

# The End of the Age

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[ 0 : 00 ] As you can see in your bulletin, I plan to preach to you from Luke chapter 13, and I may have an opportunity to do that another time.

But in light of the events of the past week and the ways that things seem to be spinning out of control, in our country, I decided to draw our attention to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 and raise our sights to the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ and the resolution of all things in Christ's coming again in power and glory.

So this is a big picture sermon that enables us to step back from the things that trouble us and distress us and keep us awake at night and the distressing trends that we see on the horizon and get a bigger picture of what God is doing and what God has revealed yet awaits us.

We believe the second letter of Paul to the Thessalonians was written in response to the increased persecution that the church had been facing since the first letter that he had written.

And there are two themes running through this epistle. One of the themes is standing firm in the face of persecution of all sorts. And the other, that is really coupled with the second theme of the assurance that they will see Christ and that Christ will come in power and glory and will vindicate his holy kingdom.

[ 1 : 43 ] So I want to read for you from 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. I'll begin reading with verse 3. I'll read from 3 to 10. And I will look at 5 to 10 with you will be my text this morning.

We ought always to thank God for you brothers and rightly so because your faith is growing more and more and the love that every one of you has for each other is increasing.

Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance in the faith in all the persecutions and trials that you are enduring. All of this is evidence that God's judgment is right.

God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and will give you relief to those of you who are troubled and to us as well.

This will happen when our Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

[ 2 : 51 ] They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on that day that he comes to be glorified with his holy people and to be marveled at among those who have believed.

This includes you because you have believed our testimony to you. Let's pray and ask God again for illumination as we look at his word. Father, we come to you again recognizing our great need, our profound need of the work of the Spirit of God.

And our hope is really in the Spirit's work this morning because we know that the Spirit of God is the one who caused these things to be written. And so we ask that that same Spirit would give us illumination of heart and mind and deepen our understanding and enable us to see this big picture of the consummation of all things in the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and find in this truth solid ground in which we can stand, a place of reference for us even as we try to sort out how to respond to the things around us.

And so we pray, Lord, that you would deepen our understanding, give us insight into these things and show us your glory and fill our hearts with hope today. Hope that is not found in looking around us or even in some expectation that better days will come, but hope that is found in the certainty of the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the revelation of his glory that all shall see.

We pray this for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Verses 5 through 10, Paul makes a defense of God's justice because the issue of suffering always raises the question, where is God?

[ 4 : 52 ] Where is God's justice? Why are things like this? I mean, that question never goes away. It's always present with us because we live in a fallen world.

We see injustice on every hand. We see the ways that ungodly and unprincipled people bring injustice and suffering on others.

And yet none of us lives long enough to see the whole picture. And often what we see in our moment of time is confusing to us. And the problem, of course, is that we can only see what's on the surface.

And the surface reality is often very ugly. We see evil people who are full of malice and cruelty. We see arrogant people who are exercising great power so they can persecute God's people.

We see the suffering of the people of God who are opposed and ridiculed, boycotted, and canceled, and oppressed, and harassed, and in some places even imprisoned and tortured and killed.

[ 6 : 01 ] And in many corners of the world, even this morning as I speak, Christians are facing incredible suffering and persecution. And I could regale you with story after story, contemporary story, of suffering that Christians are facing right at this moment.

There are 40 countries in the world, that's 20% of the countries of the world, in which Christians are facing direct persecution at this moment. And of course, the top 10 list is North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, India.

And for many years, the United States of America, as a Christian country, stood as an international force against persecution of all sorts.

I remember one time being in Romania with Cornell and talking to Paul Negruz, who is a Baptist minister, a Christian leader in Romania, president of the only Christian university in Europe that is accredited by the EU.

And he told us of times of persecution in the 60s and 70s when he could appeal to government leaders in the United States during times of persecution.

[ 7 : 26 ] And America wielded such moral authority in the Ceausescu era that they were often able to act as a defender of Christians against tyranny.

But as Christians are increasingly subjected to ridicule in our society, we can see on the horizon times when we will face persecution that we could not have imagined in an earlier generation.

Days are coming. They're almost at hand. In some cases, are at hand when pastors will face censure for preaching truths that are from the word of God and upholding the standards of scripture when speaking against what God calls perversion will be censured as hate speech.

And already we see evil and injustice. We see the wicked flourishing and the righteous suffering. And it all seems wrong. It seems so topsy-turvy, so downside up.

And the question that Christians struggle with as they observe that and the question each of us have struggled with at some points is the question of why doesn't God do anything?

