

Fate of God's Enemies

2 Thessalonians 1:6—10

Since the Thessalonians were experiencing intense persecution, they were questioning whether or not they were going through the seven-year tribulation that Paul had taught them in the first letter he wrote to them (1 Thessalonians 5:1—11). Paul clearly told them that they would be Raptured before the beginning of the Tribulation and therefore would be saved from the wrath that is to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9).

When the Thessalonians looked at the persecution they were going through, and then read a letter, supposedly penned by the Apostle Paul saying they were going through the Tribulation, they threw out everything Paul had taught them and decided they were indeed in the Tribulation. This is why Paul wrote the second letter to them, allaying their fears of missing the Rapture and reassuring them that God will avenge those who have been unmercifully tormenting them.

God's vengeance

It's very important to notice that God is the judge, jury and executioner. We are never told to take action and lash out at those who are doing us wrong. Vengeance belongs to God, not us (Deuteronomy 32:35—41). Israel will cry out for the Lord to judge those who have turned against His people (Psalm 94:1—3). This cry will be heard as the believing remnant of Israel nears the end of the Tribulation, thinking the Lord has forgotten her (Revelation 6:10; Psalm 13:1; 89:46). I believe their cry is heard and answered at the end of Revelation 6 when Jesus Christ is shown coming in His glory and power.

We need to leave vengeance up to God because He is all knowing and completely righteous and just. He is the only One who knows the heart of man and therefore is the only One qualified to judge the intentions of the heart. When men judge each other, mistakes are made. This is why people are wrongly imprisoned, sometimes for years, before it is discovered they were wrongly judged. When God judges, there will be no mistakes, and His retribution against sinners will be completely just and fair.

The description of God's vengeance is terrifying. There are many passages in the Old Testament that warns of this time of God's wrath. Isaiah 30:27—33 speaks of the Lord's burning and fierce anger. He is a consuming fire who will shake the nations. Isaiah 34 speaks of God's indignation and wrath. His sword is filled with blood in His day of vengeance. Isaiah 26:20—21 says He will punish the inhabitants of the earth, and that this day will be like no other (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1). It will be a time of darkness, destruction and wrath when God devours the whole land by the fire of His jealousy (Zephaniah 1:14—18). The cosmos will be shaken and Satan and his minions will be removed from power (Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:25—26). Note that the stars falling from the sky in Matthew is related to Satan's demise (Isaiah 34:4; Revelation 6:13).

This is the affliction that Paul had in mind when he told the Thessalonians in verse 6, "it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you." This time of Tribulation for the unjust is in view with verses 7 and 8.

Wait patiently

To summarize Paul's instructions to them, we could say he is telling them to wait patiently, to hold up under pressure. There is no promise that the trials will subside, but only instructions to look up and look beyond the tribulations they are going through. Those who are tormenting believers are actually persecuting God. As Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Jesus Christ came to him asking Saul why he was persecuting Him. Persecutors of Christians are actually doing so against God. This is another reason why God needs to be the

avenger. Since only He is perfectly just and all knowing, and anything done against a Christian is actually done against God, He is therefore the only logical person who should retaliate.

Eternal destruction (verse 9)

Those who reject Christ will be banished from His presence for all eternity. The word destruction often means to utterly annihilate so it is no longer in existence. There are many who take verses like this to build a case that unbelievers will be annihilated, that they will cease to exist.

However, this teaching contradicts many other passages that clearly teach souls will either experience eternal life or eternal death (Daniel 12:2). If the destruction were about annihilation, there would be no need to insert the adjective “eternal” because the very meaning of annihilation implies it will in a state of non-existence forever.

People will be punished for not accepting Jesus Christ as the only Person who can save them from eternal damnation. By rejecting God’s offer of salvation, they are, in effect, thumbing their noses at His offer and are saying they will do it their own way. These Christ-rejecters will now spend an eternity attempting to pay off the penalty of their sins. If God were to annihilate them, they would prematurely lose the ability to pay off their own sins.

According to John 3:36, those who believe in Jesus Christ will have everlasting life, while those who do not believe will not see life. Instead, they will experience God’s wrath, which will remain upon them. The word “remains” is in the present tense, indicating that it is never-ending. If an unbeliever were annihilated, how would God’s wrath be upon them continually into the future?

There are a number of verses that show a continuation of consciousness for the unbeliever. The account of the place of the dead shows an existence of the unsaved after death (Luke 16:19—31). Matthew 25:46 says the unbelievers will go away into eternal punishment while the righteous into eternal life. This verse indicates the unbeliever’s destination is as secure and as long as a believer’s destination. Revelation 20:10 shows the devil being thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented with the beast and false prophet day and night forever and ever. Later, death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14—15). This shows all unbelieving dead will be tormented along with the devil forever.

This fire is said to be unquenchable (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17) and eternal (Matthew 18:8). This eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41) but, after the fall of man, will also be the final destination of the unsaved. This is an eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46).

The Gospel of Grace

Although the Apostle Paul’s teaching gave comfort to the Thessalonians, by telling them God will avenge those who are tormenting them, he was also very concerned that everyone would hear the Gospel of the Grace of God and the promise of eternal life. Those who persecuted Paul and the Thessalonians were not only harming these Christians, but were also obstructing the spread of the truth of the Gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:14—16).

While we may not be under persecution, such as experienced by Paul and the Thessalonians, we do have the God-given responsibility to reach out to the unsaved with the message of reconciliation. We are the instruments, as ambassadors, through whom God has chosen to bring His message of hope to the world. Knowing the fate of those who reject Jesus Christ, as their Savior, should impel us to be bold in presenting Jesus Christ as their only means for them to have peace with God.

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