

All 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. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10)

What are We Waiting For?

Waiting can be difficult and most of us don't like it very much. But would you agree that what you're waiting for affects how difficult the wait is? For instance, waiting for the birth of child is different than waiting for a jury to come back and pronounce you guilty or innocent. Both of those things are different from waiting for a surgery to be scheduled. In all three cases, you might get impatient, but being eager to hold your newborn child is different from just wanting the torture of not knowing whether you're going to jail to be over. You might not look forward to going under the knife, but you still get impatient for the surgery because you hope that after the pain and the rehab, you'll feel better than you do before it starts. What you're waiting for has a deep impact on how you wait.

Today is a special Sunday of the church year. It's called Last Judgment because it focuses on Jesus' return. But none of the readings that we have before us this morning are detailed descriptions of what's going to happen on that day. Instead, they focus on waiting for that day to come. So what's our attitude while we wait? Well, that depends on our view of what's coming. My friends, **what are we waiting for?**

I.

The Bible speaks of the wars and rumors of wars, of famines and earthquakes. It talks about persecutions and false Christs and falling away. But none of that is part of Judgment Day. It all comes before. Judgment Day is when Christ returns. When he comes, the whole world will see him coming on the clouds at the head of a great army of angels. The whole world will hear a trumpet blast. Christ will call the dead out of their graves. His angels will gather the living and then all people will stand before him. Then he will call the believers righteous and holy and invite us to spend eternity with him. And he will condemn the unbelievers to an eternity of hell. Then the world as we know it will be consumed by fire and God will present us with a new heavens and a new earth, our eternal home, where we will live in joy forever.

That's what we're waiting for. That is what Paul is talking about this morning. But he comes at it in a different way. He speaks of God "paying back" those who trouble us and giving us relief. He talks about Jesus being revealed "in blazing fire" and punishing all those who did not trust in his gospel. He's talking about the fires of hell. God will punish unbelievers with everlasting torment. And Paul says that they will be **"shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power."** Part of hell is being shut out from God's love. Those who suffer there will know what they're missing. They will know that we are enjoying every day with Jesus and his love. That will only make their punishment worse.

Jesus is the judge who will send them to hell. Even when it comes to Judgment Day, it's natural for us to think of Jesus as the one who loves us and saves us. But this section from 2 Thessalonians presents Jesus as the vengeful, punishing God and that's very different from what we're used to. But that's because we're believers and we have the benefit of forgiveness. Jesus is also the judge of unbelievers, and that means he will send them to hell.

In this reading, Jesus reminds us of that not to terrify us over our sins but to comfort us while we live in this sinful world. He reminds of vindication. When the end comes, he's going to do more than just rescue us from the difficulties of this life. He's going to prove that our faith was right. He's going to punish all those who spent their lives trying to make it hard for us to believe. God tells us that for our comfort and strength. We need to know that. We need to hear that because there are so many situations in this life that challenge our trust in what God is going to do. This week, I got an e-mail from another pastor about a mutual friend who resigned from the ministry. He left the ministry because of a struggle with a terrible temptation, a struggle he ultimately

lost. Hearing that made me wish that the Lord would come back and put an end to sin. That's what we're waiting for.

But we're hoping to be freed from more than just the general hardship that sin brings into this world. We're waiting for more than the end to the heartbreak that comes when we see brothers and sisters turn their backs on the truth. We live in a world that mocks people like us for being stupid and narrow minded. I had a friend in the army once who told me that Christians have invented a Disney land in the sky because we can't deal with the reality of death. Once he found out that I was a Christian, he took a perverse pleasure in challenging my faith. We live in a society that loves to portray conservative Christians as heartless, evil hypocrites who are afraid of homosexuals and who try to hold other people to standards that we don't live up to ourselves. That image is everywhere in the media and the devil gets enormous mileage out of it.

Most of us are going to face hostility to our faith. We're going to face people who try to make us choose between living as Christians and having a relationship with them. We're going to encounter people who think it's funny to run down our faith. We're going to encounter movies or music or websites that call us hypocrites and stupid and anything else they can think of. If you think it's ever going to change, you need to pay more attention to what Jesus said. He told us that the world hates us because it hated him first. People who hate you aren't going to give you a fair shake. People who hate you aren't going to take the time to listen to what you're actually saying. People who hate you are always going to revel in making you look bad.

