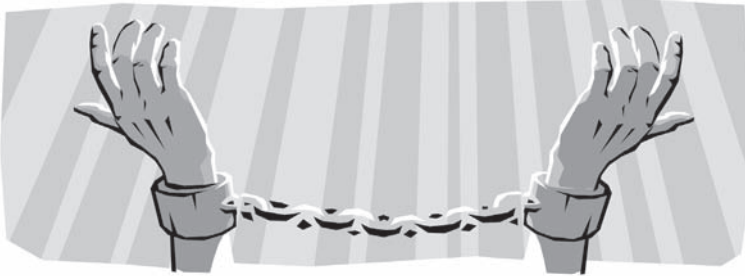


# Promise to the Persecuted

## (2 Thess. 1:1–12)



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### SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Thess. 1:1–12, John 1:18, Rom. 2:5, 12:19, Rev. 16:4–7, 20:1–6, John 14:1–3.*

**Memory Text:** “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power” (*2 Thessalonians 1:11, ESV*).

**Key Thought:** The second coming of Jesus is the culmination of all Christian hope.

Because written correspondence could be slow, a church that wanted to talk to Paul had to track him down and get a message to him, not always an easy process, to be sure. Once contact was finally made, the apostle would then dictate a response and have it hand-delivered back to the church. The process might take months. In the meantime false beliefs would have time to develop and spread.

This seems to have happened in Thessalonica, where new problems arose in the church. These problems may even have become worse due to the misapplication of what Paul wrote in the first letter. Second Thessalonians was Paul's attempt to further correct the situation.

Paul's words in this week's lesson come down to this: at the Second Coming, believers will be rescued by God's spectacular intervention in Christ. This passage provides further information about the nature of His return.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 15.*

## Fresh Greetings (2 Thess. 1:1, 2)

“Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:1, 2). What hope and promise are found even in such a simple greeting as this? How much theology is in there, how much hope, how much promise? How can we learn to make these hopes and promises our own?

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Paul, as he does so often, talks about grace and peace. In one sense, are they not related? Shouldn't the realization of God's grace, the promise of forgiveness in Jesus, lead to peace in our lives? How crucial that, no matter our circumstances, we all take time to dwell on the wonderful provision of salvation made for us and the grace it offers us, regardless of our unworthiness. What better way to experience the peace that we are promised? We need to keep the focus off ourselves and on Jesus and what we have been given in Him.

**Compare** 1 Thessalonians 1:1 with 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2. There's a small difference in the wording. What significance might be found in that difference?

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There is one difference between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Paul changes from “in God the Father” (1 Thess. 1:1) to “in God our Father” (2 Thess. 1:1). This adds a relational touch. There are people who feel close to Jesus yet are afraid of God the Father. Paul assures the Thessalonians that they can have as much confidence in their relationship with the Father as they do with Jesus. Jesus came to this earth to show us what the Father is like.

**Read John 1:18 and 14:7–11. What assurance and hope can we draw from these texts, especially in light of 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2?**

## Paul's Thanksgiving (2 Thess. 1:3, 4)

Paul had a tendency toward extra-long sentences. Second Thessalonians 1:3–10 is a single sentence focusing primarily on events surrounding the second coming of Jesus. The central core of the sentence, however, is not focused on the Second Coming (*2 Thess 1:3, author's translation*): “We are obligated at all times to give thanks to God concerning you.” Paul’s comments regarding the return of Jesus (*2 Thess. 1:6–10*) are part of the reason that he thanks God concerning the Thessalonians themselves.

**Read** 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4. What important spiritual principle do we find in these verses in regard to the question of faith? What happens to faith if it does not grow?

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“We are bound,” or “we ought,” to give thanks to God is the main verb of 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10. Paul feels obligated to thank God for the Thessalonians because their faith is getting stronger and stronger. Meanwhile, their love for one another is also increasing, and both verbs are in the present tense in the original. This means that their growth in faith and love was consistent and ongoing. This kind of growth is basic to any healthy church. Like a plant, if a church does not grow spiritually, it will die.

Paul will go on to offer significant criticism of the church in the second and third chapters of this epistle. But he knows that people need a lot of affirmation before they can handle criticism constructively. He provides that kind of affirmation in the first chapter.