[ 8 : 46 ] Where is God in the midst of this? Why do these things happen? And the answer, of course, in this passage is that God is doing something and he will do something. So we want to look at this passage together.

Let me look at you with begin just reading in verses 4 and 5. All of this, Paul is referring in verse 4 to the growing faith and love of these Christians and their perseverance in persecution as he mentioned in verse 3.

All of 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. So Paul says that he sees in their lives evidences that God's grace is at work and also evidence that God's judgment is right.

Now, what is he referring to in that statement? There are a couple possibilities. The very fact that they are suffering for Christ or is it their faith and their love and endurance that they're displaying in the face of the suffering?

And I think it's probably both things are here. Let me show you that. The very fact that they are suffering is evidence that God's judgment is right because Jesus taught that we should expect suffering, that suffering is the unavoidable path to glory, that we should not expect that our path to glory will be unimpeded by suffering, that the suffering will be a reality that would be present in all of our lives.

[ 10 : 21 ] Remember how in Mark it says in chapter 8, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever wants to save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. Or in Luke chapter 24, did not Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?

Or John chapter 12, I tell you the truth, unless the kernel of wheat falls into the ground, it dies. It remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Remember how Paul taught in Acts chapter 14 that it's through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom of heaven.

In Romans chapter 8, he wrote that if we only, that we must share in his suffering if we are going to share in his glory.

[ 11 : 26 ] So we know that suffering and tribulation are inseparably joined to the kingdom and to glory. And therefore, since God is allowing them to suffer, they could know that he's preparing them for glory.

Their suffering is an evidence of God's justice. Because it's the first part of that equation that's the guarantee of the second part of the glory that would follow.

And secondly, even though God allowed their persecutors some degree of latitude, it is clear that he is working in these Christians.

And remember, God is always on the side of his suffering children. He's always there to sustain us and to sanctify us. He is there to use persecutions and suffering to grow and to develop our faith in his son, Jesus Christ.

So we, through suffering, we grow in our love for him and our love for others. We grow in our perseverance in his grace. God is always showing his justice in using even our suffering as a means of preparation for his eternal glory and his kingdom.

[ 12 : 48 ] Verse 5 even goes so far as to say that God uses the sufferings of Christ to make his people who are counted worthy of his kingdom.

God's transforming grace is at work in them through their suffering. And it shows them to be worthy. God is fitting them for heaven, for heavenly inheritance. And that's part of what God is doing through suffering, sufferings of all kinds.

But God is just. And he will publicly vindicate his people on this earth who have endured such suffering. And the passage is telling us that God will one day reverse the fortunes of those who are the persecutors and those who persecute.

Notice in verse 6, God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who are troubling you. And he will give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. When Christ comes again in power and glory, he will pay back those who have persecuted his people.

He'll bring relief to us. And there's a great point of stability for us in that truth and in that reality that even though we suffer now, Christ is coming.

[ 14 : 03 ] He's coming again in power and glory. He will bring relief to us. And it takes spiritual discernment and insight for us to look at the situations of injustice and see that even in this, God is being just and God will bring just judgment.

Because our tendency, our temptation is to judge by appearances, to see the surface of things and to make surface judgment that leave us sometimes questioning God's goodness, questioning God's truth, questioning whether God is truly at work in all these things.

And we do it even in our own lives, don't we? Even in the relatively superficial persecutions that we face in our lives.

Family members or old friends may make us the butt of their jokes or we may learn of the sufferings of Christians and the persecuted church around the world and we cry out for God to bring them relief.

And we need spiritual discernment and spiritual strength to see that God gives this suffering to his people as an evidence that God's judgment is right and will be vindicated on the day of the Lord in crushing all who oppose him.

[ 15 : 29 ] So what this passage is teaching us is that God allows the persecution of his people, he allows these things to take place to fit them for heaven.

He allows the wicked to have their way for a moment. But in the end, his just judgment will fall on them. And the very situations in which we are tempted to wonder where is God and why do these things happen and to doubt God's justice and goodness become the places where it can be clearly seen.

God is working his purposes out for us. And this passage is designed to give us that kind of discernment. It's a big picture passage that's designed to fill us with hope even in the midst of these things, to give us the same kind of godly perspective that the Apostle Paul had.

And the time for us to gain this kind of perspective on persecution of Christ's church is now. It's an appropriate time for us to be thinking about these things.

As we know, we've seen incredible events in the past number of months. The instability of our culture, the massive changes that can take place nearly overnight.

[ 16 : 51 ] And while we here in Pennsylvania have not faced lockdowns that included the church in many states, churches are being told that they cannot meet for corporate worship.

