

1 Thess 2:13-3:13

Please Pray:

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for the beauty and perfections of your Word. As I preach, please help me to be speak clearly. As we listen to your Word, help us to listen attentively. And as your Word goes forth, I pray that you would make it work with great effectiveness among us this morning. AMEN.

Introduction

When I was in elementary school, I learned pretty early on that I wasn't any good at competitive distance running. In fact, it's probably the closest thing to torture that I've ever experienced in my life. But when I got into middle school and early high school, I nonetheless decided to be a part of the Cross Country team at my school. Don't ask me why – I'm still trying to figure that out, too. Our warm-up was running. Our workout was *more* running. And our cool down was – you guessed it – *even more* running. And then the next day we'd wake up and do it all over again. Races, though, were worse – it was all the torment of running, yet with intensified exhaustion and fear of failure. I *dreaded* race days.

Perhaps many of you can relate to this dread. You're likely not dreading a race, but there may be something else afflicting you. You may dread returning to your workplace day after day – or being jobless. You may dread dealing with the aches and pains of your aging body week after week – or you may dread the prospect of death. You may dread dealing with hard family relationships – or you may dread being alone. And suffering is not a unique experience of mine, or of yours. Deprivation, sickness, depression, and disputes with others – these afflictions are universal experiences of people in all times and places.

One such individual who has *preceded* us in suffering is a man named Paul. Paul was uniquely appointed by Jesus Christ himself to teach Christianity throughout the 1st-century Roman Empire. Yet as Paul was carrying out this commission, we learn in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 that he became more closely acquainted with suffering than most of us will ever be. He distances himself from self-glorifying false teachers in Corinth by saying,

“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking as a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five

times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned, Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from all these things there is the constant pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

When Paul says he’s speaking as a madman here, he isn’t saying that he’s literally crazy. Rather, he’s earnest to prove the church in Corinth that his message and mission is legitimate. So he starts boasting in the afflictions that he has endured for the gospel. We normally wouldn’t expect for people in their right mind to use personal hardships as evidence that we should believe them. But Paul’s many sufferings make it hard to ignore the fact that there was something really unique about his preaching ministry. Why did Paul keep preaching? How was Paul comforted in his afflictions? What was Paul’s hope?

You may have noticed that in the title of this sermon I have differentiated between comfort and hope. I don’t want to get too involved in semantics here, but the difference is significant. Hope is a more specific term that refers to things that we don’t yet possess, but that we eagerly expect will become reality. Romans 8:23-25 says, “[and] *not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for IN THIS HOPE we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*” Hope refers to unfulfilled expectation of some good, future thing. That expectation, or hope, can still give us a substantial sense of comfort, and I’m going to argue that it *does*. But the comfort that God gives us is not *all* unfulfilled, future expectation. It’s also God’s good pleasure to comfort his people *right now*, in the midst of their afflictions. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 says, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings,*

so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort, too.” So it’s clear. God grants to his church both present comforts and future-oriented hopes that strengthen his people to endure afflictions.

And in our passage this morning, Paul, an afflicted messenger for Jesus Christ, was writing to an afflicted church, the Thessalonian church. When I last preached from 1 Thess., I explained that Paul had only been able to teach in Thessalonica’s synagogue for 3 weeks before he was driven out of the city by those who opposed his message. Moreover, these antagonists were so hostile to Paul’s teaching that they later drove him out of the city of Berea that was a full day’s journey west of Thessalonica. This aggressive, anti-Christian coalition in Thessalonica was undoubtedly involved in afflicting the Thessalonian church. And Paul acknowledges that, indeed, the Thessalonian Christians had suffered (2:14) and were afflicted (3:3-4).

