

How the Judgment to Come Brings Hope

Psalm 73, 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10

The title of my message this morning is “How the Judgment to Come Brings Hope.” I included a quote from John Calvin: “. . . the momentary and evanescent felicity of the wicked, which will ere long be exchanged for a dreadful destruction” (Calvin). “Evanescence” means *vanishing like vapor*. “Felicity” means *happiness*. Calvin’s point is that the happiness that the wicked experience in this earthly life is momentary and vanishing like vapor. They might think that they have the world by the tail, that everything is coming up roses, and that it will be that way forever, but in reality, their happiness is momentary and vanishing. By and by they will experience dreadful destruction—eternal punishment. “The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall *perish*.”

We see this in our Old Testament text (Ps. 73). Asaph reflects on the present prosperity of the wicked: “there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth. Therefore his people return here, and waters of a full cup are drained by them. And they say, ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?’ Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches.”

He observes that the wicked seem to prosper. They want nothing to do with God. They live long and healthy lives. They do not seem to experience trouble. They are full of pride. They speak loftily. They attack the godly. They have more than heart could wish. Their cup is always full. They think that they can avoid God’s searching gaze—that they can commit sin and God will never notice. The Psalmist agonizes about this. It does not seem fair.

But then he goes into the sanctuary to worship, and everything becomes clear. The wicked may experience blessing in this life, but ultimately go to everlasting punishment. On the other hand, the righteous may be sorely tested in this life, but ultimately go to be with Jesus in heaven. “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” All the success and pleasure that a man experiences in this life will not even be remembered as he burns in the fires of hell, where there is weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. But the Christian can say with confidence, “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus! Life’s trials will seem so small when we see Christ. One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase. So bravely run the race till we see Christ.”

In this world, because of Adam’s sin, the godly experience suffering. But in the world to come God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

I have three points this morning: (1) it is righteous with God to appoint affliction, (2) patiently enduring affliction is our Kingdom duty, and (3) revenge is God's work. First,

1. It is righteous with God to appoint affliction.

Writing a second letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul speaks of “your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God.” This young church was experiencing persecution at the hands of the unbelieving Jews, which at that time were dominant and enjoyed official protection under Roman governance. Amazingly, Paul says that this persecution and tribulation that they were experiencing was “manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God.” The fact that the Thessalonian Christians were being persecuted for their faith was positive proof that they were being judged by God, and that his judgment is in keeping with his character—right and true and good. The Thessalonian Christians might have thought, hey, we're suffering for our faith, suffering for the name of Christ. When we heard the preaching of the gospel, we became persuaded that Christ is indeed the only true God, and eternal life. Born again by the Holy Spirit, enabled to understand that we are sinners in the sight of a holy God with no hope apart from Christ, we confessed him as Lord and Savior and began worshipping him with his church. Then we started experiencing persecution. All kinds of bad things began to happen to us. We were misunderstood, defamed, charged with wrong motives, blamed for things that we never did, beat up, unjustly imprisoned; our friends turned against us. We lost our jobs. We couldn't find work. Now the apostle Paul is saying, “Yes, I know that all of that is true, but I want you to understand something. That is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God. Our God is absolutely sovereign. God is on the throne. He does whatever he pleases. He answers to nobody. He never lacks for power and resources to carry out all his holy will. He is holy, just and good. We cannot question him. We cannot charge him with error. In the end it will all make sense. In the meantime he wants us to trust him. Though we might have thought, hey, if I become a Christian—if I join God's team—my life will improve. I'll enjoy God's protection. But now, bad things are happening to me, and he wants me to trust in him just the same. I am experiencing affliction, yet my God is still on the throne, and he is righteous. To God alone be all the glory. Amen.”

Yes, it is righteous with God to appoint affliction. It is righteous with God to give me success or failure, good times or adversity, as he sovereignly determines. He is God, and he knows best. All things—even the cruelest and the bitterest—work together for good to those who love him. Now we know in part, but in the end we shall know fully, and God will be vindicated. The evil that we experience today will be shown to be part of his perfect plan, and as we rejoice with the saints around the throne of the Lamb for eternity future we will say, “Yes, Lord, your

plan was best. I wouldn't have it any other way. Amen. Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be to him who sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. Amen."