Who could have imagined that in our country we would be forced to choose between obeying God and man? Who could have imagined that churches would face huge fines for meeting for corporate worship?

That pastors would be threatened with prison sentences for exercising constitutionally protected rights of assembly and worship?

And we don't know what may yet come. But we do know these are very unstable times. And these are times when things can break at lightning speed.

And we need to be ready. And we need to have biblical perspective on how to interpret things that may come. And Paul's assurance of the righteousness of God's future judgment is one of the things that this text teaches us.

[ 18 : 03 ] That God is coming as the just judge and he will bring about righteous judgment. Now of course that raises questions that our text addresses. One of those questions is when will this judgment happen?

The second question is who will be judged? Who will be punished? Third, what kind of form will that punishment take? When will God vindicate, the first question, when will God vindicate his justice and redress the current imbalance in human experience in which the wicked seem to be getting away with their wickedness?

And Paul answers that question in the last half of verse 7. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. It's the word apocalypse that is used here in this passage.

It's the revelation of Christ. Christ. This will happen at the second coming of Christ. His coming will be personal and visible and glorious. Now the first coming of Christ in the first incarnation was in weakness and obscurity.

But the second coming of Christ will be public and in public magnificence. And he'll be revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

[ 19 : 25 ] And the picture here is of an irresistible army. The Lord of the universe will return with his army, his powerful angels to settle accounts with all the tenants of the earth.

And there will be no escape, no recourse, no place to hide, no possibility of resistance, no capacity to withstand him and his power.

Malachi says it this way in chapter 3, verse 2, who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears for he will be like a refiner's fire?

And so the passage tells us there's this day of the Lord coming when he will bring about everlasting justice. The second question the passage raises is who will be punished when Christ is revealed as the righteous judge, when he comes with his holy angels.

And verse 8 answers the question, he will punish all those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, the failure to know God and the failure to obey the gospel is willful and intentional.

[ 20 : 47 ] Paul makes that clear in Romans chapter 1, doesn't he? That what may be known about God is clearly seen through what God has made. He's revealed himself with clarity. People are without excuse.

No one can say, I didn't know there was a God. He's revealed himself in the creation. He's revealed himself in his word. And chapter 2 of Romans makes it clear that the people are without excuse because the law is written on the heart of man.

And those who know that they are, who are not obeying the truth are willfully obeying. So in disobedience, people are, the spiritually blind are willfully blind.

And in disobedience, the people are blindly willful. It's interesting to note that who, who is not being punished here because those for whom Christ has already borne the punishment they deserve will not be punished with this everlasting fire.

Those who know God, those who have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, those who have repented and believed, those who have, who are delighting in the law of God in their inner being, those in whom God has produced an irresistible desire to obey God.

[ 22 : 20 ] And it comes back again and again even though they fail. Those who have repented and believed, those who know him, those who desire to obey him, those for whom obedience is a priority, those who obey the gospel, he says.

And of course, that invites the question that each of us needs to reflect on, in which group are you? Which camp do you belong to?

You're someone who does not know God. Are you someone who does not have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ? Are you someone for whom obeying God is not important?

It's not even on your radar. And in that case, you're in this category of people that are described here as those who will face destruction in that awful day of the Lord.

The third question that it raises is what will their punishment be? That's a fair question. Just how bad will it be in that day for those who do not know the gospel, do not obey the gospel?

[ 23 : 31 ] And verse 9 answers the question for us. It says, they will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.

You can see on the face of the words there are two things here. First is everlasting destruction. The second is separation, being shut out from God's presence. But everlasting destruction is a very interesting phrase because if you think of something as being destroyed, then it's gone, it's done, it was the end.

But everlasting destruction is destruction that is never over. It's destruction that's not terminal, it's destruction that continues.

And it's interesting, the Bible does not teach annihilation. What the Bible teaches is everlasting destruction. Mark gives us some help here in the gospel.

Mark, beginning with 43, it says, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out.

[ 24 : 45 ] And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than having two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

So everlasting destruction means punishment that does not end, that is never abated. But the second part of the punishment of the damned is even worse than that because it's to be shut out from the presence of the Lord and the majesty of his power.

It means that to be everlastingly cut off from all that is good, from all that is pleasant, from all that reflects God because God is the source of everything that is good and everything that is pleasant.

