

⁵This is evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer. ⁶Certainly, it is right for God to repay trouble to those who trouble you, ⁷and to give relief to you, who are troubled along with us. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his powerful angels, ⁸he will exercise vengeance in flaming fire on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength, ¹⁰on that day when he comes to be glorified among his saints, and to be marveled at among all those who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

We fear being judged. It's what shapes social norms, convincing us to do things that we don't really want to do so we won't be judged. Polls show that many people's biggest fear is public speaking, not because they are afraid there is inherent danger in misspeaking, but because they fear their misspeaking will bring about judgement. Judgement feels really bad. It's why we'll avoid it at almost any cost. Our desire to be acceptable comes from our very souls, and it drives us to chase after righteousness and approval from many people. But today we learn that God's judgement is actually carried out for our benefit.

Paul begins with the gospel: "This is evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom" The Thessalonians were already worthy in God's sight. Of course, we know it wasn't because they suffered well or believed strongly enough. It was because Jesus was worthy in their place. Their growing faith and love amidst suffering was not the cause of their faith. Rather, it was the result, revealing God's verdict upon these sinners: not guilty!

Paul makes it clear here that the persecution they were experiencing was not punishment. As Peter writes in his first letter: "If you are insulted in connection with the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." So, as we speak about judgement, the Thessalonians and we need to keep something straight: judgement is not something believers wait for with anxiety. The verdict was already handed out to the Thessalonians and to you. You are not guilty because Jesus carried your guilt away. God's judgement has already declared you worthy. So, you don't have to prove that you belong to God. You suffer and persevere because you already do.

None of this is new news to you. You know who you are in Jesus. But even knowing this, we still tremble at the thought of eternal judgement. Why? Well, we know our sinful hearts. We know the evil that we do day-after-day. And even if we've fooled ourselves into some false sense of self-righteousness, we still brag to others about our good deeds in the hope that they

will validate our importance. We tremble because we are sinners, but also because at times we misread our suffering as punishment from God. You raise your kids faithfully, go to church every Sunday, then boom, you get diagnosed with cancer. You work your tail off at your job, only to see the economy crater, the business close, and your job disappear with it. You pour your heart and soul into your marriage. You pray that God brings healing during a rough patch. But then you come home to find the divorce papers on the kitchen table. Don't you, even in the far-back recesses of your mind, wonder if God is punishing you? We tremble because we know that sin is no small problem, and that we can't just wave it away or pay a small fine to make it go away. And maybe most of all, we tremble because we think of how God acts in terms of how we would act – keeping score, holding grudges, and waiting to expose us for the hypocrites we are.

This is the voice of the law. We fear judgement because we know the sinful nature rears its ugly head again and again. And too often, we let the law be the only voice that speaks: "There's no place for God's forgiveness and grace. You're a sinner, and you know what God has in store for sinners." This might lead us to go so far as to resent God's promise to judge the world. "How could he do that?" "Why couldn't he just let it go, to live and let live?" "How could he be so cruel?" But our resentment reveals a deeper problem in our hearts: We don't truly grasp the horrors of sin and we don't trust the goodness of God. Sin makes us rot. Like leprosy, it makes our sinful flesh stink and disintegrate. Sin ruins relationships. It breaks families. It drags us into a depressive state. Maybe you say, "The ups and downs of life make it more interesting," but I have yet to meet someone who is overjoyed that they lost their job and their house is being foreclosed upon. Sin disfigures our souls and leads to destruction.

And on the flip side, how good is God? He's so good that he cannot make accord with sin. He cannot stand to let the mold spread. He must put an end to it, even though he is not the cause of it. And he's willing to spend everything so that it does not continue to poison his creation. He pays the price of his Son's life for a world in full-blown rebellion. Paul makes it clear: God is just. His judgement is not violent or vengeful. God's judgement is right. It's always right.

If God is our good and loving Father, he must act, even in disciplinary ways that lead to our benefit. What parent would not push their child if it meant getting her out of the way of an oncoming car? What parent would not break down the door to their son's bedroom if they knew he was about to ingest poison? God has won us for heaven, but his justice is necessary as we still try and touch the stove of sin and risk walking through the dangerous neighborhood of unbelief.

Paul now turns the page to the unbelievers who persecuted the Thessalonians: "He will exercise vengeance in flaming fire on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction

away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength.” All this is not meant to stir up fear in Christians. It brings reassurance that God does not ignore the evil, nor does he forget those who are victimized. God’s justice means that those who reject him, hate his people, and spurn his grace will face real punishment. This judgement is described sharply and soberly: “eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength.” This is what hell is. It’s everlasting separation from the one who gives life and breath and being. And apart from him, there is no life and breath and being. There is only pain and regret.

This judgement is not aimed at believers. It’s aimed at those who refuse the gospel of Jesus and seek a righteousness on their own. It’s for those who do not know the true God. And so, for us, who are believers, this section of scripture serves as a gentle warning. Do not stray from Christ. Do not trade his righteousness for your own earned righteousness, because no matter what you do, it will not be enough, and it will lead to eternal destruction. But this warning also answers our heart’s fear: “But what about my sins?” Read the scriptures! Christ has already taken them away. And those who trust in Christ need not fear.

This section also answers our concern about God’s judgement. If God does not ultimately destroy evil, evil continues to exist and continues to disfigure and kill. A God who does not judge is not loving, because it would make him a God of lawlessness, who abandons the persecuted and oppressed, who lazily sits as the sinful world burns forever. Judgement is the necessary surgery to remove the cancer of sin forever. So, God’s judgement is not the problem and therefore should not be the focus of our ire. Sin is the problem. Don’t get angry with God. Get angry with sin. Get angry with that sinful nature inside of you who just won’t die.

There is judgement for the unbeliever: eternal destruction. On the flip side, there is also judgment coming to the believer: relief, rest, and peace. The same event that terrifies the unbeliever excites the believer. Why? Because when Jesus comes again, he’s not coming to reevaluate you. He’s coming to bring you home. This return of Christ is not a threat. It is the answer to our every longing. Every tear – dried. Every injustice – made right. Every fear – silenced. Every sorrow – swallowed up by joy. You and I will marvel at Jesus, our Savior and the bringer of our righteousness.

Yes, judgement is coming. But it’s not judgement against you. It’s judgement for you. In Christ, God, the Righteous Judge, has already spoken the verdict: “Not guilty. Righteous. Worthy.” So, when you think about judgement, do not tremble as though God is your enemy. Rejoice that he is just. Rejoice that he vanquishes all evil. Rejoice that he brings you relief. When Jesus comes in blazing fire, you will not shrink back in terror. You will look up in joy and marvel at him forever. God is just, and that’s good news. Amen.