

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)

Judgment Day Makes Christianity Worth It

What makes something worth your effort? I was thinking about that on Friday so I went to Facebook and typed the words “this makes it all worth it” into the search box. Lots of entries came up. There was a video of a little girl singing and another one of a dad wearing a silly costume and joining his cheerleader daughter. There was a post about an outreach event at a church where one family stayed and talked for two hours and another one about seeing your son or daughter play organ in church. I’m sure I could find more examples. And I’ll bet we’ve all had moments when we thought, “This makes it all worth it”: watching your son or daughter walk across the stage at graduation or stand up here and confess their faith at the confirmation. Landing your first job after college and sending out hundreds of resumes. What do all those things have in common? They make the hardships and the effort and the sacrifices worth it. Whether it’s the minor sacrifice of dealing with parking at a football game or the decades long effort to get our kids through school, there’s a payoff in the end. Of course, sometimes, we have the opposite reaction: “This just wasn’t worth it.” So where does your faith fall on that spectrum? Is it worth the effort or is it a total waste of time? I hope that if you’re here today, you believe it’s worth the effort. But in a sinful world, living our faith does require sacrifices. What is it that makes them all worth it? St. Paul tells us today: it’s Judgment Day. **Judgment Day makes Christianity worth it.**

II.

Does that surprise you? How do we think of Judgment Day? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Don’t we tend to think of it as something scary? In my last congregation, we had a member who took care of the congregation’s website. Every Monday morning, I would email him the sermon from the day before so he could post it. I would add the scripture text and then save it as the name of the Sunday plus the words “for Scott,” so, “Christmas Day for Scott” or “Epiphany 3 for Scott.” Well, the Sunday of the church year that we’re celebrating today is called “Last Judgment.” So, I saved the sermon file as “Last Judgment for Scott.” He couldn’t let that pass. He was amused, but only because it sounded like doom for him. Doesn’t that reflect our natural way of thinking about Judgment Day? On some level, doesn’t it make us a little nervous?

If so, what are we afraid of? I can think of two possibilities. One is that we’re really afraid of all the stuff that comes before Judgment Day. Jesus talks about the world becoming more and more evil – wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, false Christs and persecution of us Christians. He says that the love of most will grow cold and that if those days were not shortened for the sake of us believers, no one would survive. That’s scary stuff. But all that scary stuff actually happens before Judgment Day. Judgment Day itself puts an end to that stuff, so it won’t be scary at all.

But maybe there’s another reason that we might feel uneasy about Judgment Day. Are we afraid of the verdict? Are we just a little bit nervous that Jesus is going say, “Sorry. You didn’t make it. You go stand on my left with the goats who are going down to hell.”? I think that at least some of us fear that. Now, why would a Christian ever fear that? Because he or she feels guilty. Because we know deep down in our hearts that we’re just not good enough to get into heaven. We can’t forget the selfish things we’ve done. We can’t forget the ways we’ve failed our parents or our children. We can’t escape the memory of hurtful words or hidden sins or truly terrible things that inflicted real pain on other people, pain that we can’t ever undo or make up for. That makes some of us more than just a little afraid of finally having to face Jesus.

But you know what? That’s completely missing the point of Judgment Day, at least for the believer. If you trust in Jesus, your verdict is already decided. It’s “not guilty.” No matter how many times you have failed your Savior and the people who love you here, Jesus has already guaranteed that you will be found innocent on

Judgment Day. That day is not really a day in court like we think of it here. You're not "rolling the dice" like you are when you go to trial in human court. In our justice system, where the lawyers and the experts fight it out and argue about the evidence, no one can know all that did or didn't happen, so no one can be certain of the outcome in advance. But God does know. God knows that Jesus lived a perfect life in your place. So, when God reviews your case, all he will see is Jesus being perfect. God knows that Jesus died on the cross and paid for all your sins. He knows that Jesus suffered hell itself on that cross in your place. He knows that Jesus rose to demonstrate that all your sins are paid in full. And Jesus himself will be the judge on that day. He will rule that you are holy and innocent and you will enter eternal life with him. It's already decided.

So, Judgment Day is not about us getting what we deserve. It's not even about all our lives being played out for all people to see. I think sometimes we Christians worry that everyone is finally going to know all that I did wrong. That's not the point at all. Jesus never says he's going to review all our sins. He says only that he's going to call us innocent.

