

**The Place of Suffering in the Purposes of God**  
**2 Thessalonians 1:5-12**  
**June 21, 2009**  
**FBC Waynesboro**

Paul begins his second letter to the church in Thessalonica with a very strong commendation. This church is a great church. And we looked last Sunday at the marks of a great church. Paul cites three here: a great church is growing in faith. A great church is gracious in love and is persevering in faithfulness to the Lordship of Jesus in the face of persecutions and tribulations. In fact, Paul makes it very plain here that persecutions and tribulations are present in great churches and they constitute the core of what God uses to produce and to prove great churches. We can individualize this truth and speak of great Christians so long as we understand that there are no great Christians or Christians period apart from the church. Put simply, persecution and tribulation come to us from the hand of God to produce in us what God desires and to demonstrate that we really are who we say we are as the children of God.

Let me just remind us again of the difference between persecutions and tribulations. Persecution comes from the world as directed by Satan and its intent is to get us to conform to the ways of the world. Those who are children of God will not conform so this passive form of persecution turns active and Christians are then condemned, criticized, castigated and crucified by the world. Satan's most powerful and popular form of persecution is not the active form but the passive form. Get a group of people who profess to be believers but who are in fact living by the standards of the world to gratify the desires of the flesh, and he has us under his control and we don't even know it. Such was the situation in the church in Corinth. But remember that we are taught in the Word of God that all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Tribulation is internal and relational. It can range from relational disruptions to devastating diseases. We give our lives to Jesus wanting to live under His Lordship and for the glory of God and before we know it we are having relational struggles, emotional upheavals, and facing physical issues that we never faced before. These are real and they either reveal that we belong to God or they reveal that we do not belong to God. Remember that Jesus taught us that we are going to have tribulation in the world but we are to be encouraged by it because He has overcome the world. James

says that we are to compute it as a source of joy when the trials and tribulations come because God is using them as a source through which we can give praise to God and press on to glorify His Name through all the pain. This is perplexing to us, and Paul knows that so he takes this a step further. And in these verses he teaches us about the place of suffering in the purposes of God. Let's look at what he says.

Notice first that Paul calls persecutions and tribulations, "evidence." The word that he uses here is only used here in the entire Bible. That means that we must pay attention to it because the Holy Spirit selected this special word for a reason and the reason is found in its meaning. This word means "plain and simple proof." In other words, God is using persecutions and tribulations in the lives of His children as plain and simple proof--of what? Well, he spells it out.

First, God uses suffering in the lives of His children as plain proof of His righteous judgment or that His judgment is right. The Bible is clear that God always does what is right and because it is right, it is good. What God cares more about than any other reality in the universe is His Name or His character or His honor or His glory. He will vindicate His Name upon the earth. And He does this in one of two ways: He does it by saving those who call upon Him through Jesus who satisfied the righteous justice of God upon the cross. God punished and put to death His Son upon the cross so that those who trust in Jesus alone are made right with God. The outcome for all who have trusted Jesus is that we will not be judged on judgment day by God's standard of perfect and holy righteousness because we trusted Jesus who fulfilled that perfect standard for us. But for all who do not trust Jesus as seen in our lives lived under His Lordship, God will do in the end what is right. He will judge us by His absolutely pure and perfect standard of righteousness and visit with eternal punishment all who have trusted in any other reality but Jesus as Lord. That is why God sends us suffering; nothing shows who we really are like suffering.

But there is a second thing here. Suffering is sent by God as plain proof of the rule of God in our lives. "Considered Worthy" is the translation of one word that is passive in form which means that we are made worthy by someone who has come down to us. Our worth is not in ourselves but in the One who has come down to us and He has come down to us all the way inside us so that He rules over our lives. And suffering shows whether or not that is really true. So what are you and I after in the

midst of pain and suffering? Are our prayers focused on the glory of God in the exaltation of Jesus or are they focused on ourselves and our being delivered from trouble? But there is here a third thing: suffering is plain proof that we have found our rest in God who is working all things together for good to those who love Him, 6-7a. The word for “relief” is the Biblical word for rest and it requires some sense of its larger context in order to understand what it means.