And again, the Gospels help us here because remember how Jesus talks in the Gospels repeatedly about people being cast into the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[ 26 : 08 ] And the word picture that Jesus repeatedly uses to describe everlasting punishment is to be thrown out of the banquet. The banquet is a place of feasting, the place of friendship, the place of conviviality, the place where there's camaraderie and enjoyment and feasting and pleasantness but the wicked are cast out into utter darkness, out of the place of feasting and delight, utter darkness where there's only weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, nothing to comfort, nothing to take the edge off of the misery and eternal woe.

I've heard people, perhaps you've heard people say flippant things like this, I want to go to hell because all my friends are going to be there. I may as well go to hell because it can't be any worse than what I've seen here on this world.

They have no idea what they're saying. Hell will be banishment from God's presence and therefore will be banishment from everything that is good and pleasant.

There will be banishment from everything that is wonderful and beautiful because banishment from God's presence might not seem that bad to you but if you think about it, it will mean the utter privation of anything that is good.

There will be no friends in hell because friendship is an aspect of the character and heart of God. There will be no kindness in hell because kindness comes from God.

[ 27 : 44 ] There will be no love in hell because God is love. There will be no pleasure because God is the fountain and source of all pleasure. To be shut out from the presence of God means the loss of God's friendship and it extends to the loss of everything that is in any way good.

Utter privation of anything that is good. The passage is teaching us about an unpleasant topic.

It's teaching us about the retributive justice of God. Justice is retribution for wrong and God will avenge every sin.

He will avenge every act of cruelty toward a child, every beheading, every instance of torture, every instance of persecution of his people, every wicked deed that has been done on this earth will be avenged and God will overlook nothing that is not under the blood of Christ.

all sin will be paid for. There will be complete retribution that God will bring every single act of sin and wickedness or cruelty and mockery or callous disdain for God and God's ways, every instance of arrogant pride or spiteful anger, all that mankind does and has done in disobedience to God and a failure to believe the gospel will be punished with everlasting punishment.

[ 29 : 31 ] That's the negative side of all of this and it's frightening, it should be frightening. It's the big picture that reminds us that the wicked will not get away with wickedness.

God has not fallen asleep at the switch. God is a God who is a God of great forbearance who bears with us because he's not willing that any of his people should perish but that all would come to repentance.

The negative side is absolutely demanded by the justice of a holy God. But there's a glorious side to this as well and you see it in the passage in contrast to the appalling nature everlasting destruction we have the glories of the gospel.

Not only will he judge those who reject the gospel but he will be glorified in his holy people and marveled at by all who believe.

And he adds this phrase and this includes you because you too have believed our testimony. There are a couple aspects of this glorious revelation of God I want us to see. First is that we will see him he'll be glorious.

[ 30 : 55 ] We have this phrase the majesty of his power. Remember he's coming he's coming in blazing fire in the midst of his holy ones and it'll be even more glorious and more majestic and more marvelous than you and I can even imagine this morning.

There will be this glorious revelation of God. And the second thing I want us to see is the twofold effect of this on us. One is he says he will be glorified in those who have believed.

What does that mean? It doesn't merely mean among them like you know he's in the stadium and we were there and he was there too.

not simply before them like a performer might be observed and we might marvel at this wonderful performance not by means of them as though they were simply mirrors reflecting his glory but he will be glorified in his holy people.

The distinction I'm drawing here I think is very important because a theater is not changed by the play that is performed in it. It might be a wonderful play and cleverly acted out but when the actors have gone home and the audience has left the theater is the same as it was before.

[ 32 : 24 ] It has been unchanged by the performance. A mirror is not changed by the image that it reflects. It might reflect a glorious mirror but the mirror is not changed by the image that it reflects.

but a filament in light bulb is changed when the current is switched on. It becomes incandescent.

And when Jesus is revealed in his glory he will be revealed in his people. We will not only behold his glory we will share his glory as much as created beings can possibly share it.

We'll be more than just a filament that glows for a moment when the current is on and then goes cold and dark when the current is shut off. We'll be radically and permanently changed. We will be transformed into his glorious likeness.

We will our transformation will be visible to be seen in us. We'll be like Moses when he came down from the mountain or like Christ in the Mount of Transfiguration.

[ 33 : 42 ] Not that we will be Christ but there's that glory of God that will be revealed in us. The second part of this that is so marvelous is that we will marvel at him I'm speaking of something more profound and more amazing than just simply the way someone marvels when he sees a commanding performance that is compelling and amazing and wonderful.

This is a marveling that is deep and profound. It will be the kind of marveling Paul speaks of in Romans excuse me Ephesians chapter 1 when he talks about the fact that God has revealed his mysteries to us that are all summed up and brought to conclusion in Jesus Christ.

