**The righteous judgment of God** 28/1/24dkm

Read: Isaiah 66:10-23, 2Thessalonians 1

Text: 2Thessalonians 1:5-10

Psalms: 9:1-8, 75, 1, 72old

Driving down the motorway you are overtaken by a speeding car swerving in and out of the three lanes. Do you say, ‘The driver must have good reason to be breaking the law’ or do you say, ‘Where are the police. This driver must be caught and punished’. I suspect that you, like me, say ‘Where are the police?’ You understand that the road rules are in place so that people don’t get hurt, and that these rules must be enforced. You have a sense of justice. Of course, if you are caught for speeding you may question the law, or why the police stopped you, but you must accept the law is there for everyone, including you. We are quick to judge others but make all manner of excuses for our own sin. But do you think we should scrap the police force, and maybe the courts as well? Think of how much money could be saved, but then again, think of the chaos, of the speeding drivers and innocent people getting killed.

What about the man who burnt his own mother in her house the other day? We all expect him to judged and sentenced for his horrendous crime. And what about men like Putin? Do we not hope for justice for the innocent people of Ukraine? As people made in the image of God we have a sense of justice, even if it is corrupted by sin, our sin. We must understand that God, the God of creation and God of redemption, is a just judge, as well as our loving Father. This God, our God, sees many of his people suffering injustice in this world. He hears their cry and will one day deliver justice. He must do this if he is just, and if we as his people are to have hope. It may not be in this life. In his vision John saw the souls of martyrs under the altar crying out for justice and they were told to rest a little while longer (Rev 6:9-11); when the next seal was opened kings and rich and mighty men and others were facing the wrath of the Lamb.

**1. Righteous judgment of God**

‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do right’ said Abraham when God revealed his plan to examine and judge the people of Sodom. Some in this city were crying to God for deliverance; remember Lot and his two daughters (Gen 19:8). The righteous judge destroyed Sodom but rescued Lot and his daughters as he did so. Neither Abraham nor anyone else accused God of injustice in destroying Sodom. God will similarly judge the whole world in righteousness. He will do so through Jesus Christ who will return to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

This truth is part of the gospel you believe if you are a believer. If you don’t believe the Bible you will not believe in the righteousness judgment of God on the last day- but your ignorance and unbelief will not change this truth or excuse you on that day. If you have heard the gospel you will be most culpable and most pitiable because in the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul preached in Thessalonica, and which is preached here in this church, you are offered the way, the only way, to avoid condemnation on that day. God in his justice justifies sinners like you and me through the precious blood of Christ.

Paul taught the Thessalonians about the second coming of Christ or the *Parousia* during the three weeks he was with them. They had questions concerning those of their number who died before the return of Jesus. Paul assured them that the dead in Christ would be raised first to meet the Lord in the air. He taught that the Lord Jesus would ‘descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God’ (1Thess 4:16). This is what Jesus taught his disciples when they asked for a sign of his coming and the end of the age (Matt 24:30, 31). John assures us that no one will miss the *Parousia* because, ‘every eye will see Him’ (Rev 1:7). The whole Book of Revelation is about the return of Jesus and the judgment; it is called the *apocalypse,* the same word used by Paul and translated ‘revealed’ in verse 7.

Paul adds to what he wrote about the *Parousia* in his first letter, saying the Lord Jesus ‘will come in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel’ (1:8). We use fire to cook, to keep warm, and sometimes to cleanse or purify things. But if you hear the word ‘fire’ in the news headlines it will be a destructive fire, a bushfire or house fire. We were dreading another summer of bushfires until the predicted ‘*el nino*’ never arrived. Houses are destroyed, and people are sometimes overtaken by the flames. Nothing is left in the aftermath of a bushfire. It was fire and brimstone that God rained down on Sodom, destroying that city and its people. When Jesus comes again he will come with power and great glory, and also with fire that will engulf and destroy the wicked (Isa 66:15, 16, 2Peter 3:7, 10).

The just judge will destroy the wicked, meaning those who refuse to believe in and obey Jesus, and save the righteous, meaning those who believe in and obey Jesus and his gospel. Paul describes these two types of people here in this passage. Our second subheading is, ‘Believers counted worthy’ and our third, ‘Unbelievers assigned to everlasting destruction’.

**2. Believers counted worthy**

Why is Paul telling the church in Thessalonica about ‘flaming fire taking vengeance’? He has already comforted their troubled hearts in telling them of the *Parousia*, and the dead in Christ rising from the grave to meet the Lord in the air. But those still alive were still being persecuted for their faith (1:4). They were patiently enduring as they waited for the return of Jesus. Would this be soon- no doubt they were praying it would be! And what would the judgment of God look like? They knew about God’s judgment on the last day. Moreover, why were they suffering for their faith?

