

Righteous Judgment
2 Thessalonians 1:4—5

The Apostle Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians in response to a letter circulated in Paul's name, stating that what he had taught them was actually wrong and that he had some revised information for them (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Instead of escaping the wrath that was to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10) by being caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17), this letter stated that they were currently going through the seven-year Tribulation. This letter preyed upon their current state of being persecuted for their new-found faith. As soon as they took their eyes off teaching that they originally accepted as coming from God (1 Thessalonians 2:13), they fell into accepting error.

In spite of this, Paul commends them for having a strong faith in the face of persecution and tribulation. He also notes that their love for each other is growing greatly (2 Thessalonians 1:3). However, there is one noteworthy omission that Paul commented them for in 1 Thessalonians 1:3—their hope. While their faith and love were strong, the hope of Rapture had been shaken. They were still sure that they were saved (their faith was strong) but their understanding of future events were now on shaky ground. Instead of standing firmly on what God said through Paul, they looked at their situation and decided to believe a counterfeit doctrine. The hope they once held to was shattered because they built their doctrine on their experience instead of the sure word of God.

Paul needed to correct this error quickly because eventually this would lead to their faith being uprooted since the two are inexorably connected (Romans 5:2, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Galatians 5:5 and Colossians 1:23). If Paul was wrong about their hope of heaven, perhaps he was also wrong about other doctrinal issues. Paul wrote to them as soon as he heard they were accepting false documents as doctrine.

Righteous judgment (verses 4—5)

Paul makes an interesting statement concerning their reaction to external circumstances. In spite of being persecuted and afflicted by friends, family and unbelieving Jews, they stood firm in their faith. Being able to stand strong in these conditions is, according to Paul, a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that they will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God. Some take this verse to mean that God will judge whether we are worthy to go into His kingdom based on how we act. If we are loyal to Him, as we go through life's trials, then He will be loyal to us in allowing us to enter His kingdom. This would make works to be the road to eternal life.

Before addressing what this passage really means, we need to define what righteous judgment is. First, anything God does is righteous. Being righteous really boils down to being or doing right. It contains the idea of being just, equitable and fair. Since everything God does, by His very nature, is right then everything God does is righteous. God can not be anything other than perfectly fair in all His dealings with mankind.

To make a judgment is to discriminate, make a decision or even award a person. So then, a righteous judgment can only be done by a righteous Judge. This Judge will always make the right choice and do the right thing when dispensing retribution or reward.

Examples of righteous judgment are found in the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 4:8), the coming seven-year Tribulation (Psalm 9:8; 37:6—9; Romans 2:5—6; Revelation 16:7) and the Lord at the Second Coming (Psalm 97:1—6; 99:1—5; Isaiah 33:5; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Hosea 2:19).

Since judgment means to discriminate, a judgment can be good or bad. For instance, our legal system discriminates between those who are innocent from those who are guilty. If you are guilty then judgment can be bad but if you are innocent, judgment is good. Athletes in the Olympics are judged to be awarded with medals. To be judged is to be compared with a standard.

In the world of Christianity, God has set the standard by which people will be judged. Israel will be judged by one standard, the Gentiles by another (Romans 2:12; Hebrews 10:30). The judgment of the unsaved at the Great White Throne is mentioned in Revelation 20:12—13. We in the church, the body of Christ will also be judged by God's perfect standard.

The believer's judgment

Our Bema Seat judgment, unlike the Great White Throne judgment, will be one of reward and has nothing to do with salvation. Only those who have believed in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ will be going through the Bema Seat Judgment (Romans 14:10—12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). This judgment will reveal both good and bad, according to what we have done while on this earth. We will be giving the Lord an accounting of how we used this time on earth. Did we waste our time pleasing self or were we faithful in serving the Lord (Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5)?

The church at Corinth was a carnal church that needed a lot of spiritual growth. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul warns them that there is a judgment coming and proceeds to give the basis of that judgment. He tells them to be careful to build their foundation upon what he (Paul) has been teaching them. He can do this because God gave him the position of masterbuilder (1 Corinthians 3:10—12). Paul was given the plans for a brand new building project—the church, the body of Christ. He is building on the foundation of Jesus Christ and was given very specific revelations directly from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11—12) as to how to build the rest of the structure.

Since Paul is the masterbuilder for the church, the body of Christ, then anything we teach and preach in this age of grace needs to conform to the blueprints he was given by Jesus Christ. Those who build on the doctrine of Grace, as revealed to the Apostle Paul, will be rewarded with eternal rewards. These rewards will survive a judgment by fire. Those who don't see the unique message given to us by Paul, but instead preach and teach according to Peter or Moses or Abraham, etc. will be storing up wood, hay and straw for eternity. These teachings will not survive God's fiery judgment and will be burned up.

Paul makes it clear that the works will be burned up but the individual will still be saved (1 Corinthians 3:15). This judgment discerns between works that are appropriate for this dispensation from works relating to other dispensations.

Considered worthy (verse 5)

The Thessalonian believers persevered in spite of tribulation. Being able to hold up and stand firm was a strong indication (or sign) of God's righteous judgment, for they will be rewarded for being able to hold up under crushing persecution. The rewards to be given them will last an eternity and being qualified to obtain these awards show they are indeed worthy of the kingdom that they were already a part of.

One reward that we should be looking forward to is the one, given by the Righteous Judge for all those who love His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul knew he would be receiving this crown of righteousness and longed to be home with the Lord (Philippians 1:23). We should also desire for the Lord to come to take us home, not as an escape, but rather to be with Him for all eternity, serving Him perfectly as He sees fit.

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