

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Last Judgment
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
You know what's coming.

This is evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer. ⁶ Certainly, it is right for God to repay trouble to those who trouble you, ⁷ and to give relief to you, who are troubled along with us. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his powerful angels, ⁸ he will exercise vengeance in flaming fire on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength, ¹⁰ on that day when he comes to be glorified among his saints, and to be marveled at among all those who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

—2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 EHV

Have you ever had a situation in your life where you said, "If only I would have known?" When I was in high school, I was in a bad car accident. Thankfully, nobody was seriously hurt. But I remember walking away from the car accident thinking, "If only I would have known that my friend was planning to drag race, I wouldn't have gotten in the car."

Maybe you've had situations like that. "If only I would have known..." I hope that's not the case with your life as a Christian. God has told us very clearly in his Word that those who follow Christ will face hardships. We will have challenges. Christians bear crosses.

I hope nobody ever said to you, "You know, when you follow Jesus, your life will go so smoothly. Everything will be great for you when you follow Christ." I hope nobody ever told you that. I hope you didn't one day say, "If only I would have known that following Christ would be so challenging, I would have thought twice about this Christianity stuff." It's not easy. Jesus said it wouldn't be easy to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Christ. That's the truth about being Christians.

That's a truth that the apostle Paul shared with people he met on his missionary journeys. The apostles often proclaimed, "**We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God**" (Acts 14:22). Following Christ is not easy. Paul regularly shared that message with the people in his life.

Think about the people who lived in the city of Thessalonica. On his second missionary journey, God directed Paul to this Macedonian city. And Paul spent three weeks in a row preaching in their churches. Paul preached that Jesus is the Christ who suffered and died and rose from the dead, and as a result of his preaching, a handful of Jews believed and a whole lot of Greeks believed in Jesus. But I'm also confident that Paul proclaimed, "**We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.**" As Christians, life would not be easy. It would be challenging.

That became very clear in Thessalonica when a jealous mob of Jews rose up to oppose Paul and the Christians. A mob started to riot in the city. Soon enough they started storming through the homes of Christians, looking for the apostle Paul. They wanted to silence him and his message about Jesus.

But when they couldn't find Paul, they grabbed some of his new converts. These were just baby Christians, new to the faith, and they dragged them to the local court before the Roman judge. And they said to the judge, "Hey! You have to do something about this because these people are pledging allegiance to a king whose name is *not* Caesar. His name is Jesus." These young Christians were put on trial and persecuted because they professed Jesus as their Savior. Paul prepared them for these challenges, but I wonder if any of them ever thought, "If only I would have known."

Well, in the middle of all this mayhem, some of the Christians smuggled Paul out of the city. They got him out of there because things were getting quite intense.

But Paul couldn't get out of his mind what was happening to those baby Christians. He was concerned about them and their welfare. He was concerned about their faith in the midst of these challenges. What was going to happen to them?

So, just a few months after Paul was smuggled out of the city, he wrote a letter to the Thessalonians. We know this letter as 1 Thessalonians. He wrote this letter to encourage them and to strengthen them in the face of persecution. He reminded them that their severe suffering for their faith wasn't an indication that God's work among them failed.

No, not at all. He encouraged them that hardships and challenges and persecutions were all part of following Jesus. He wanted to strengthen them in their faith. And then about six months later, Paul writes another letter that we know as 2 Thessalonians. The persecution didn't let up.

And it might have been tempting to give up on following Christ because of those hardships. If they were trying to figure out God's plan for their lives on how well they were treated, they may have given up on following Christ. They would have given up after the first three weeks of Paul's preaching. It seemed as though there was one obstacle after another that just kept popping up for them. If they thought that life was just going to be smooth sailing as Christians, they would have given up early on. It wasn't smooth sailing. Living as followers of Christ was difficult and challenging.