Prior to the judgment will be a time of tribulation or suffering for God’s people; indeed, suffering in this world is the norm for believers. ‘In this world you will have tribulation’ said Jesus (John 16:33). Believing in Jesus Christ meant suffering for NT Christians, as it does today in many parts of the world. Converts from Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam, and even from secular humanism, face persecution from family, from friends, and even from governments; the form and intensity of persecution varies of course. So it is interesting to hear a gospel promising prosperity or, health, wealth, and happiness. Is this the gospel you heard and believe? Did you expect a trouble free life as a Christian? It was not the expectation or the reality for those who heard the apostle Paul. One commentator writes, ‘We get worried that we might suffer for Jesus sake. The earliest Christians would have been worried if they had **not** suffered!

From the apostles to Polycarp of Smyrna, to the Reformers and still today, you will hear martyrs counting it a privilege to die because of their witness for Christ. They did not want to die, thinking their death would contribute to their salvation, but they are willing to die because of the grace, the abundant grace of God, by which they have been saved. This is how we understand the words, ‘counted worthy of the kingdom of God’ and ‘count you worthy of this calling’ in verse 5 and 11 respectively.

We live in a fallen world; we live in the midst of sin and corruption and injustice. Living a righteous life in such a world invites persecution, as our Lord Jesus Christ experienced on the cross. You have chosen between living in the kingdom of this world and living in the kingdom of God. A believer becomes a citizen of heaven. He or she remains in this world but does so as a stranger or alien. They are waiting for their eternal home in heaven; they are renters not owners! For this reason Paul tells the Thessalonians, and tells us, that persecution is manifest or plain ‘evidence of the righteous judgment of God’ (1:5). In this fallen world the wicked prevail, so believers or those who love righteousness, will suffer, but only for a time (1:10). Their suffering, or our suffering, is evidence that we do not belong to this world. It is evidence that we are worthy, counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

‘Only for a time’ we said, because when Jesus returns the kingdom of God will be revealed and the kingdoms of this world will disappear. The tables will be turned in that day. In that day you who have suffered for Christ will have rest, and those who troubled you will have trouble (1:6, 7). In that day Jesus will be revealed from heaven in all power and glory. In his saints or holy ones, or his elect, Jesus will be glorified (1:10, Matt 24:31). The elect of God will either rise from the grave or be changed in an instant, changed into the glory of our Saviour and Lord.

‘When He is revealed… we shall see Him as He is’ and, ‘we shall be like Him’ (1John 3:2). Peter, James and John saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain but they were not changed. When Jesus comes again in his glory we will be changed radically and permanently to be like him. ‘We will not only see, but share his glory’. The saints or holy ones set apart by God for his glory are also ‘those who believe’ because of the testimony of the apostle Paul (1:10). That they believed when they heard the gospel was wonderful, a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. We marvel at Jesus today but when he returns we will marvel even more, rejoicing with all who have believed in him seeing him revealed in all his glory and ourselves being changed to be like him.

**3. Unbelievers assigned to everlasting destruction**

The tables will be turned in that day because Jesus is the truth and God is a righteous or just judge. It will not be you or me saying what is true, and it will not be an earthly rulers or judges making the judgment. It will be the all-powerful, holy, and righteous God. Moses knew that vengeance belonged to the Lord, as did David. They were powerful leaders but did not take vengeance upon their personal enemies because vengeance belongs to the Lord. It was the same with Paul and the apostles, and it remains the same for us.

Our Lord suffered in silence as he went to the cross, so we suffer for Christ in silence. When Jesus returns however, he will come with vengeance upon his enemies; he will bring justice to oppressed believers, fiery judgment upon those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel (1:8). Is Paul referring to two groups of people? Some think so, even suggesting he is referring to Gentiles and Jews respectively. It is more likely that he is referring to the same people, but with more depth in his second description.

We might think of people who have not heard the gospel, but in the end the gospel will be preached to all nations, and besides, God has revealed his power and Godhead in the creation, so men are without excuse (Rom 1:20). ‘Those who do not obey the gospel’ (1:8) seems to refer to those who have heard and rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. This certainly applied to the Jews but to Gentiles also. It is a solemn warning to you who have heard the heard the gospel not to turn away in disobedience. Already in Thessalonica and other churches, some were turning to false teaching and ‘another gospel’. The Day of Judgment will be the day of the separation of those who accept Christ and those who reject him.

Those who reject Christ will be punished with everlasting or never-ending destruction, with separation not only from believers who may live under the same roof, but for God’s face for eternity. It is the opposite of eternal life. Remember, Christ is light and life (John 1:4), so separation from him means darkness and death. Destruction means complete ruin; it does not mean annihilation. It means the fires of hell. Whatever power you think you have it is nothing compared to the power of God that will be revealed on that day. If you are wise you will surrender now. You will bow your knee to Jesus today and acknowledge him as Lord, Lord of your life and Lord of all.