That ability to see that in Christ all the movement of history and all the glories of God come together in the final end of all things.

It's the kind of marveling Paul talks about in Romans chapter 11 when he says oh oh oh oh the depths of the wisdom the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God of God how unsearchable are his judgments how inscrutable are his ways who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid for from him and through him and to him are all things to him be the glory forever we will marvel when we see how he has brought together all things and has tied up every loose end and done it in such a way that all of his people are secure for eternity and the wicked are justly and fairly treated and all the evil that has been done on this planet is dealt with for the glory of God it will be marvelous it will be a marveling that we'll marvel at the fact that it's all true but we also will marvel just that is more glorious and more wonderful than we could have imagined in our most expansive moments it will be that marveling that comes in the realization that things that seem the most random that seem to us to be the most out of control that seem to us to be the most senseless the most meaningless that through them

God has been working a great glorious plan to bring redemption to a host of fallen people more than anyone can number and bring justice eternal justice to those who have resisted him and turned aside and the amazing thing is that this marveling by those who believe will not come to an end at the end of the day when the day of his return comes to an conclusion will be marveling throughout the coming ages throughout the coming ages the unfolding dimensions of the wonder of God's plan the glories of his person will never get to the end of it will never get to the final episode because even in our glorified state one day in the presence of God we will still be finite creatures and he will be infinitely glorious and the infinite complexities and glories and wonder of his plan and his purposes and all the things that seem so contingent and fragile and random and chaotic and crazy to us will see them all in light of the glorious truth that he is



[ 37 : 40 ] Lord and King forever and ever and ever and every eye will behold him and everyone will see him even those who pierced him and the knowledge of God will cover the whole universe like the waters cover the sea he will be glorified by those who marvel at him I want you to notice in this passage it's so clear there are two destinies there's eternal destruction and banishment from the presence of God exclusion from the presence of everything that is good and everything that mitigates human suffering and human travail we're trying to get a big picture view of the movement of time and history here so let me make this very personal for us if you do not believe if you do not submit yourself to this

God who is good and who offers you salvation through his son you will face everlasting destruction and banishment from the presence of God and from the presence of everything that is good but I'm here to tell you this morning that Jesus Christ came into this world to fulfill all righteousness for every man and woman and boy and girl who would ever trust in him and believe and no one here has any hope of escaping everlasting destruction through good works you cannot be good enough even on your best days all of your righteousness is like filthy rags in the presence of God but Jesus Christ is good enough and he always believed the father he always obeyed the father he did the father's work he fulfilled the father's will and if you come to him and repent of your sin and believe in him he will give you his perfect record and he will transform you internally he'll transform your appetites and desires he'll transform you into someone who can flourish as a human being because you can never flourish fully as a human being without him because you're made for him you're made for glory not only will you escape everlasting destruction you'll be transformed into a person who for the very first time is truly alive there's a second group of people here there are those who have believed and obeyed the gospel and in whom God is glorified and who are destined for marveling at the final revelation of his glory and seeing his plan for all eternity do you know why you're in that category if that's your category do you know why you're there you're there because of

Jesus Christ who believed for your unbelief who obeyed for your disobedience for who for reasons found in him and never in us has shown you mercy and that should humble you and fill you with joy that is unspeakable and glorious even in the midst of trials as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6 may I say that the need I think we need the realities of this passage and the big picture in order to begin to interpret the day to day experience we have in this earth in order for us to even begin to understand our civic duties as citizens who oppose evil and who strive for justice and I want to acknowledge that there are profound questions that I haven't even attempted to address here questions that remain questions like what is the place of civil disobedience what is the place of the civic duty of a citizen who strives against evil and who strives for justice how do we resist what is wicked and wrong is there a point at which it's appropriate to take up arms all those kinds of questions those are profound questions important questions and questions

I'm not addressing today but I want you to see this God has a plan and purposes that he is working out on this earth and all that we face today and what we may yet face in the future will ultimately yield to his glorious return and marveling at him on that day when he reveals his glory may God help us to live in that perspective so we can try to understand how we respond as citizens to all that we face in this world let's pray together father we thank you for a passage like this that gives us a big picture we pray that you would cause these big things to inhabit our vision and to move us and to instruct us and to help us to understand your ways we pray

Lord for your grace I pray Lord today for anyone under the sound of my voice who is in that category of those who do not obey the gospel who do not believe and I pray that you would use these things we have considered today to spare them from everlasting destruction and being shut out of the presence of God for eternity we ask this for Christ's great glory amen I want us to sing and close