Yet we see that, like Paul, the Thessalonian Christians persevered through these trials. Paul wasn’t some sort of super-spiritual guru who could withstand more hardship than anyone else. Both Paul and the Thessalonian church endured great sufferings because they were comforted by the same unassailable realities. They didn’t have anything more than the same God-given comforts that the church possesses today. So my aim this morning is to help our anchors to latch on to the same comforts and hope that Paul and the Thessalonian church had, so that we, too, can weather all the storms of life with unassailable confidence.

But first I want to show to you from the text how we as Christians can expect to be afflicted. We can expect affliction from our own corrupt human nature, from the corruption of the people around us, and from the spiritual forces of darkness. Yet the focus of this letter is *not* on the the Thessalonians’ trials, but on the comforts that Christians’ have in Christ, which is a prominent theme throughout 1 Thessalonians. So after touching on affliction briefly, I’ll transition to Christian comfort and hope. And I’ll identify three key ways that Christians of all eras in the church have been comforted in their trials: by the work of God’s Word, by the encouragement of God’s church (His people), and by the coming of God’s Son.

Our Afflictions

But first, our afflictions. Christians can expect to be afflicted for following Christ, and these afflictions can come to us from three general sources: first, from our own corrupt hearts;

second, from people who oppose Christ, and third, from Satan and/or his fallen angels. It's potentially unhelpful to handle them as three, completely isolated entities because our hearts and humanity around us are certainly tempted, tested, and provoked toward evil-doing by Satan. Yet it's equally unhelpful to neglect one of these them, because we must be prepared for afflictions on all three battlefronts. I won't talk much about the first source of affliction, our own corrupt human nature, because it isn't explicitly referred to in this text. However, Paul refers to our human nature's antagonism toward God and godliness in Romans 8:7 when he writes, "*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*" Our hearts most often afflict us by repeatedly hindering us from thinking and feeling rightly about God and his ways. Our own fleshly desires inhibit us from finding rest, contentment, and joy in God. For some of you this may come as a surprise. Our culture has propagated the idea that the opinions and emotions that seem most natural to us are true and right, but the Bible reveals that the aquifer of our heart is a polluted water source. Many of our desires bubble up from a corrupt human nature that is hostile toward godliness and God. So be aware. Be prepared to stand firm, because *your own hearts* can bring forth doubts and anxieties that would rob you of your comfort and hope in Christ.

Now in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 of our text today, we see the *second* source of affliction: corrupt humanity. The Jews are held up as a case in point. In vs. 14, Paul says that the Thessalonian churches' sufferings from their countrymen *were the same* as those experienced by the Judean churches *from the Jews*. Though the Jews should have been chief executors of God's message, they were instead chief executioners of God's messengers.

Throughout their history, the Jews had repeatedly harassed and killed the prophets that God had sent to them. And Jesus himself condemned the Jews' generational hostility to the truth in Luke 11:47-51. And shortly thereafter, the Jews proceeded to kill Jesus himself. Though the Jews were often murderous against the church, they also resorted to other aggressive actions to assert their position. Paul recounts in vs 15 that the Jews drove out Paul and his co-workers (referring to when they were forced out of Thessalonica).

Paul is clearly and rightly angry with the Jews and their repugnant treatment of the prophets, Jesus, and the church. Yet Paul recognizes that there is one more *utterly criminal* error

of the Jews. They displease God and oppose all of mankind *by hindering Paul from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved*. Because the Jews are obstructing the gospel, they are opposing all mankind, including *themselves*! Note carefully what Paul is communicating here. We live in an age where our religious freedoms are increasingly vulnerable, and we may project a narrative of reality that says that we *inside* the church are victims, and people *outside* the church are oppressors. But that's not how *Paul* sees it. It's true that we may be increasingly afflicted by the world in the years ahead. Yet we have comforts from God that the world *doesn't* have. Really the world *itself* is the victim of its own hostilities against Christ. Greater antagonism toward the gospel should fill us with greater compassion for the lost, who are being prevented from hearing the truth. Even Jesus, on the road to being crucified, prayed for his enemies saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). So let's make sure that we don't forget to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" (Matthew 5:44).