And so it is true for us in the twenty-first century as well. It is righteous with God to appoint affliction. As Job said, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"¹ Brothers and sisters, our God is righteous. He is the judge of all the earth, and he *will* do right—every time! "True and righteous are his judgments." To him be the glory forever.

I recently heard from a Christian sister of a sore trial that she is experiencing. Thinking about it is keeping her awake at night. She is praying to God for mercy. We prayed together over the phone. Later, I sent her thoughts for meditation at this difficult time.

The first was from B. B. Warfield: "In the infinite wisdom of the Lord of all the earth, each event falls with exact precision into its proper place in the unfolding of His eternal plan; nothing, however small, however strange, occurs without His ordering, or without its peculiar fitness for its place in the working out of His purpose; and the end of all shall be the manifestation of His glory, and the accumulation of His praise."

The second was from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9, commenting on Romans 8:28: "What do you believe when you say, 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth'? That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father for the sake of Christ his Son. I trust God so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father."

The third was from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 7: "What are the decrees of God? The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained *whatsoever* comes to pass." This was the section I meditated on as I drove to Detroit the night my dad was brutally beaten on the head and left for dead.

I sent these thoughts to this sister in Christ, and a few minutes later I received the reply: "Thanks. I'm meditating."

These are thoughts that *all* of us should meditate on. We are selfish and self-centered by nature. We don't like to experience pain—pleasure is more pleasurable! Yet bad things will happen to us in this life. And we all need to realize that God is still on the throne. He hasn't fumbled the ball. He is at every moment

¹ Job 2:10

and in every situation working out all his holy will. Whatever happens to us is ultimately for his own glory and our good—no exceptions. We may not understand now, but we will someday. We will see how the bitter cup that we are experiencing fits into his remarkable, amazing plan, and that it was for our ultimate good. He is a faithful Father and he will not disappoint us. He is holy, just, kind and good. He wants us to trust him.

We are prone to think selfishly, as though our comfort and happiness were paramount. Suffering is unpleasant, and we reason that if God really loved us, we would live a pain-free life. Since we suffer pain and disappointment, God must not really love us. Of course, that is man-centered, humanistic thinking. God doesn't promise that we will never experience affliction. Quite the contrary! Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Note carefully what he is saying: you *will* have tribulation, but *in me* you will experience peace. He is *not* saying that we're going to experience peace because there will be no tribulation. No! Jesus is being realistic. He is forewarning his disciples that in this fallen world it is certain that we *will* experience tribulation. But it is equally certain that in him we will experience peace. A Christian can experience peace under the most adverse circumstances. But note: it is not because we ourselves are so strong in our own strength. Rather, Jesus is saying, "*In me* you will experience peace." He is the strong one, and in his strength we are secure. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'"²

Now think about that for a moment. Do you know what happens to sheep when they go to the slaughter? Why, they are killed for food. Now I'm not exactly sure how sheep were slaughtered in ancient times. U.S. law requires the humane treatment and handling of food animals at the slaughter plant. But the point is that sheep to be slaughtered are expendable. They were raised to be harvested for food. No one mourns their death. If no one on earth mourns *our* death, our Heavenly Father still cares. He pities his children. He cares deeply about every one of us. He will never lose track of us. He will bring us to glory by and by. He will love us with fatherly affection throughout eternity future. We will bask in his fatherly love forevermore. All our nagging questions will be answered then, and we will agree that he has done all things well. Things may not make sense now, but they *will* then. Amen. It is righteous with God to appoint affliction. Second,

2. Patiently enduring affliction is our Kingdom duty.

² Rom. 8:35ff.

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

Meditate on those words with me: “. . . that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.”

These are the inspired words of God. What this plainly means is that the Christian, by his patient continuance and enduring and walking by faith and not by sight, will show by his actions that he is a true disciple of Christ and worthy of the kingdom of God.

In other words, patiently enduring affliction is our Kingdom duty. This is something that we should work for and strive for.

