

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

November 13, 2022

Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

### **The Last Day: Trouble for the Troublers**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Thessalonica was a good sized city for its time. Maybe 200,000 people called it home. Thessalonica was a Greek city, but of course, everything was ruled by the Roman Empire at this time. It had a good port used by merchant ships and the Roman navy. It had an important road used by travelers, traders and the Roman legions. Thessalonica, like many cities around the Mediterranean also had a small Jewish population and even had a synagogue. If we were looking to plant a mission church today, Thessalonica would be a great place. Easy to travel to and from, lots of people, multicultural population, and a core group of people who know the Bible and gather weekly at the synagogue.

The apostle Paul arrives in this city along with Timothy and Silas. They went to the synagogue and Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead” (Acts 17:2-3). The Jews in the synagogue knew the promises about the Christ in the Old Testament. Paul explained how Jesus carried out all that the prophets foretold so that they would know and believe that Jesus is the Christ. Some believed!

But Paul only had three Saturdays in the synagogue before the troublers took action. Some of those who did not believe gathered a group of “bad characters” from the marketplace and started a riot. They grabbed some in Thessalonica who had been associated with Paul and accused them of rebellion against Caesar before the city officials. Paul is sent away to the town of Berea to escape the persecution. But “When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up” (Acts 17:13). These people hated the gospel, hated gospel messengers, and were willing to do almost anything to stop Paul and the other believers.

The Jewish believers who lived in Thessalonica would face intense persecution from fellow Jews. Often they would be forced out of the synagogue, disowned from their family, boycotted in their business, shunned on the streets. Your life was centered around the synagogue and your friends and family at the synagogue. Now, your friends ignore and hate you. As a Jew, you were already living among the pagan Greeks and Romans whose morality was somewhat lacking. Now, because you believe that Jesus is the Christ, you are almost all alone, not knowing if or when the angry mob will drag you from your house and falsely accuse you before the city officials.

Paul continued his mission journey to Athens and to Corinth. But he is thinking of and praying for those believers in Thessalonica. So, he writes them one letter and then a second a short time later. In his second letter he gives comfort and hope to the persecuted believers with the words before us today:

### **2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 (EHV)**

*This is evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer. Certainly, it is right for God to repay trouble to those who trouble you, and to give relief to you, who are troubled along with us. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his powerful angels, 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. Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal*

*destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength, 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.*

Their perseverance during persecution is evidence that God has called them to faith in Christ and kept them in faith in Christ and will keep them in faith until eternal life begins. Paul gives them comfort in the certain hope they have for eternal life. What happens to us in this life does not take us from Christ. Believers will glory in and marvel at the sight of Jesus on the Last Day. No longer will we see Jesus, the Christ, by faith alone. For on that day, believers will see Jesus face to face. And we will be with him forever.

This certain and glorious hope we have in Christ helps us through all kinds of trouble in this world. In addition, Paul also gives persecuted believers comfort and hope by telling us what happens to those who trouble us. The Last Day will bring trouble to the troublemakers. The Lord Jesus *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. Such people will receive a just penalty: eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious strength.*

It might seem like a strange way to comfort persecuted believers. But it really takes the pressure off of believers in these situations. God is just and in his time he will punish those who troubled his believers. It is not our role as individual believers to bring such justice to those who trouble us. God will take care of it. Christ will judge perfectly on the Last Day. God has asked us to endure, persevere and preach the Word. Perhaps some troublemakers will repent and become believers through the preaching of the Word and the evidence of patient perseverance by believers. The apostle himself is but one example.

But those who actively persecute believers and do not repent will be punished with everlasting fire. Such people chased Paul from city to city to stop him from telling people that Jesus died and rose to forgive all people. Governments in the world today refuse to allow Christian missionaries to enter their nations. In some of these nations it is dangerous to own a Bible and even more dangerous to talk to someone about Jesus. Life or death dangerous, not someone might make fun of me dangerous like in our nation. Such troublemakers falsely accused Christ and Paul and many others of crimes against the state. Earlier this year, a member of the Finnish Parliament was put on trial by the government for hate speech.<sup>1</sup> She had quoted the Bible on the topic of homosexuality and wrote that it is sin. Thankfully, she was acquitted. However, those who want to silence the Bible will make more attempts.

I was in Minnesota last week and heard from pastors that attempts to push biblical Christianity out of society are becoming more successful. One group is convincing city councils to make it illegal for Christian counselors to tell their clients that the LGBTQ lifestyle is not in line with God's Word. The same group is attempting to make people who want to get a license to teach in the state affirm the world's view of marriage and gender instead of God's view. If such things happen, it will make it increasingly difficult for believers to be part of society.

We are not enduring the kind of persecution the Thessalonian Christians endured or that many in our world currently endure. But we must be ready for it. If the secularization of the United States continues, unbelievers will increasingly cut believers out of their lives. Families will be split. Friends will be

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/christian-mp-goes-trial-finland-calling-homosexuality-disorder-2022-01-24/>

enemies. Believers will be shunned and boycotted and perhaps arrested and punished for going against the secular religion of the nation. So what do we do?

Certainly, we have the benefit of living in a nation that has free elections. We can work with laws and the constitution and elected officials to preserve our ability to believe and live according to the Word of God. But we must never put our hope in human laws and human leaders. Our hope is not for a perfect kingdom now, but for an eternal kingdom provided by our suffering Savior. Besides, human laws and human leaders will not make a Christian nation.

The believers in the early Christian church did not change their society by laws and leaders. They lived with the certain hope of eternal life through Christ. Their perseverance in the faith was evidence to the unbelievers around them that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of God, the only Savior for sinners. These believers could live their faith each day. They could be like Daniel who continued to pray to the Lord when his enemies made a law to stop prayers to the Lord. So they continued to gather around God's Word and Sacraments even if they had to do it secretly. These believers could show amazing love to their enemies because they were confident that God would take care of the final judgement. Through their endurance and love for others, many were willing to listen to the gospel and the Holy Spirit did his work. God again foiled the plans of the enemy and instead of eliminating Christianity, the church grew even though the suffering of believers.

I am not a prophet, so I can't tell you exactly what form of persecution you will suffer as a believer in the future. Whatever it is, the Lord can preserve us in faith through his Word. So stay in his Word and be ready to show the world what Christianity is truly about. Confidence in eternal life through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. Amazing love for all because Christ will take care of all judgment and punishment on the Last Day. Until then, we persevere in faith, endure suffering, and preach the gospel to all creation.

Amen.