

PREFACE

There is a lot to digest in the passage before us, and, once again, the good intention of covering a paragraph is thwarted by the immense depth of God's word contained in just the first sentence. Even though we covered it in our last session, I include v4 because it is key to understanding v5.

Sidebar: It is passages such as this that make the deep study of God's word so rewarding and pleasurable. Not everyone agrees on its interpretation, but when one considers both positions and discovers that they really form one cohesive, powerful thought, it is reason to marvel at the wisdom and, as our text states, the "righteous judgment of God."

v5

The fundamental question that interpreters must answer in deciphering v5 is, Does the "righteous judgment of God" apply to the present situation—i.e., the church in Thessalonica—or to the future—that is, the end times?

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

Sidebar: Now stick with me on this. We need to get down into the weeds, but it will be worth it. This is how this passage truly comes to life for us.

"This is" or the NIV's "All this," points back to v4's "your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." Verse 6 then seems to substantiate the "present situation" position with

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

But then from v7 to v10 the text refers explicitly to the yet-future end times.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

I believe the KJV helps us out here. What the other translations speak of as "evidence" or "plain indication,"—[perfectly acceptable translations](#)—at the beginning of v5, the KJV terms a "manifest token." What is a token? *Webster's* says that a token is "a symbol; something serving as a sign of authority, identity, genuineness."

When we got married forty-six years ago, Linda and I exchanged rings which we still wear. In a sense these rings were given, back in 1971, to indicate *our love for each other at the time*. The rings, along with the ceremony itself, told everyone present that our love was a love worthy of our getting married to each other—becoming one under God.

But these rings were also a "token" of something else—something yet future. They represented not just our love at the time, but were a *pledge* of a love we were then too young even to imagine. They were a "manifest" ([something visible and tangible](#)) "token"—a sign, a promise—that we would still be there when our small, teenage love would mature into something far more profound.

Our two rings spoke of the here and now in 1971, but they also spoke of the future, many decades down the road. They were "tokens" of both.

The persecution the Thessalonians were experiencing in AD 51, when this letter was written, the Philippians would experience about ten years later. And what Paul wrote to them illumines our passage.

Read Philippians 1:27-30.

Look at v28. Paul tells the Philippians that when they are not alarmed by their opponents—when they stand strong in their faith—they are a sign, a token, both to their opponents and to themselves:

- The Christian's resolve in the face of persecution would signal to their opponents that they were doomed; against such a faith there could be no victory, only perdition.
- Their resolve and strong faith in Christ also signaled to the believers that their salvation was sure. As believers they would indeed suffer, just like Christ and the apostle Paul, but even that suffering was granted to them by God as a token of their belonging to Him and of His promise to them.

Now back to our text.

Understand, the fact that the Thessalonians were suffering under persecution for their faith was not the token, but the "*perseverance and faith* in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure" (emphasis added). And this perseverance is not just gritting one's teeth and holding on with white knuckles until all the unpleasantness passes.

perseverance^{NASB, NIV}, **patience**^{KJV}, **steadfastness**^{ESV} = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (hupomeno); **cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy** : - enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

It is what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome.

Read Romans 5:1-5.

Paul says that it is the Thessalonian's *perseverance* that is the token, the evidence of proof of God's righteous judgment. So we must then ask the obvious question: How so? How does our perseverance in trial demonstrate or reveal the righteous judgment of God?

Back when I was still in grade school—probably around the fifth grade—one day after school, instead of going straight home I accompanied the two Nelson brothers down to the creek that ran behind the school to catch frogs and crawdads.

Now, the school was just one block from our house, as the crow flies. To get to school each day I could "cut through" our back yard, then Wiggins' back yard, down their drive, cross the street, and I was in the school yard. It took all of two or three minutes. From our house one could hear all the bells, so Mom knew when school was let out and we were released from prison. Within five minutes I should be home.

On this day I was 30 minutes late and Mom was beside herself with worry. The Nelson boys, having parents who didn't care a whit where they were or what they were doing, had left our brief adventure at the creek moving on to some other adventure. I, however, went home to my certain doom.

I knew I would get a lickin' when I got home—and I did. But even at that young age I understood that though I had received a warmed bottom for my foray to the creek that day, while the Nelson boys were free to do whatever they wished for as long as they wished, I was indeed the fortunate one. For I was the one who had parents who loved me enough to worry about where I was, and what I was doing; parents who loved me enough to chastise me when I did something foolish and wrong.