The third source of affliction for Christians is God's adversary, Satan. Satan, or the devil, is presented in Scripture as a real, personal, spiritual being. But kids, listen up – the cartoons are *wrong*. Satan is *not* an angry red man with horns and a pitchfork. Instead, from passages like Ezekiel 28:12-14, Isaiah 14:12-14, and Matthew 25:4, we can infer that Satan is an *angel* who has rebelled against God. This is helpful information for two reasons. First, it exposes why so many are deceived by Satan's schemes. It's because Satan, quite naturally, masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). But Second, perhaps more importantly, Satan is merely a created angelic being. He is far inferior to God in power and knowledge. Satan does *not* know everything. Satan *cannot* be everywhere at once. When Christians are warned against the devil in various New Testament passages (*James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:8*), we shouldn't take that to mean that Satan himself is everywhere at once, threatening each individual Christian. Instead we should realize that the reference to Satan could refer to Satan personally, to any of the rebellious angels that Satan leads, or even to the rebellious inclinations against God that Satan manifests.

Now we see here in 2:18 that Paul wanted to come to the Thessalonians again and again, but "Satan hindered him." What does this *hindering* mean? The short answer is – we don't know. But it's unhelpful for us to imagine that *Satanic* hindering takes on a highly supernatural

form, such as a mystical forcefield blocking Paul's progress on the road to Thessalonica. From Scripture we see that Satan can bring afflictions upon godly people in a variety of, seemingly natural, ways. Job 1 and 2 are perhaps the clearest picture of Satan's schemes in afflicting the godly, where we see that Satan seems to have the ability to incite natural disasters, medical conditions, and even the people of surrounding nations against Job. Yet we also see Satan's malice is restricted under God's Almighty authority.

While I'm mentioning Job here, I want to address a common misconception about what it means to suffer for being a Christian. Suffering as a Christian does not always mean that you have a mob trying to burn your house down on account of your faith. Job was suffering on account of his faith in God, but nothing in Job's circumstances would have revealed this to him. There was no neon sign that said, "Job, the reason you're suffering is because Satan doesn't want you to trust in God." But this is the underlying issue we face in *all* our sufferings: will we continue to trust God – or *not*?

Because Satan does whatever he can to shake our faith, he is referred to as the *tempter* in 3:5. We can confidently infer that Satan and "the tempter" are referring to the same being from passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:5, which show Satan as the one who brings temptation. Satan, as the tempter, presents evil to us in a way that makes it appear more enticing than good. By bringing angry mobs against the Thessalonian Christians, Satan was testing their belief that Christ was more precious than a life without affliction. And Paul was concerned that Satan's temptations would successfully lure the afflicted Thessalonians away from Christ.

Satan, and his host of corrupted angels, are engaged in the same schemes of intimidation and enticement today, both in overt persecution of the church and in subtle attacks on our perseverance in faith. And in the culture at large, Satan's schemes have been largely successful. You don't have to be a Christian to objectively agree that our culture celebrates many things that are contrary to Scripture. With our culture rapidly abandoning Biblical morality, we can reasonably expect that Christians in America may soon share in the same afflictions as the Thessalonian and Judean churches. And it is important, and will be increasingly important, to avail ourselves of the comforts and hopes that God has provided to sustain his church to the end.