Now in ourselves, we are *unworthy*. We are unprofitable servants. We do not measure up to the perfection of Christ. In Luke 17 Jesus said, “When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” We cannot, by our obedience, merit salvation. It is by grace, through faith, that we are saved. It is not of works, lest any of us should boast. The only way that a person is saved is to realize that he is *unworthy*—that he is a sinner, that he has failed to measure up to God’s standard, which is absolute perfection. If we think salvation is a cooperative effort, that *we* do some of the work and Christ does the rest, then we are deceived. Salvation is a free gift. It is all of grace. Boasting is excluded. We are saved by grace, through faith, *unto* good works. The Christian does good works out of gratitude. We are so thankful that God has saved us who had rebelled against him, who had been like sheep that had gone astray, who had wandered off, who had stubbornly and persistently done our *own* will, not the Father’s. But after the Good Shepherd had sought us and found us and picked us up on his shoulders and brought us back to the fold, after he had done a work of grace in our hearts and made us his joyful followers, we became zealous of good works, doing those good works not as the *basis* of our acceptance by the father, but out of a heart of gratitude and a desire to please him and adorn our profession. And one of those good works that glorify the Father is patiently enduring affliction. It is inevitable that we suffer affliction in this life, and it glorifies the Father when we endure affliction patiently, with an attitude of resignation to the Father’s will. “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight” (Matt. 11:26). It is the born-again Christian’s desire to be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which we also suffer. Enduring that suffering manfully and joyfully and patiently and cheerfully is our duty. It is not easy to do, but we can do it by God’s grace, for his glory. By the Spirit’s working in our hearts the born-again child of God is desirous of being counted worthy of the Kingdom. It is our desire to grow in the faith and develop godly attitudes and dispositions. It is our desire to say *no* to the selfish attitude that says, “I must at all times get my own way, or I’m going to sulk and pout.” Let there be no mistake: enduring affliction is

not anything that any of us would choose for ourselves, but when we do it cheerfully, out of a zeal to please our Lord, and for his glory, that is clear evidence that we are born again. God knows that his children are going to experience suffering, but “he gives more grace.”³ He gives us grace that is sufficient, grace that enables us to will and to do according to his good pleasure.

Dear child of God, when you are suffering, don’t pout, don’t throw a temper tantrum. Rather, pray for grace, that you may be able to bear it.

We have seen that (1) it is righteous with God to appoint affliction, and (2) patiently enduring affliction is our Kingdom duty. Thirdly,

3. Revenge is God’s work.

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

Now God is a God of vengeance. He says in Deuteronomy 32, “Vengeance is Mine, and recompense . . . I will render vengeance to My enemies, and repay those who hate Me.”⁴

The church prays, “O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongs—O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! Rise up, O Judge of the earth; render punishment to the proud” (Ps. 94:1–2).

Next week, as we continue in this text, we will consider verses 8 and 9, where we read the inspired words: “in flaming fire *taking vengeance* on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

Yes, God is a God of vengeance. This is so because he is a God who follows through on his promises. His law promises blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Those who do not obey him, who do not come to him through the only Mediator, Jesus Christ, will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.

God is a God of vengeance. He will take revenge against sin. But this is not something that he gives to private individuals. The state has the power of the sword, but it is to be used only for those who are proven guilty of committing a capital crime such as the premeditated murder of a fellow human being, made in the image of God. But let there be no mistake: private individuals are *not* to exact vengeance. God’s word is clear: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18).

Our topic this morning was “How the Judgment to Come Brings Hope.” The judgment to come brings hope because the Christian realizes that God is going to

³ Jas. 4:6

⁴ Deut. 32:35, 41

right all the injustices of the world, punish all wrongdoing and gather his elect into his heavenly kingdom, where we will enjoy everlasting, unending felicity and joy in perfect fellowship with God and his people.

But as it brings hope to the Christian, it brings terror to the wicked. To die in the hands of a God of perfect justice without a mediator is the most terrifying thing of all. Truly, “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

God does not look upon sin lightly. It is an affront to his holiness. It is the sinner saying, “I will do my own will; I do not care what God thinks—all that matters is what I think. I will be my own lord and master.”

Indeed, (1) it is righteous with God to appoint affliction, (2) patiently enduring affliction is our Kingdom duty, and (3) revenge is God’s work. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”⁵ If you do not know the Lord, flee to him for mercy. He will not turn you away. Amen.

⁵ Rom. 12:19