David Guzik: We usually think that God is absent when we suffer, and that our suffering calls God's righteous judgment into question. Paul took the exact opposite position and insisted that their suffering was evidence of the righteous judgment of God. Where suffering is coupled with righteous endurance, God's work is done. The fires of persecution and tribulation were like the purifying fires of a refiner, burning away the dross from the gold, bringing forth a pure, precious metal.

God's righteous judgment

We will see this more powerfully in the following verses, when we consider the *future* ramifications of this text—that is, God's ultimate and final judgment—but let us glean something about this righteous judgment even in the here and now.

The righteous judgment of God is seen, first, in His determination to refine His children through trial—

- for our benefit,
- as a righteous witness to those seeking to harm us,
- and for His ultimate glory.

And as Guzik points out, when “suffering is coupled with righteous endurance, God's work is done.” Look at all He has accomplished when his people persevere under affliction (v6)! But I think there is more; there is one more aspect of His righteous judgment, one that requires careful explanation.

When we read the word “judgment” in association with a sovereign, righteous God, we naturally think of His *ultimate* judgment—as indeed we should. Christ Jesus described it to his disciples:

Read Matthew 25:31-33.

But in the context of our passage in 2 Thessalonians, I think we can include at least one more aspect of God's judgment. I believe His righteous judgment is demonstrated in His sovereign election of believers.

God never makes a bad decision. Even when, on occasion, as during the time of the exodus, God “changes His mind” (repents; Exodus 32: 7-14) that doesn't mean there was anything wrong with His initial decision. If He had not changed His mind and followed through on His judgment to destroy Israel for their rebellious idolatry, that act would have been utterly righteous. He would have been perfectly right to respond in that manner to their heinous behavior. God never makes a bad decision.

Just so, before He inaugurated time and space and all creation, God set down the names of all those who, once they were physically born, would be in His kingdom. This, too, was His judgment. And it was righteous; it was right.

What if God *could* make a bad decision? What might it look like? Well, let's say Joe Smith is a member of the church in Thessalonica. God has placed his name in His Book of Life. Joe is one of the elect. Then the church comes under brutal persecution and affliction from without. Most of those who comprise the church bear up under it, and retain their faith and hope in God. But ol' Joe says he has had enough; this wasn't what he bargained for. He turns his back on the church, rejects God and His Son Jesus, leaves Thessalonica for his home village and his old paganism. Till the day he dies he remains a worshiper of idols, and his soul is consigned to hell.

In this hypothetical—and impossible—scenario, God made a bad decision in placing Joe's name in His Book of Life. But God never makes a bad decision, so in Thessalonica every person who's name is recorded in God's Book of Life persevered through the persecution, and their faith and love for each other actually grew stronger as a result. And *that* was a token of "God's righteous judgment" in choosing them in the first place. Because God does not make bad decisions.

considered worthy of the kingdom of God

Guzik: The idea behind counted worthy is not "seen as worthy" but "reckoned as worthy" as in a judicial decree. Paul's prayer is that the worthiness of Jesus may be accounted to them.

This is an important point. We are not "considered worthy of the kingdom of God" because we have held onto faith through persecution or trials; that is, we have not *earned* our place in His kingdom by toughing it out through hard times. Rather, our perseverance demonstrates that we are indeed, *in Christ*, worthy. It works like this:

- Someone *not* a believer suffers persecution and, as a result, curses God. His behavior proves he is not worthy of the kingdom.
- A Christian suffers persecution, accepts it, even gladly embraces it. His behavior proves that he (already a believer) *is* worthy of the kingdom. His behavior is a "token," an indication that he already belongs in the kingdom.

for which indeed you are suffering.

After Christ Jesus laid hold of Saul on the road to Damascus and blinded him, he instructed Ananias to go to him and give him back his sight. But Ananias wasn't too keen on the idea.

Read Acts 9:13-16.

The word translated "suffer" is the same as in our text.

suffer, suffering = *pascho* = **to experience a sensation or impression (usually painful)** :- **feel, passion, suffer, vex.** This is the word from which we get "Paschal Lamb," "The Passion of Christ," "Passion Play," etc.

We will look at this more in our next session, but God's word makes it clear that the believer's path of (progressive) sanctification in Christ will include a measure of suffering. As the apostle Paul told the disciples in his travels, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The Thessalonians were learning that suffering was part of God's readying them for His kingdom; that too is part of His "righteous judgment."