The Word of God

The first comfort that Paul extends is that God’s word is at work in the Thessalonian believers. He mentions this at the end of vs. 13. The phrase “is at work” in your Bibles (if you’re using the ESV) accurately reflects that the work is ongoing. And in Greek the phrase is represented by one Greek word, ενεργεω. This is where we get the word “energy” in English. This isn’t clearly reflected in the English translation, but this word has the connotation, not merely of working, but of working *effectually*. And there’s a difference. Many of you can relate to the dissatisfying feeling of mowing your lawn over *and over* again in the summer because no matter *how many* times you mow it, the grass never *stays short*. Your work doesn’t ultimately, effectually accomplish what you wanted. Likewise, you can work for hours bailing water out of a damaged boat. But the water is going to keep welling up from the bottom. No matter how much water you throw out of the boat, you’ll still be sitting in a puddle because the hole hasn’t been fixed. These are examples of work that is *not* ultimately effective. But effectual work accomplishes what it sets out to do. So when we see that God’s Word works *effectually* in believers, this is reason for us to have great comfort, and would have been a comfort to the Thessalonian church as well.

God works through his Word in multiple ways. We know from Genesis 1:3 and onward that God *creates* with his Word. “*And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.*” God also *sustains* the universe by the Word of His power – we see this in Hebrews 1:3. So God creates and sustains creatable things through His Word – but there’s one more thing. God *reveals* himself, the uncreated and self-sustaining God. So God *creates, sustains, and reveals* through His Word.

Here in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul most likely has the effectual *sustaining* work of the Word in view. Because right after he confidently declares that the word of God is at work in the Thessalonians, he explains how he knows this in vs 14: “*for you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews...*” This backdrop of severe affliction makes the efficacy of the Word’s work in the Thessalonians even more apparent. And we have the same Word at work in *us!*

But *how* does God’s Word work to sustain us through affliction? I first want to deny that the words of Scripture themselves have some sort of mystical power of their own. The Bible isn’t a spell book of incantations that make us feel better if we just repeat the words enough. I say this because many of us may make the mistake of reading the Bible as though it’s an impersonal self-help manual. But the work of God’s Word isn’t the work of man – it’s the work of *God*. And this is good news, because 1 Peter 1:24 tells us that “*All flesh is like grass... and the grass withers... but the word of the Lord remains forever.*” God’s Word is efficacious because the eternal God himself, the Holy Spirit in particular, powerfully and personally works through His Word. The Word of God is living and active (cf. Hebrews 4:12) because *God* is living and active. God opens our minds and hearts to understand and apply the truth of Scripture (cf. Luke 24:45, 1 Corinthians 2:1-13, 1 John 2:24-27).

This illuminating work of God’s Spirit through His Word is already attested to earlier in Paul’s letter. The Spirit had powerfully worked through God’s Word to convict the Thessalonians of their wrongdoing (1 Thess. 1:5). Paul’s teaching about Christ had deeply penetrated the minds and hearts of the Thessalonians. Their deepest allegiances, beliefs, and desires had changed. The effect was that they “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

You can see in this passage that God’s work, through His Word, *produced* work – it produced human activity – in the Thessalonians who believed the Word. This wasn’t a mystical process. I’m not saying that God’s Words somehow *forced* the Thessalonians against their wills to start serving him. Rather, the word of God worked by renewing the wills and desires of the Thessalonians. And that, in turn, efficaciously redirected how they lived. The endurance and faith of the Thessalonians are very much their own endurance and faith. Yet it is the sustaining work of God through His Word that renews their minds and undergirds their persistent faith. Paul recognizes this nuanced relationship between God’s work and man’s work in Philippians 2:12-13 when he both commands faithful human effort and insists upon God’s underlying work. He says, “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence,*

but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

And ultimately, it’s good news that the Almighty God himself is the one who is effectively at work in our hearts and minds. Knowing that right now God is expediently working in us doesn’t make us apathetic, but it rather makes us confident in our fight against Satan and sin. And we are likewise comforted because the work of God will continue until it reaches its effect – the salvation of our souls. It is, after all, *effectually* working. In Philippians 1:6 we see that Paul is sure of this, “*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work of you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*”

