

**Pastor Troy Schreiner—Victory Lutheran Church, Jacksonville**

**November 10, 2019—Second Sunday of End Time—Last Judgment Sunday**

**Series/Theme: Welcome Home, Where You Are Perfectly Safe**

**Sermon Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10—A God of Justice; A God of Grace**

When you were 3 years old, what did you want to do more than anything? Probably go to school, like the big kids! 8<sup>th</sup> graders can't wait for high school. High schoolers fixate on where they'll go to college. College students prepare for their first job. Fresh-faced employees dream of becoming one of the higher-ups. And the higher-ups count down the days to retirement! We spend a lot of our lives looking forward to the future, don't we? I think that's because the present isn't always pleasant, and we formulate this idyllic idea that in the future, those troubles will disappear. And sometimes that's true. But when we only focus on the future, we can lose sight of what's good about the present. I often wish I could go back and take some of those naps I despised as a kid!

That can also happen spiritually. On Last Judgment Sunday, believers can joyfully look forward to Jesus' triumphant return at Judgment Day. But if we only focus on the good to come, it's easy to lose sight of the ways God blesses us right now. We can be filled with joy, both for the present and the future because our God is a **God of justice, God of grace**, on Judgment Day, and every day.

When Paul visited the Greek city of Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit brought many to faith through Paul's preaching and teaching of God's Word. But his success made the Jews so jealous, they stirred up an angry mob and drove Paul out of the city. If the Jews in Thessalonica hated the message and the messenger, how do you think they felt about those who believed the message? Persecution was the new reality for these fledgling Christians.

Can you imagine the thoughts that must have gone through their minds? "I thought following Christ meant life would be easier! But now we're suffering, and the unbelievers are prospering!" So Paul wrote to them to explain. ***"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."***

It shouldn't have surprised them. After all, Jesus never promised his followers heaven on earth. Rather, he tells us, ***"Take up your cross and follow me!"*** "Crosses," meaning any suffering--physical, emotional, or psychological-- which we face because we believe Jesus is our Savior.

American Christians rarely suffer physical persecution or martyrdom for their faith, like happens in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. But that doesn't mean we don't bear crosses. Being on the other side of a society growing increasingly anti-Christian causes suffering-- mockery or belittlement from teachers, co-workers, even friends and family, because you follow Christ. For believing in Jesus, we're guaranteed to suffer in this life. It seems like we'd get rewarded, right?

And yet, how many of us would be considered extremely influential or wealthy? But a prominent atheist like Richard Dawkins, the author of the book, *The God Delusion*, has a net worth of \$10 million! It doesn't seem fair that God's children often suffer, while a blasphemous atheist rakes in millions. If the wicked prosper and believers suffer, are they right? Is there no God? Or if there is a God, should we just resign ourselves that our only hope for this life that it will someday end?

But when Paul referred to the evidence that God's judgment was right, he wasn't talking about the persecution they suffered, although cross-bearing is part of a Christian's life. Rather, the evidence of God's justice and grace was how they responded to that persecution! Paul said, ***We ought always to thank God for***

***you, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing...we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecution and trials you are enduring.”***

Want proof of God’s justice and grace? Paul only spent 3 weeks with these new Christians. Their faith was brand new! So we might expect that once their faith began attracting persecution, they’d toss Jesus away like a hot potato. However, their faith grew stronger, as did their love for each other. That’s God’s work, friends. In his justice and grace, God allowed the Thessalonians to suffer persecution, but gave them the spiritual strength they needed to persevere!

Paul was holding up a mirror for the Thessalonians, saying, “Yes, you’re suffering for your faith. But look! God is blessing you through it! God is sustaining you and your faith! And our cross-bearing is the same two millennia later. God allows us to suffer for following him so we rely on him, not ourselves, and gives us the spiritual strength we need to persevere!