In our reading from 2 Thessalonians, St. Paul explains what that's going to mean for us. He says, "**God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.**" Judgment Day means relief from all the hurts of this life. And Paul points to the same thing that Jesus pointed to: persecution. One of the hardest things about being a Christian in a sinful world is the sneering and the suffering that we have to put up with to confess our faith. It's gotten a lot worse since I sat in confirmation class forty years ago. It's gotten noticeably worse since I was ordained 26 years ago. It's getting harder and harder to be a Christian in America today and you know what? It's probably not going to get better. Even if we get some temporary relief, Jesus warned us that persecution is the price of faith in a sinful world. On this side of heaven, almost always, the enemies of the gospel have the upper hand. Almost always, people who are willing to be selfish and greedy and egotistical are going to have more material wealth and success than people who try to live their faith. Almost always, people who think like this sinful society thinks are going to be more popular than people who let God's Word take their every thought captive.

But when Jesus comes back, he will repay those who troubled us. St. Paul points out two things about that punishment. He says, "**They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.**" Now, when he says "eternal destruction," he does not mean that they'll wiped out never to exist again. Rather he means God will replace eternal life with a suffering so bad that it can only be thought of as unending death and destruction. Hell will hurt and it will hurt every part of the people who are condemned there forever. And there's the other part: they will be shut out from God. That's why God abandoned Jesus on the cross – he was suffering hell. Those unbelievers will be like orphans, living in the street during winter. They're cold and they're hungry and they're lonely. And they can look into the window of a fancy restaurant and they see a family there celebrating a birthday. Everyone is eating and drinking and enjoying each other's company. But those orphans are locked outside. That's what hell will be like. All those who reject Jesus will be locked outside, unloved, forever.

But Jesus will give us eternal life. He will wipe away all our tears. He will give us relief: in his arms, surrounded by his love, in a perfect world forever. That relief starts on Judgment Day. And the world we will know then will be better than anything we could ever experience now. So, the truth is, my friends, **Judgment Day makes Christianity worth it. It promises us vindication.** That means, the whole world we see that we trusted in the one true Savior.

II.

That relief is the goal of our faith. Christian faith is not about having the best life we can here. It's about using this life to get home to eternal life. That perspective is really important when we deal with persecution and pain and sorrow here. Faith in what's coming keeps us going. And it has to be faith because we can't see eternal life right now. All we can see is what happens here. A pastor I know put it this way: when we get to heaven and we can finally see our lives the way that God sees them, if God were to sit down with us and review all the pain and sorrow we've faced, and why he sent it, and then, if God were to say that we could go back and change anything we wanted to, that we could have a "do over" and relive any part of our life that we wanted to and get rid of any hurt or loss, at that moment we wouldn't change a thing. Once we can see our lives the way God does and understand all that he is doing, we will agree that God's way is best and we will even rejoice that God loved us enough to send those pains and hardships.

That's true about persecution. That's true about sadness and loss. That's true about everything that makes it hard to be Christian here. And let's be honest: all the hurts and sorrows of this life attack our faith. It's hard not to ask, "God why do I have to go through this? Are you really paying attention at all?" St Paul does not promise us that on this side of heaven it will make sense or even that it will get better. He promises that when Jesus is revealed, we will get relief. Only when we see Jesus will our pain and sorrow end. Only then will we see things the way God does.

Judgment Day is about finally getting that relief. There are a number of very memorable descriptions of that day. The Bible says that the trumpet will sound and all the world will hear it and look up. No matter where you are on that day, you will see Jesus coming in the clouds, with all the angels of heaven. He will call the dead from their graves, and they will rise to live. Jesus will gather all people before him and he will separate believers from unbelievers. He will condemn the unbelievers to an eternity in hell. But he will open the gates of paradise to the believers. And we will live in a new and perfect world where death has died. Our hearts will be free from all sin and fear and doubt and pain. We won't have any physical or emotional scars. And we will be with Jesus forever.

That is the what every day here is about. That is what every church service and catechism class is about. Getting us to that day is the reason that God sends every joy and every sorrow that we have to face. Faith is trusting that promise, even though it's impossible to see here. That faith changes us. It gives us courage and comfort here. It changes the way we look at all those scary things that lead up to Judgment Day. When we see those things happening, Jesus tells us, "**Lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near!**"

Judgment Day makes Christianity worth it. It inspires us to trust our Lord.

Persecution and loss and hurt and challenges to our faith are all signs that this world is passing away and that our Savior is coming to get us. That leads us to say what St. Paul said in another place: "**Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!**" The more you understand God's promises, the more you want Jesus to come. The more you face the pain and sorrow of this life, the more you have to pay the price of confessing Christ in a sinful world, the more you long for Jesus to return. I wish he would come today. I wish he were already here. But like you, I have to wait for his time and trust that he knows what's best. While we wait, Jesus will keep us safe from all harm and danger. He will use that promise of eternal life to keep our faith alive. He will minister to our hearts and comfort us with the message of his love. Trust him and wait for him. Amen.