**2 Thessalonians 1:5-10** November 10, 2019

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*2 Thessalonians 1:5 All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 10on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Besieged!**

Sieges. You know, when a large group of people—soldiers maybe civilians too—get holed up in a city, a fortress, on a mountain, surrounded by the enemy, and the enemy decides they are just going to sit out there and wait for the victims to starve or surrender or whatever. Sieges aren’t pretty.

I have a book called *The Great Sieges*. The serious historian wouldn’t like this book because it covers about 20 of these very important, drawn out military events, eight pages each. But the book is stirring. Read it and find yourself beside people pushed to the extremes, soldiers and civilians. They are holed up behind walls, food diminishing, terrors outside. Sometimes the results are beyond heartbreaking. All that human suffering. Sometimes the results are heroic and legendary. The sort of thing that makes you say, “Yes!”, and that in some small way makes you determined to conquer your own difficulties.

The essence of a siege, however, is not the defeat or the victory, it is the sitting there; waiting, waiting, waiting; suffering, starving; hoping for relief from who-knows-where, anywhere.

I would hope that your life… no, I pray that your life has more joy in it than that. I am certain that for most of you there is. But a great many of us have or had a dark time in our lives when we felt spiritually besieged. So many things just not working out. Opposition from outsiders—and insiders! Conditions at work, home, school, friends aggressively warring with the Holy Spirit living in us.

**I. God’s People Will Be Besieged**

This is the situation Paul addressed in our reading. ***“All this,”*** he says, ***“is evidence that God’s judgment is right.”*** All this? All what? Go back a verse. ***“…All the persecutions and trials you are enduring… is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and… you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.”*** Their trials and persecutions were evidence that they were in the kingdom of God.

Human nature usually takes it the other way. If only I had a dime for every time someone has said in the midst of their trials, “Pastor, with all the bad things happening in my life, I don’t think God loves me.” Paul says that being spiritually besieged is a sign that we are God’s. In a different way than we usually mean it, this is a fruit of faith. Since faith is opposed to the sinful world, of course the sinful world opposes those with faith.

Now we don’t know exactly what was happening to these Christians in Thessalonica. It never is explained. But they suffered specifically for bearing the name of Christ. This fact that they suffered for Christ proved that they belonged to Christ.

This is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, the people he healed, the strangers on the road to take up their crosses and follow him. “You will be besieged!”

As children of God who have been renewed through Baptism, we often feel out of place in this world. What about that scene in the movie which is clearly immoral and incites desire inside of you? Do you feel uncomfortable? You should if the Holy Spirit lives anywhere in you! What about the people who use your Savior’s name to curse? Do you want to walk out of that conversation? Good! Your heart should stir for your Savior’s honor! What about the way people raise their eyebrows when you insist that Jesus is the only way to be made right with God and saved? As Christians, we find ourselves at odds with a lot of other people.

Thank God that you feel uncomfortable and out of place in this world, because if you weren’t it would be a sign that you don’t belong to God. That is what Paul was saying to the believers in our reading. They were not having an awesome experience as Christians and they wondered what was going on. “Maybe God doesn’t love us!” They couldn’t make sense of being God’s people, and not having a great time. We hope, we pray, we expect that God is going to remove all the bad stuff from life and make it a cake walk. But it isn’t that way. In some ways, the life of faith is a siege.

Now before going any further, there are risks in portraying the Christian life in a fallen world as a siege.

One danger is that we think life is nothing but misery and forget the great things God *does* do for us. We feel the forces of this world, even Satan assaulting us, but we are surrounded by many kind and respectful people, many of whom are not even Christian. Ask a sales associate for help in a hardware store and they cheerfully take you to the bin where the solution to your DYI project sits. Walk outside and while you can complain about the weather being too cold or cloudy or whatever, don’t forget to look into the night sky and marvel at the stars God hung up there to make the darkness beautiful. If you listen to the news and feel like the world is nothing but cats and dogs devouring each other, don’t forget that we do enjoy a religious freedom undreamed of until the last century. Remember that even while we are spiritually besieged, God is still so very, very good to us!

Second, thinking of the Christian life *only* as a siege will lead us to becoming defensive and withdrawn rather than evangelistic and outgoing. That is wrong thinking. The day Jesus rose from the dead and found his disciples holed up in a room for fear that those who killed him would kill them… he didn’t tell them to buy bigger locks and thicker doors. He said, *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”* (John 20).