In fact, looking forward to the future often helps us better appreciate the good things about the present. I remember my final year of Seminary training, I was so ready to graduate and start pastoral ministry. But looking forward to that future also helped me appreciate the present—the daily time I got to spend with my classmates; the calm before the hectic nature of ministry. Or when my wife was pregnant with our first, I couldn’t wait to hold that baby in my arms, but looking forward to the future also helped me appreciate the present—like being able to sleep in, and easily go on dates.

In the same way, knowing that Jesus will return with justice and grace at the Last Day changes the way I see the blessings of God’s justice and grace in the “right now.” If someone harms me, I know that I’m suffering for something worthwhile. When I face adversity, I can trust that God is in complete control. When I’m suffering, I can face each day, knowing God is blessing me through it. When I’m tempted or persecuted, I know God is giving me the strength to persevere. We rightly look forward to the future when Christ returns at Judgment Day! And in doing so, we can better see God’s justice and grace every day.

Outside observers might think you’re sadistic for that. A worship service that celebrates the end of the world like it’s a good thing? Our culture is fascinated with the end of the world, because Judgment Day is so unknown. But our culture is also terrified of it because people believe there is nothing better than this life.

And the unbeliever should be terrified! Paul says, ***“This will happen when the 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.”*** The glorious, all-powerful Son of God appears in roaring fire, surrounded by a vast army of powerful angels! That’s a terrifying image for those who ***“did not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”***

That’s an interesting phrase, isn’t it? Paul doesn’t call them “those who didn’t obey the law.” Rather, these unbelievers didn’t obey the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ is our Savior. It wasn’t that they failed to accomplish some prerequisite checklist, or to climb some mountain of works. Jesus already checked all the boxes and climbed the hill to save us. They simply had to receive the free gift God was giving them by faith. Their entire lives, God showed his grace, constantly reaching out to them with the good news that sins were forgiven in Christ. Yet they rejected it, throwing away the free gift of salvation God offered, saying, “Don’t want it. Don’t need it.” At Judgment Day, as much as it pains God, who wants all to be saved, he will say to those who rejected his grace, “You always wanted to be separated from me. Now you get what you wanted.” ***They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.***

The worst punishment of the eternal destruction of hell is “being shut out from the presence of the Lord. Hell is being shut out from the love, grace, and mercy of God. And that means in hell, there will be no hope. No rest. No second chances. No love. The grace offered in life ends, and only justice remains.

On Judgment Day, the Richard Dawkinses of the world will discover that God is no delusion! The punishment of unbelievers at Judgment Day shows us that God is just, and in complete control! We don’t have to question whether God’s paying attention to our struggles or suffering. He allows us to face them in this life for our good, but in the end, ***God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.***

At Judgment Day, we will see God’s justice carried out firsthand. Should we look forward to that destruction of the wicked, cheering, “Go get ‘em, God! Let ‘em burn!” Of course not. Like God, we too want all people to be saved.

That’s especially true when we understand that we aren’t morally superior to those who will meet God’s justice at Judgment Day. We won’t rejoice while they’re terrified because we’re so much better people. In fact, sinners like us should have just as much reason to be utterly terrified at the thought of Jesus’ returning, because we too have so often failed to love and live for Jesus as we should.

But we can look forward to Judgment Day with joy instead of terror, because God is a God of justice, and grace. He doesn’t leave sins unpunished. He’s not your smiling Grandpa who tells you “don’t worry about it” with a wink. No, God is a God of justice. There must be punishment for sin. But God is also a God of grace. Instead of punishing us who deserve it, he instead placed the punishment for the sin of the whole world on his perfect, holy Son. Instead of the sinful world paying for its sin, the cost was willingly paid by the one who created the world. A God of justice, a God of grace.

That’s why, as believers, we can picture the beauty, the glory, the majesty that awaits us on that day, when Jesus ***comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.*** In our lives on this earth, we don’t always look rich, or powerful, or special. We face persecution, and suffer as we bear crosses for our faith in him. But on that day, our faith becomes sight. Our idyllic, “no suffering” dreams of the future, become reality. Look forward to that glorious day, brothers and sisters. And as you do, don’t lose sight of the “right now” blessings God showers on you every day.