So, Paul writes this second letter to give them more encouragement. And he says, **"This is evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer."** Now just imagine this. You're a Thessalonian Christian hearing that you are being counted worthy of God's kingdom. Really? I believe and confess that Jesus is my Savior, and as a result I lose my job, and my kids are taken away from me, and my friends disappear, and I'm afraid to leave my home at night because persecution is intensifying. Really?

Are you serious, Paul? This is the evidence of God's righteous verdict? This is the evidence that things are right? Well, there's something deeper here. Let me read Paul's words right before our text. He writes, **"We are always obligated to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, as is fitting, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love that each and every one of you has for one another is increasing. ⁴ So we ourselves boast about you in God's churches in regard to your patient endurance and faith in all your persecutions and in the trials that you are enduring"** (2 Thessalonians 1:3,4).

You see, Paul points the Christians to the fact that under the weight of all those troubles, their newborn faith wasn't being smothered. In fact, their faith and love were growing and spreading. In the midst of persecution and hatred against them, their love wasn't growing cold, but it was intensifying. It was increasing.

That's the **"evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer."** These persecutors are just stomping all over the Thessalonian Christians, and as far as these Jesus-haters can see, they're fighting against people who are just getting stronger and who are multiplying under that persecution. So, it became evident that these persecutors aren't just fighting a war against people; they are fighting a war against God.

Think of it like this. It's as if Jesus is standing invisibly in between the persecutors on one side and the Thessalonian Christians on the other side. And Jesus is converting all those painful trials into painful blessings. Through those challenges their faith and love were growing. And it's evident. People see it. Paul knew it, and he encourages the Christians in their trials.

While all those challenges were taking place, the Lord Jesus was invisible to all those persecutors. They didn't know God, and they didn't obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. They hated Jesus, and they hated his followers.

But Paul encourages the Christians to live peaceful lives in the midst of all that. And here's his encouragement. Paul is telling the Thessalonian Christians that the day is coming when Jesus is going to turn the light switch on, and everybody is going to see who's always been there.

And it's on *that* day, the day we call Judgment Day, that everything will come to light and be made right. Look at how Paul describes this to this new Christians who are suffering. He says it like this: **"Certainly, it is right for God to repay trouble to those who trouble you, ⁷ and to give relief to you, who are troubled along with us. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his powerful angels, ⁸ he will exercise vengeance in flaming fire on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength, ¹⁰ on that day when he comes to be glorified among his saints, and to be marveled at among all those who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed."**

It can be very frustrating when justice is not served. It can be irritating when the ungodly seemingly get away with persecuting Christ's church. But God does not want *us* to take revenge. He does not want *us* to make things right. Rather, Paul encourages the Thessalonians, these persecuted Christians, to focus their eyes on the Day of Judgment. He wants them to **know what's coming**.

Just as certain as Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead and is here with you right now, so he will certainly be revealed from heaven **"with his powerful angels and exercise vengeance in flaming fire on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."**

Jesus is coming back, and he is saying, "It will be payback time." We don't need to take these matters into our own hands. Jesus will take care of it. **You know what's coming!** It will be a time for everyone to experience close and personal the judgment of God.

You got the persecutors on one side and you have the Lord's people on the other side. And Jesus is in the middle. And God through Paul is saying that the day is coming when Jesus is going to flip on the switch, and he'll be seen by all. He's no longer going to convert painful trials into painful blessings. He'll be delivering justice. And when he delivers justice, that includes delivering punishment. **You know what's coming!**

Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians by pointing them to the Day of Judgment. Now, understand his purpose in telling them this. His purpose in telling them about God's judgment isn't primarily so that the Thessalonians can go over to their persecutors and tell them, "Well, if you don't stop being mean to us, then God is going to come, and he's going to send you hell."

No, that's not his primary purpose in telling them what's coming. His primary purpose in telling the Thessalonians about God's judgment is to give them hope that those hardships that they have been suffering for so long will end. They will end when God's justice is revealed. Jesus is going to be revealed, and he's going to make things right.