Making *too much* out of being spiritually besieged is not a good thing. Yet it is important to remember that when we become Christians we are entering into spiritual warfare. We are waiting for the perfection of heaven, but we live in a fallen world. We are declared righteous in God’s sight through faith, yet we are often tempted and even fall. We are the children of God Almighty, yet we are victims of hatred and happenstance. We have eternal life, yet first we must pass through death’s doorway. And the contradictions go on.

No wonder these new Christian converts, all newbies!—none of them stabilizing spiritual veterans of the faith—no wonder that they were speculating that they had boarded the wrong train. “No,” Paul says. “You’re not on the wrong train. In fact, these ‘fightings and fears, within without,’ (*CW* 397) are the very things that prove that you belong to God.”

**II. “Judgment” Is Relief for the Besieged**

Paul then assures that beleaguered, besieged garrison of Christians at Thessalonica that relief is on the way. ***“God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.”*** The cavalry will ride. God will come destroying the enemy lines. As we sang in hymn 29, Christ will come on clouds descending. Every knee will bow before him, and those who once besieged his people will cower in fear, for their dreadful eternal doom has come upon them. ***“When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels, he will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”***

It will be a terrible judgment. A judgment of fire, unending, without hope. It will be God’s payback to those who warred against his people. In that terrible eternity never again will there be the leaven of caring Christians in their lives. Never again will they hear the church bells calling, no more churches to drive by and think, “Next week I’ll get serious about God.” They will be forever without hope, without rest, without relief.

If anyone wants to say that eternal judgment and punishment is unbecoming of a loving God, your argument is not with me or the Lutheran church, it is with God’s Word. No one who says that a loving God would not punish in this way—no one who says that can claim to believe the Bible. God’s just punishment on those who reject his mercy is a consistent theme of the Bible, beginning to end. If you deny that, fine. Just don’t call yourself a Christian. God is both a God of love and a God of justice. Because he is just, he punishes.

But here is the good news: that punishment has been meted out upon Christ Jesus. Therefore, God’s justice is satisfied; not with our punishment, but in Christ’s punishment on a cross. All are forgiven. Simply believe that. People who reject that message, choose to be punished by God.

Eternal life or punishment will be decided on the single issue of faith! ***“God will punish those who do not know [him] and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”*** On the other hand, ***“He will be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed.”*** Faith is the determining difference.

**III. Remembering “Judgment”, We Will Weather the Siege**

Here we, as Christians, must stop and ask ourselves a question. How does this truth make us feel? How do I feel about the fact that some of the very people who perhaps make my life miserable, will be punished ***“with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power”?***

Are not our hearts and minds filled with swirls of emotion? When we have been grievously wronged, don’t our hearts cry out for justice? Then the Holy Spirit speaks and reminds us that it is not our place for revenge and anger. But then our mind questions: “If God is a God of justice, is it wrong to want justice?” But then who could desire ***“everlasting destruction”*** for anyone?

Maybe it is good we feel conflicted at just this point. We finite fallen humans cannot fully comprehend what complete love and complete justice look like standing side by side. Complete love for our neighbor desires to see them in heaven, which is what God wants. On the other hand we have the desire for justice, that God’s will be done, which is also what God wants. In us fallen creatures, or at least in me, these two cannot be fully reconciled because one always overtakes the other. My desire for mercy denies justice. My desire for justice becomes vengeance. We need to approach it like Paul does here. The Holy Spirit didn’t let him talk about his human feelings about this matter. He doesn’t display any glee over the punishment of the damned. He simply says, “This is what God is going to do.” And he submits himself to that.

Insofar as judgment is relief for us we accept it and thank God for it. Insofar as it is God’s desire to punish what must be punished, we say, “You are God. Praise and glory to you even when it is beyond my understanding.”

In the meanwhile, the Final Judgment is not yet here. There still is time. There is still time to rescue people from that judgment. To make the sorties outside the city wall, to speak and bring those who do not know God to knowledge of him. This is God’s own attitude about the Final Judgment! First Peter three tells us *“God is patient… not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* (1 Peter 3:9).

So even while we children of God are besieged by the world around us, we still reach out into that world, to save some. That they too may come to a knowledge of their Savior, and when from the ramparts of the Holy Christian Church we see Christ approaching for judgment, we will be able to *“stand up and lift up our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.”* Amen.