

God's Retribution
2 Thessalonians 1:5—8

As mentioned in the last lesson, the believing Thessalonians were obvious signs of God's righteous judgment. When people could see how they were able to hold up under intense persecution but still hold firm to their faith, they could see the hand of God at work in their lives. It was evident that God was judging these believers to be worthy of eternal life. This was His righteous judgment. Holding up in the face of persecution didn't make them worthy of heaven. It was not a good work that pleased God. Rather, from man's point of view, these believers were worthy of the Kingdom of God because they remained faithful to Him.

Righteous judgment of unbelievers

Now the tables will be turned. God will righteously judge the believers, in a positive way, but He will also righteously judge unbelievers in a negative way. Both judgments are good, just, fair and righteous but one is positive and the other negative. One will be about reward while the other will lead to damnation.

Paul was keenly aware of what the Thessalonians were going through because he had experienced the same type of mistreatment for standing firm in the faith (1 Thessalonians 3:4). He also knew the mindset of the zealous, unbelieving Jews who were seeking to destroy any Christ believer. He paints them the big picture to give them some hope of relief. Although this relief will not happen immediately, it gives them the knowledge that God will ultimately take care of those who lash out against believers.

Since God is just, He will repay those who caused the Thessalonians to suffer. He will also avenge those who have mistreated believers throughout the ages. As they stand before the Judge of the universe at the Great White Throne, they will need to give an account of their deeds (Revelation 20:11—15). Even they will bow before the almighty King, the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).

God's judgments

God will judge every person who has ever lived. Believers, in this dispensation of Grace, will be judged for their works at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:13—15). All unbelievers will eventually stand before God at the Great White Throne judgment at the end of the age (Revelation 20:11—15). The Gentiles will experience judgment at the end of the Tribulation (Matthew 25:31—46) and Israel will be judged for producing or not producing fruit (Luke 19:15—27).

As Paul writes about God's retribution against those who are persecuting these new believers, he looks ahead to the events at the end of the Tribulation. This is when God will judge these unbelievers and their final destination of eternal damnation will be realized (Romans 2:5). It is quite easy to relate the events Paul mentions in 2 Thessalonians 1:5—8 with end-time events as mentioned in the Old Testament and the early books of the New Testament.

The Lord Jesus revealed (verse 7)

There will actually be two future revelations of Jesus Christ. The first revelation is when He comes back to catch up believers into the air at the Rapture (1 Corinthians 1:7; Colossians 3:4). Jesus Christ will only reveal Himself to believers in this Age of Grace. Those who are not saved will not see Him so it is a partial (secret) revelation.

The second revelation will be at His Second Coming. This will happen after the Tribulation and will be seen by all people on earth, saved and unsaved. He will come in glory, majesty, righteousness and power as he takes full control of the governmental system on earth. This is the

revelation of Jesus Christ that Peter speaks of (1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13). Luke fills in details surrounding this Second Coming, comparing it to a flash of lightning and the time fire rained down on Sodom. It will happen quickly and take many by surprise. Those who are not ready will be left behind (Luke 17:22—36). The two events are laid out side-by-side in 1 Thessalonians 4:13—18 and 5:1—11. Many people fail to see the distinctions between these two events because they fail to rightly divide between Israel's Prophetic program from the Church's Mystery program. So that there would be no confusion to the readers of 2 Thessalonians, Paul adds specific details of the revelation he is speaking about.

Mighty angels (verse 8)

The first detail that points to the Second Coming is that the mighty angels will be coming with Him. These mighty angels are warriors who will be working to clean up the world of evil men to prepare for Jesus Christ to appropriate the throne. Matthew 16:27; 25:31 and Mark 8:38 make it abundantly clear that Christ will come back with a multitude of angels.

Most people think that we will be coming back with Jesus Christ so that we will reign with Him for all eternity. They have arrived at this conclusion because they don't rightly divide Scripture and have taken what belongs to Israel and given it to the Church. They take verses such as Zechariah 14:4—5 (and the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee) and 1 Thessalonians 3:13 (at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints) as proof.

However, Matthew 16:27; 25:31 and Mark 8:38 show that it is His angels who will be coming back with Him at His Second Coming. These angels are mighty warriors who will be sent to fight (Revelation 19:11—15). There is no passage of Scripture that specifically points to believers coming out of heaven with Jesus Christ to take over the world.

The only verse that specifically mentions believers coming with Christ is 1 Thessalonians 3:13. This passage relates to the Church, the Body of Christ, not Israel in the Millennial Kingdom. These saints, that come with Jesus Christ, come to receive their body that will be raised from the dead and then changed (glorified). We, who are already on this earth at the Rapture, will just be changed (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52). This is a two-step process for those already dead and a single step for those who are living at the time of the Rapture. Most people, unfortunately, combine Rapture and Second Coming details and come up with an unpalatable mess.

Flaming fire of vengeance (verses 7—8)

The other detail that Paul adds, to clarify which coming of the Lord he is talking about, is that He is coming back in flaming fire. The Bible speaks often of fire from the Lord and it is usually centered on judgment and retribution, often concerning the Tribulation. For instance, Psalms touches on the Tribulation quite often (Psalms 11, 18, 21:9 for instance). Isaiah 30:27—30 shows God burning with anger and devouring with fire, as does Isaiah 66:15—16 (the Lord will come in fire). Zechariah 13:9 says He will bring Israel through the fire (of the Tribulation) to refine them, as we can see in Malachi 3:2—3 (refiner's fire).

Matthew, Luke, 1 Peter and Revelation (and other New Testament books) all collaborate with these Old Testament verses. Matthew 13:37—43 says the angels (who have come back with Jesus Christ at the Second Coming) will be sent out as reapers, cutting down the tares and burning them, while bringing the wheat (believing Israel) into the barn (the Kingdom). 1 Peter 3:7 also mentions the fiery judgment of the Tribulation. This flaming fire of vengeance is not presented any more clearly than in the book of Revelation where Christ is pictured breaking the seals while the angels pour out the wrath of God with the seals, trumpets and vials. The culmination of these judgment is seen in Revelation 19:11—15 when Jesus comes with His armies of angels, not believers.

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