God's not going to forget. The righteous verdict will be given. God will not be mocked. He will not forget the crimes against him and against his people. **You know what's coming.** Paul writes, **"Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength."** That's hell. Hell is coming.

Now, I know that a lot of people don't like to talk about hell. It's not a very happy subject, is it? It can make us a little uneasy. But it's important for us to reflect on this, because here is where God shows us the severity of sin. It's important for us to think twice about who has a better sense of justice. Do we or does God have a better understanding of the gravity of sin and the damage it does?

Judgment Day puts everything into perspective, doesn't it? Even our feeble little minds can sort of comprehend this. We know it's fitting for God to punish those who do not know him and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. The only possible way to be spared from the eternal fire of hell is through Jesus. We need his righteousness and his forgiveness. If we push God out, if we push Jesus away and reject him, if we try to approach God without Jesus' forgiveness, well, it makes sense that God would shut us out of his presence. When people live lives apart from Christ, well, on Judgment Day, God will give them exactly what they wanted while they lived in this world. He'll give them an eternal existence apart from him.

So, this is huge, isn't it? This is the critical aspect of trusting in Jesus. Faith in Jesus makes all the difference on Judgment Day. And just so that we are all clear on how critical this is, think about some words that Jesus spoke when he was on the cross. You know them. **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Matthew 27:46). You know what Jesus was saying with those words? He was saying, "Why have you shut me out of your presence?"

Just think about that. Jesus knows the justice of God. Jesus knows the gravity and the severity of sin. Jesus experienced the damage that sin causes. He knows the scars that sin leaves better than we ever will. And Jesus knows that God's justice is not just *hypothetical*. No. He knows from experience. He knows what it's like to be shut out of the presence of the Lord. He knows what it's like to be closed off from his glorious strength. He experienced the devastation of hell.

You know, I had a member in a previous congregation who claimed that hell wasn't real. He made the claim that hell was just something the church made up as a threat, a scare tactic, to keep people in the church. Well, if he's right, then why in the world did Jesus cry out those words from the cross?

This is serious stuff. These aren't just empty threats to keep you coming to church. These are serious truths so that **you know what's coming.** Sin and hell are so serious that it required the perfect Son of God take upon himself our sins and suffer the hellish separation from God because of them. And that's what Jesus did for you, my friends. Jesus cried those words, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,"** so that you would never cry those words.

I mean, just think about how different these words that Paul writes to the Thessalonians would be if Jesus hadn't experienced that justice on the cross. Imagine what it would mean if Jesus hadn't called every sin of every sinner his own. Imagine what this would mean if God didn't demonstrate his perfect justice on his Son. If that were the case, there would be nothing at all encouraging about Judgment Day. There would be no reason at all for hope. There would be no reason for peace. There would be no reason for Paul to write a letter or to preach a sermon. There would only be fearful expectation of God's return to give everyone exactly what they deserve.

But, my friends, Jesus *did* say those words. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** And you know the answer to the question. The answer is for you, for me, for people in the entire world. Jesus suffered God's justice for the world that **“whoever believes in him shall *not* perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16).

You know what's coming. There aren't any surprises here. You can't say, “If only I would have known,” because **you know what's coming.** A line will be drawn in the sand. You will have unbelievers on one side and believers on the other with Jesus standing between them. God is very clear about this. **“Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength,¹⁰ on that day when he comes to be glorified among his saints, and to be marveled at among all those who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.”**

You and I will marvel as what we see on that day. Oh, I'm sure we will marvel at the powerful angels and the flaming fire of vengeance. But there is so much more that we will marvel at. We will marvel as we see Jesus coming to be glorified among his saints, and that's you. We will marvel in the fact that Jesus will have accomplished his goal of restoring you to himself and making you whole. He's going to make everything right. Trust him. Rely on him. Marvel at him. And live in peace and in love because **you know what's coming!** Amen.