The Encouragement of God’s Church

But perhaps the most visible manifestation of God’s comfort for His people comes through *His people*, the Church. At times the work of God’s Word can be invisible and intangible. Yet God, knows that we are carnal creatures with physical senses. He shows us further kindness by placing Christians into a visible, interactive community that brings us gospel comfort. Now I recognize that some of you may come from church backgrounds where the church has profoundly hurt you. And if this is so, any mention of the church comforting you may sound paradoxical or nonsensical. (pause) I can’t make those wounds disappear. At times it is *painfully* obvious to us that the church is composed of narcissists, back-stabbers, pretenders, and all other manner of sinners. But I really am going to insist that in a *healthy* church where the Word is training us to abandon those sins and enjoy God, the church *will* be an encouragement to you, and you will (in turn) encourage the rest of the church. Notice in this passage, it is not only the preacher *Paul* who encourages the Thessalonian church – the Thessalonian church *profoundly* encourages *him*, as well.

The Thessalonian church was encouraged by Paul in three ways. First, as we see in vs. 13, Paul had proclaimed the Word of God to them, the content of which is inherently comforting. In Acts 17:2-3 we see that “*Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to*

you, is the Christ.” We only have a brief picture of what Paul said here. But Paul’s message clearly showed the Thessalonians that, through Christ, God had kept *all* the promises he had made in Scripture. Jesus Christ had come to rescue people from corruption and death, which is the gospel message of Christianity. God didn’t – and *won’t* – break his promises. You can endure through torture and trauma because those things can’t take God’s promises away from you.

Secondly, when Paul was still with them, he had the foresight to prepare them for the suffering they would experience (3:4). It may not seem as though this is a way to comfort someone. But imagine if Paul had not warned them. They may have entered a season of persecution and wondered, “Why isn’t God saving me from my enemies? Are the gods of my enemies stronger than this new God I’ve chosen? Is there even a God at all?” Many people would have thought that afflictions were a certain sign of God’s displeasure. And it’s still easy to jump to this conclusion today. It’s likely that Paul was responding to this error when he wrote in Romans 8:35-37, “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*” Thus, Paul affirms that Christians normatively suffer afflictions, and in doing so he assures the Thessalonians of their salvation.

Thirdly, the Thessalonians are encouraged by Paul on account of his love for them. It is one thing to be told “Jesus loves you.” It is another thing altogether for a Christian to show you what that means – to care for you as a dearly beloved child and to work night and day for your benefit. This parental love is exactly how Paul characterized his ministry in 2:7-12. Moreover, he’s concerned about the Thessalonian’s faith (3:2, 10), their success in resisting temptation (3:5), their endurance (3:8), and their love and holiness (3:12-13). Paul dearly loves and is committed to the Thessalonian church. So Paul isn’t content to merely look from a distance and say, “I hope things get better.” Look at Paul’s prayer in 3:10 – “*as we pray night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.*” Paul’s prayer is that he will be able to meet the Thessalonian church’s need! We are often less-than-loving in our

prayers without realizing it. We often pray for someone's needs to be met in some indefinite sense. "God, please help so-and-so." But Paul prays as one who sees the needs of the Thessalonian church as acutely as his own needs. He functionally prays, "God, please bring me into a position where *I* can supply what is lacking for my brother and sister." Let's comfort our brothers and sisters like this - where we're not just praying for one another's needs, but we're eagerly praying that God would use *us* to bring them relief.

So those are the three ways that Paul encouraged the Thessalonian believers. But the Thessalonian Church greatly encouraged Paul as well. In 2:13-14, Paul is encouraged because God is the hero who is preserving the Thessalonian church in their afflictions. That's why he's thanking God, rather than making the Thessalonian Church the object of his praise. Way too often we go through life trying to be the strong person, the hero, the one-who-is-always-helping-and-never-asking-for-help. But we're not the main attraction – God is. One of the most helpful things we can do for one another is draw attention to God. We discourage people when we pretend that the good news is that God makes us self-sufficient islands. But we comfort people when God's power is manifested in our weakness.