The biblical concept of rest is rooted in the command of God to observe the Sabbath as a day to the Lord. It is a day of rest which means far more than refraining from work. It is a day to devoted to the worship of God so as to declare to the world that our trust is in God. We rest in Him. This concept is further refined in the Book of Hebrews where the writer implores the people of God to enter into the rest of God. John Macarthur shows that the concept of rest includes three different realities. We enter into the rest of God when we are saved so that we do not need any longer to fret over anything. We live out our lives under the sovereign hand of God seeking to bring glory to God in all things as we yield our lives increasingly to Jesus. So that even in suffering we give thanks and experience joy because secondly we know that a day of great rest is coming for the people of God when with the saints of all the ages we will rule and reign with Jesus during the millennium which is simply a one thousand year prelude to the eternal rest of God’s people when we live with unrestrained joy in the new heavens and the new earth. How I respond to suffering shows how much I am either attracted by this world or anchored in His Word which causes me increasingly to look away from this world toward that glorious day of eternal rest.

There is one other thing here and I think it is among the most magnificent of all but we think somehow that it is just not right to own this one. The suffering of believers in this world now is plain proof of the ultimate revelation of the rule of God upon the earth when King Jesus shows up to vindicate the Name of His Father by the expression of unmitigated wrath and vengeance upon the earth. Look at how he says this in verse 6 and 8. Jesus is coming to vindicate His Name and His people and to judge the wicked with His rightful justice. And Paul is making it plain that suffering now for the believers is plain proof from God that the last word has yet to be spoken. As we rejoice in the fullness of life forever with God, many who saw our suffering and questioned our God will just be beginning to see how real He is and how rigorous is His righteousness.

Paul puts it this way in verse 10: when Jesus comes to judge the earth three things are going to take place: one, He will be manifest among the saints. The world will see who are His and will then see the suffering in a whole new light and two, the saints who have been secured from suffering will marvel at the Master and stand in awe of His great glory. Then three, many who mocked those who believed will now be mocked. The end of verse 10 must be understood in the context of the church in Thessalonica where many who believed were maliciously maligned, painfully persecuted, torn apart by trials but they would not relent and the world considered them crazy. Now the world will see that they were not crazy but committed to Jesus as Lord and as the saints are vindicated, vengeance begins to be poured out upon those who rejected God.

Suffering is sent by God to His people as a proof of the righteous judgment of God, the rule of God, to show that our rest is in God and that we long for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But suffering is a plain proof of something else as well. Paul says that the suffering of believers in the present time is just a hint of what is going to happen to unbelievers in the end, 6. Jesus is coming with His mighty angels and the fire of the judgment of God and He is going to bring eternal destruction which will take the condemned away from the presence of God and the glory of His might. Now two things here are critical: first, destruction does not mean annihilation. The word is used of a cankerous corruption that gets worse and worse without any relief. What is declared here in a word is pictured in the Bible as the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. This is eternal torment. This is unending punishment. And it is coming as the righteous judgment of God upon people, and Paul would want us to know that it is right for God's people to long for this day rightly and He wants us to know who these people are so that we can love them and bear witness to them. We do not long for the day of God's justice so that people will be condemned to hell; many will be; we long for it so that the Name of our great God can be vindicated, Psalm 139:19-21. So, who are these people.

Paul says that they are those who do not know God because they do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not have a relationship with God because it is evident that their lives are not being lived out under the Lordship of Jesus. That is what it means to obey the Gospel. They may have heard the Gospel that Jesus was sent from God to bear upon Himself our sins and to become our substitute. They may have

heard that after sin killed Him the sovereign God raised Him up so that He could show the world that it is only those who come to Him through Jesus and live under His Lordship are His. These people who will be judged in the end will be people many of whom have heard the Gospel and responded to the Gospel but did not believe the Gospel. They have may have well have spent as so many do in our day their whole lives thinking that they belong to Jesus but they do not. And that day will make it plain. So Paul prays as we must.

Here he prays for two things as John Phillips as helped me to see: He prays about the nature of their calling and the Name of Jesus. It is amazing how different our prayers would be if we really trusted God's sovereignty and really knew that the only thing that really matters is the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. Our prayers reveal more than we know about what we believe about God. Paul seldom prayed over physical and material concerns. He doesn't here even though he is in prison and his people are in pain. He prays only that God would make them worthy of the calling with which they had been called by fulfilling in them and through them by His power the purpose that He has for their lives. They had come into a relationship with God through Jesus because God had called them and now Paul prays that this God who called them would work in them to make them worthy workers who will honor God with their lives BY being vessels that show forth the glory of Jesus by the grace of God.

Here is the bottom line. What is God after when He sends me or you as His children into the slough of despond? When disease wracks your body? When the world is offering you its pleasures at every pass? When your friend won't hang out with you because you are a Christian, a real Christian. . . What is God after? He is after giving you grace so that the glory of God in Jesus can be exalted in your life and God can smile because He has made you worthy of His calling. Rick Warren is right, "God does not waste pain." I would only add that He uses it for the glory of His Name which is always, always what is our good.