All that hurts. And sometimes, it causes us to doubt our faith or to hide what we believe to avoid being mocked. We may even feel ashamed of Christ and our confession of him. The unbeliever in our heart betrays us to unbelievers. We have to face the attacks of unbelievers and the treachery of our own sinful hearts until the Lord comes back. But only until then. When he returns, he's going to rescue us from all that the devil and all that his followers inflict on us here. He's going to prove that all his promises were true. He's going to strip away that unbeliever in our hearts and leave us with a perfect faith – a faith that will never doubt or suffer again. He's going to give us eternal life with him. And all those unbelievers, all those people who mocked us and did their level best to undermine our faith – he's going to send them to hell forever.

That matters right now because that's what we're waiting for. Waiting for Judgment Day is not waiting to find out what the verdict is going to be. We already know the verdict! We're waiting for the eternal life that Jesus won for us when he died and rose and that Jesus promised us when he ascended into heaven. We're waiting to be set free from the attacks that come from our own hearts and from the assaults of Jesus' enemies. We look forward to that day with joy and anticipation. We have comfort in sorrow and disappointment and we long for that day to come because of what Christ has made that day to be for us. **What are we waiting for? A day of vindication.** A day when Jesus proves our faith was right and he punishes all those who hurt us and he gives us a new and better life with him.

II.

So for us, Judgment Day is a day of glory. What does glory mean? It's honor or praise given to someone. It's people seeing and acknowledging that you've done something impressive. When you win at something, you earn a little glory and you may feel a temptation to do a little victory dance. When your kids play games, if they have a good turn, they pump their fists and shout, "Yes!" On Judgment Day we're going to win eternal life. We're going to triumph over all our enemies.

But is that the glory that Paul associates with Judgment Day? Not so much. He says that on Judgment Day, Jesus **"comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."** Even though we will win our greatest victory ever on Judgment Day, the glory of that day is not ours. It belongs to Jesus, because he actually won it. He died on the cross in our place. He paid for our sins and he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sent the gospel out and guided it to us and made us believers. He is the one who will guard and keep us until he returns and judges the world.

It's all about him. And Paul here does not say something that the Bible does say in other places. He does not talk about the enemies of Christ praising him. The Bible says that they will. Paul himself says it in other places. It would seem to make sense in a section where he's talking about Jesus punishing his enemies, because part of their defeat is having to acknowledge that he really is the Savior and the Ruler of the world. Imagine the Jewish priests and scribes and Pharisees who condemned him and mocked him while he was hanging on the cross and paid the guards at his tomb to lie and say he didn't really rise – imagine them having

to sing his praises as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. That's a pretty tough part of their punishment! It will be a very special aspect to Jesus' glory.

Yet, Paul does not talk about it here. Instead, he talks about the praise and honor that we're going to give Jesus on Judgment Day. Why? In part, I think it's so that we don't misunderstand what vindication will mean for us. Jesus doesn't want us to spend the rest of our lives just waiting for our enemies to get what they have coming. When we suffer under their attacks, he assures us that he's going to do right by us. But he does not want us to hate them or to wish evil upon them. He calls us to pray for them and to share the gospel with them. He calls us to work to make them part of us, so that their praise will join ours on Judgment Day.

That's pretty hard for us to do when our focus is on how mad it makes us to see the way they drag our faith through the mud. Hatred and resentment are sins – even when we hate those who persecute us for our faith. How do you feel when you see the attacks on our faith? Most of us have to admit that we are guilty of those sins. The truth is, those sins make us no better than those enemies of Christ who killed him and who attack us. Our sins killed Christ. But on that cross he paid for those very sins. He rose and he took them away. He gave us his gospel so that now, we are no longer his enemies. We will be part of the cheering crowd who will welcome him and who will spend all eternity marveling at the love and the power of the Son of God who saved us.

You know what? Praising him will be part of heaven. Praising him and marveling at his mighty acts to save us will be our central occupation when we rise from the dead. And we will love it! It's what we were made to do! We will feel our greatest fulfillment when we finally get to bask in his love and that love brings forth endless, joyful songs of praise for the one who loves us. Can you wait for that day to come? **What are we waiting for? A day of glory.** A day when we get to give glory to Jesus.

That day is almost here. It's closer now than it was yesterday. If another day passes, it will be closer still. Jesus could return today. If he doesn't, God calls us to keep waiting. He even calls us to take care of the business of life today and tomorrow and next week and next year. We may spend decades waiting. We may die and be buried before he returns. Or we may see him today. God calls us to wait, trusting that he will come when the time is right. We can do that, we can look forward to that day, we can take strength and comfort from what's going to happen on that day, because that will be the day when all God's promises arrive. It will be the day when we are vindicated, the day when we will give glory to Jesus. Look forward to that day. Amen.