Paul expresses his encouragement even more passionately in 3:6-9. When Timothy tells Paul about the Thessalonian's faith and love, and that they *yearn* to see Paul again, this confirms that the Thessalonians weren't led astray by any of Paul's opponents. The accusations that Paul defended himself against in 2:1-12 failed to disrupt the Thessalonian Christians' faith. And thus Paul is comforted, because their love for him means that they're not going to abandon Christ and listen to another messenger – or another message.

The Coming of God's Son

Thirdly, and finally, the church has hope in our afflictions because of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ. There are two explicit references to Christ's coming, and a third reference that, though debated among commentators, I *also* believe refers to Christ's coming. And all three of these references draw out different reasons why this is a comfort to the church.

The first hope that we have is that at Christ's coming, our labors will prove to have been meaningful – that we will be rewarded. Paul refers to this hope in 2:19-20, saying to the Thessalonians, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His

coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.” What Paul is saying here is that the persevering Thessalonian church convincingly demonstrates that His work has not been in vain.

An initial reading of vs 19-20 may be confusing. First, it seems that Paul says here that the *Thessalonians* are his hope, not Christ. And second, Paul implies that he’s going to be boasting before Jesus about the Thessalonian church. But before we jump to conclusions that Paul is looking to brag about how amazing he is, look again with me at the context.

In vs 13, Paul is re-affirming his thankfulness to God that the Thessalonians received Paul’s Word. And then he emphasizes the ongoing effectual work of God through His Word in the Thessalonian church. From the onset here, Paul clearly attributes the faith of the Thessalonian church *to God*, not to his own work. Then, after recounting the Jews’ antagonism toward Christ in vs 14-16, Paul seeks in vs 17-20 to reassure the Thessalonians that he loved them dearly. Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica abruptly when the persecution had started. Paul was concerned that they might think that he abandoned them or didn’t care very much for them. So Paul wanted to make it clear that the Thessalonian church had not been an afterthought to him. He hadn’t forgotten them. At the coming of Christ, Paul wasn’t going to see some Thessalonian believers there and say, “Oh!.. Right! I forgot about you guys. I’m glad you figured things out.” Paul *earnestly* hoped, he *confidently expected*, that one day He would be able to rejoice and celebrate before Jesus Christ because of the Thessalonian believers.

And there is a real and appropriate sense in which we hope for the day when all our works carried out in faith will be validated. There is a great harvest in which the sower, the reaper, and the God who brings growth will all be able to rejoice together (cf. *John 4:35-36, 1 Corinthians 3:5-9*). So this not only gives us comfort that our work will be validated in the future, but it gives us confidence in the present work that God has for us. Faithfully teach your kids and grandkids the way that they should go. Regularly meet with others to discuss God’s Word. Love unbelievers as parents love their children. And *persevere in the work*. For when Christ comes, he will show that our service to others has not been in vain.

The second hope we have in Christ’s coming is the hope of holiness. Paul is functionally praying for the Thessalonians in 3:11-13 that God will *establish their hearts blameless in holiness* at the coming of the Lord Jesus. So what does that actually mean – for our hearts to be

blameless in holiness? It means two things. First, it means that the Thessalonians' hearts are not *already* blameless in holiness. As I mentioned briefly before, the Thessalonians are afflicted by the remaining corruption of their human nature. But second, it means that when Jesus comes, Christian hearts will no longer succumb to lustful or greedy desires. Our hearts will be firmly, immutably established in a right orientation. We will perfectly *hate* what is evil, and *love* what is good! And we will be like God, intimately knowing good – and *NOT* evil! Isn't this wonderful news? *Well – it's good news if your inner corruption pains you.*

But maybe you don't weep over your self-centeredness. Maybe you're indifferent to activities that the Bible says are sexually immoral. Maybe it hasn't registered that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who *by* their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). If your heart is calloused to everything I've been saying, *please* go listen (or re-listen) to Neil's sermon from last week. He preached from John 12, and makes the dangers of hard-heartedness very clear. Do not wait. Because when the Lord Jesus comes, he will judge all his enemies.

