

"Vindicated by Christ" - 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

John the Baptist is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. That's not just my opinion; Jesus said that. Jesus said:

"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11)

Even though John appears in the New Testament, he is actually an Old Testament prophet because he declared the coming of Messiah.

John said of Jesus:

His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12)

In the First Century, a winnowing fan was used in threshing grain. The fan was actually the shovel or wooden fork used when unseparated grain and straw was thrown against the wind. The heavier grain would fall to the floor, while the chaff, dust, and other impurities would be blown to the side. When the process was complete, the grain would be gathered into baskets, and the chaff would be gathered and burned. That's the image.

What John was saying is that Jesus is in the process of separating the impurities from those who have truly come to Him by faith. Another Bible metaphor talks about Jesus separating the sheep from the goats. Still another talks about separating the tares from the wheat.

I'll give you a non-Bible metaphor: Jesus is shaking the fence. He will not let you sit with one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the world. You can't continue to sit on the fence! You are going to fall off on one side or the other and you best fall off on the Kingdom side.

Tribulation is one of the tools Jesus uses to purify His Church. Tribulation can take many forms. Trouble comes naturally when we exercise bad judgment. You can only exceed the speed limit so long before a Highway Patrolman will catch you. There are logical consequences to unwise behavior and hopefully, we will learn from our missteps. Good judgment should result from bad judgment. God will use our bad judgment to discipline us and God most certainly chastens those whom He loves.

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? (Hebrews 12:7)

But not all your suffering is the result of your own foolish actions. It may be the result of someone else's sinful behavior. In this world, tribulation also comes from persecution.

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Timothy 3:12)

And Jesus said:

'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:20)

But you need to understand and cling to this one sure promise:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Whether you suffer because of your own foolish missteps or you suffer persecution as a Christian, it will ultimately work out for your own good. You will be vindicated in Christ Jesus!

The church at Thessalonica was a persecuted church. They were marginalized from the rest of the culture and they suffered as a result. Most of the Jews were against them. All of the pagans were against them. It would have been easy for them to become discouraged and that is exactly why Paul gives them these words of encouragement.

Our text this morning picks up in the middle of a sentence, so in order to catch the context, I'll need to back up to a couple verses we covered last week.

*We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, **which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;** (2 Thessalonians 1:3-5)*

In verse 5, Paul is commending the Thessalonians for their patience and their faith in the face of persecution and tribulation. These folks were suffering but it had not diminished their faith. They were clinging to the sure promises of God in Jesus Christ.

“Manifest evidence” is a translation of a single Greek word. It literally means a token, and that’s how it is translated in a number of English versions. Now, in some transit systems, they issue tokens. If you have a bus token, it is evidence that you have the right to ride a bus. The fact that these folks were willing to stick to their faith while suffering was a token that indicated that they had a legal right to be called Christians.

Remember what I said last week; persecution can only destroy false faith. Authentic faith is strengthened by persecution. Persecution strengthens the true Church.

The culture in our country is changing rapidly. It alarms a lot of Christians. It alarms us because we suddenly find ourselves being marginalized by the rest of society. Not too many years ago, our culture was defined by a Christian ethic. It’s not the case today. Our culture is now defined by a secular ethic and it is an ethic that rebels against the God of the universe. It’s no wonder, because this world has been given over to the prince of the power of the air. It’s been given over to Satan.

It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. (Revelation 13:7)

Darkness seems to overtake us and it will most likely get worse. But listen to me; **God is still on the throne** and Jesus is holding His winnowing fan. He is shaking the fence. When being a Christian actually costs you something, which side of the fence will you fall on?

Christians have had a pretty comfortable run in our nation. If asked, the majority of people will still say they are Christians but most of those have already rejected the authority of the Bible. They are what one author calls “the mushy middle”. They are not atheists, but they aren’t Biblical Christians either. They don’t really stand for anything. They will take the path of least resistance and as the culture is secularized, they will readily adopt the ethic of Satan. As they do, they too will begin to persecute the true Church. Have you noticed? Folks have started to call us bigots, narrow-minded, haters.

We are often portrayed as uneducated, superstitious and foolish. The mushy middle is buying into it.

They are not our enemies, they are our mission field. These folks have no anchor. They are adrift and we need to show them who the one true Anchor is. Set your anchor deep, folks, in the unmovable truth of God's holy word!

But when you are persecuted, rejoice!

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, (Matthew 5:11-12)

Rejoice, because when you cling steadfastly to your faith in the face of persecution, it is evidence of your true salvation. It is your token to ride the heaven-bound train!

Besides, any persecution you might face is temporary. In fact, the tables are going to be turned. Those who inflict suffering will themselves suffer horribly.

... since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8)

Jesus is coming back, folks. He will not return as the suffering Servant; He is coming as the conquering King. That Day is getting closer, and closer, and closer.

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

The God who cannot lie has given us a promise. When Jesus returns, He will repay with the most harsh tribulation all those who trouble us and He is going to give us rest. Rest means that our suffering will be a thing of the past.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

How cool is that? We will be completely vindicated, eternally comforted and forever blessed. That is the destiny of everyone who has submitted to the truth of the gospel.

But look what happens to those who reject our Lord:

... the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is a horrible fate! Dragged before the Great White Throne with absolutely no defense, can you imagine?

The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:13-15)

Take a look now at verse 9:

These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

Hell is real. Hell is unspeakably horrible. Hell is forever. Those who reject Jesus, those who reject His gospel get to spend forever there. Their worm will never die. Their fire will not be quenched. They will constantly beg for annihilation, to cease to exist. They will wish they had never been born and they will forever wish they had taken Jesus up on His most gracious offer of salvation.

But for all those who still draw breath, there is an alternative. When Jesus comes, He will be glorified in His saints. He will be greatly admired among all who believe. What did they believe? They believed Paul's testimony. They believed the witness of the Apostles. They believed the gospel.

Trials, tribulation, persecution and suffering have been the norm for Christians for 2,000 years. You should not be surprised if you are called to face the same. Jesus is shaking the fence. You will not be able to stay on the fence. Which side will you fall on?

The Bible says that you are a sinner.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

And as a sinner, you cannot stand in the presence of God.

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

We just talked about what that means – an eternity of suffering in Hell. It's what you deserve, but God still loves you.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Jesus endured the wrath of God so you wouldn't have to. To receive the free gift of salvation, all it takes is faith. Just believe the gospel. Turn from your sin and turn to Jesus. And God will even give you the faith to believe ...

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Have you accepted that gracious gift of salvation? Or, are you a persecutor, a mocker, or just a card-carrying member of the mushy middle? Jesus is returning to take vengeance ... **on you!** But there is still time.

'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. (Ezekiel 33:11)

Just turn. Just give your life to Jesus.

... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

And then, like the rest of God's saints, you will be vindicated. Then your eternity will be more wonderful than you can possibly imagine.