will cease. In timeless eternity the justice of God’s wrath on the sinner will be carried out. *“They will be punished with everlasting destruction.”* The word ‘destruction’ does not mean annihilated, but painfully defeated. Hell is having God turn his face and his mercy away forever. It is never being in his holy presence. *“shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”*

Hell is real. The judgment of the last day that will be poured out on billions is real. Jesus’ second coming is real. I don’t enjoy speaking of it, thinking of it, and telling others of it. But knowing I was once headed into judgment changes my approach. Paul mentions it with purpose here. The judgement of God is something which ought to have impressed on the Thessalonians what it meant to be in God’s kingdom. The Thessalonians Christians were rescued from God’s wrath. They would not be shut out from the presence of the Lord. Instead, they would marvel at him.

Why are they spared punishment? Nothing is said about them doing anything different. Nothing is said about them pleasing God in any way to earn pardon from hell. The only thing that separated them from the rest of the world was faith in Jesus. They were included among *“all those who believed.”* And so, they are called *“his holy people.”*

They believed the testimony given about Jesus. Jesus 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 a testimony of angels saying, “peace to all on whom his favor rest.” It is a testimony of a humble birth with angels saying “don’t be afraid” as they announced his coming. 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. He came in the flesh to take the punishment we deserved. It was the eternal punishment. The eternal Son of God took the eternal punishment once and for all. He did this once for all on the cross. He came to take that punishment of hell away from us. He came that all who believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life.

And though the world sees only the appearance of defeat and loss, Jesus rose to life in victory, and ascended to heaven in authority. He now reigns in all majesty as our God and Lord, and he will return in all his glorious majesty. Our God always wins, and you will see it when Jesus returns. And he will return to judge.

You also are among those who have believed. You have joined the Thessalonian Christians in holding on to the hope of the gospel and of our victorious Lord Jesus. –and not only them, but all believers across all time. *“This includes you because you believed our testimony to you.”* You believe the testimony about Jesus!

When Jesus returns to judge, he will come to be glorified in his holy people! 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.

You will face troubles. But those troubles will only serve as evidence of who you are. You have believed the testimony about Jesus. He believed that he came in humility to save, and he is coming again in glory to judge!

And you who face trials and persecutions for your faith today, will stand on the day of his return and marvel at our Lord Jesus. Take comfort in your trials. You know how the story ends. And you know how it ends in victory. All who believe in Jesus will be saved. He lived, died, and rose again. And when he comes again you will see him in his majesty. Through faith in the testimony of our Lord Jesus, you will have relief from your troubles, and you will glorify him forever.