The 3rd reference to the coming of the Lord Jesus in this passage is alluded to indirectly at the end of 2:16. Paul says, in regards to the Jews who have been opposing God, “judgment has come upon them *at last* (or *finally*).” Some scholars take this to refer to certain future judgment, such that it's referred to here as a completed event. On the one hand, this is *terrifying* for anyone who is not following Christ. If Jesus isn't your King, you are functioning as his enemy. The same finale of judicious wrath directed at the unbelieving Jews will just as certainly come upon everyone who persists in disbelief. Yet on the other hand, this deeply comforts Christians who have been afflicted over years and decades by inhumane oppressors. Because there will be finally be *justice*. Everything will be set *right*. And every speck of corruption will be swept away at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

This phrase, “the coming of the Lord Jesus,” – It doesn't seem to be a particularly descriptive event. It seems to merely convey that Jesus is arriving. But to Thessalonians in the 1st century AD, the word that is translated here as *coming* was loaded with meaning. It referred to the grand visitation of an emperor, often marked by extravagant events. Everyone in the city would bow and acknowledge the King. This is why the full phrase is not merely “the coming of

Christ” or “the coming of Jesus,” but rather “the coming of the *LORD* Jesus.” *Jesus is Lord*. And He’s *coming*. I understand that our emotions don’t always match what we know to be true. So don’t doubt the legitimacy of God’s Work in your heart life on account of your feelings. But if the Lord Jesus’ coming doesn’t fill your heart delight and comfort, there’s something wrong. When you’re aware that God’s Word doesn’t comfort your anxious heart like you know it should, pray for his help. And be comforted to know that Lord and Savior is coming to set all things right.

Conclusion: Afflictions for the Comfortable

Marvel at this for a moment. The Almighty King of the Universe is committed to comforting us in our afflictions! In Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*” God is *not* anti-comfort. And God wants to provide us with deep, profound, unshakeable comforts – but we often settle for lesser things.

There are many of these alternative comforts. Comfort-food, shopping trips, philanthropy, social media – the list could go on and on. There are even ways we could be *superficially* comforted by the church, treating it as a friend group that allows us to escape from people who don’t understand us. But many of these so-called comforts don’t *actually* comfort us, much in the same way that a band-aid doesn’t actually heal wounds. They merely cover up our deeper brokenness. You can wrap yourself up in a big fluffy blanket, eat ice cream, and watch your favorite sports team win the national championship – but all of this is ultimately incapable of giving you peace of mind and a settled heart. Being *comfortable* is not the same thing as being *comforted*.

There are many warnings in Scripture against the wealthy and comfortable, not because wealth and comfort are bad, but because they quietly creep into our hearts and displace our contentment and comfort in Christ. Jesus says in Luke 6:24-25, “*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.*” You can try to use your money, food, or entertainment to temporarily fend off pain and afflictions. But it’s nowhere close to being the same as being comforted by God.

So keep in mind – God does not give us comforts so that we will never experience difficulties in this life. God comforts us so that as we experience difficulties – and endure them! – we will do so in a manner that is appropriate for one who is a citizen of the Lord Jesus’s kingdom. Paul says in Philippians 1:28-29, “*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.*”

Anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ will *not* be destroyed but will rather be saved. Afflictions *can never* and *will never* change this reality. And it’s right to be comforted by this. But whoever denies Jesus as Lord is on the broad path that leads to destruction. There is still time to change your course. No affliction in this life compares to the fierceness of God’s judgment. Your worldly achievements are false comforts, and one day even these will be taken from you. So turn to Christ. Find comfort. Find hope.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, thank you that it is your intent that we would be comforted. Please give us comfort where we need to be comforted. And please expose our disbelief and our need for comfort wherever it is needed. AMEN.