One of the reasons for Paul’s affirmations is that the church in Thessalonica is continuing to suffer persecution. He particularly commends their “patience” in affliction. Instead of faith, hope, and love, Paul talks about their faith, love, and patience. Because “patience” here is substituted for “hope,” it leads Paul into his exposition of the Second Coming later in the chapter.

The result of their increase in faith and love is that their fortitude in the face of affliction has become a source of boasting for the apostles among all the churches they visit. The Thessalonians have become a model of Christian commitment under fire.

**How can trials and affliction increase our faith? At the same time, who hasn’t struggled to maintain faith precisely because of trials?**

## Suffering as a Sign of the End (2 Thess. 1:5, 6)

Second Thessalonians 1:5–10 in the Greek has an Old Testament feel (the Bible of most New Testament Christians was the Septuagint, a pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament). Second Thessalonians exhibits many more references to the Old Testament than does 1 Thessalonians.

### **Read** 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 6. What is Paul saying?

The word *evidence* (NIV) or *token* (KJV) means “proof” or “plain indication” of something. What does the persecution of Christians (vs. 4) prove? It is certainly not evidence of God’s judgment against His people. To the contrary, it is a pointer to the future judgment, in which the people of God are vindicated and those who persecuted them receive the same kind of experience they inflicted on others.

There is a message here for us. Violence begets violence, and those who use violence against others have reason to fear for the future. God’s judgment sets things right. Those who persecute the people of God will one day face the justice of God. But those who experience injustice on account of their faith today can look with confidence to God’s future judgment. On that day, it will be evident to all that they were the objects of God’s favor.

The New Testament encourages believers to exhibit grace, mercy, and forgiveness toward others. But when these actions are rebuffed and repaid with curses, blows, and confinement, it is encouraging to know that injustice will not last forever. Thus, the saints of God are invited to have patience (*see also Rev. 14:12*).

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 6, therefore, Paul reminds the persecuted Thessalonians that the “righteous judgment of God” in the future will demonstrate His approval of them in the present. More than this, their patience and faith in the face of trial validates that God has chosen them. In this way Christian suffering can be the basis for rejoicing (*1 Thess. 1:6, 7*). It is real-life evidence of whose side we will be on when Jesus comes.

Verse 5 shows the righteous judgment of God in His approval of the Thessalonians. Verse 6 shows it in the condemnation and destruction of their persecutors.

**Have you been unfairly victimized, with the perpetrators receiving no apparent punishment for their actions? If so, what comfort can you take in the promises of God’s judgment? Or look at it this way: have you treated people badly, unfairly, and have gotten away with it (at least so far)? If so, how do you view the promises of God’s end-time judgment?**

## Fire and Destruction (2 Thess. 1:7–9)

**Read** 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9. What is the primary reason for the destruction of the wicked at the time of Jesus’ second coming? How are we to understand these verses with the idea of God as being full of love, grace, and forgiveness?

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Many people are uncomfortable with the language of these verses. They feel that “pay back” (*NIV*), vengeance, punishment, and the infliction of suffering are unworthy of a God of love, grace, and mercy. But just punishment and retribution is a frequent theme of Paul’s (*Rom. 2:5, 12:19*). Paul is unequivocal: God’s justice will one day be powerfully made manifest.

And why not? Any good government in today’s world must at some point exercise force in order to restrain evil. Though force is not always violent (as when you are stopped for a traffic violation or audited for your taxes), in some cases, especially when the criminals are using violence themselves, they must be answered with violence. Good governments provide a necessary restraint so that we can all live together in peace. Many times outright evil will not give way voluntarily. And the greater the power and brutality of evil, the greater the force often needed to undo that evil.

The images in this passage are not pretty, but they assure us that God will do whatever it takes to end violence and oppression.

**Read** Revelation 16:4–7 and Daniel 7:21, 22. What do these verses teach that parallels what Paul wrote above in 2 Thessalonians?

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Through His own experience, Jesus understands the cost of suffering. He can be trusted to exercise divine justice but without overkill. Divine justice will result in suffering, but not one iota more than necessary. If we can trust God in anything, we can trust that His justice will reveal a wisdom and fairness that we cannot currently comprehend.

The goal of this passage is not to rejoice in vengeance but to encourage the abused and oppressed. The day of justice is coming. We don’t need to take justice into our own hands.

## Glorifying Christ (2 Thess. 1:10–12)

**Read** 2 Thessalonians 1:10–12. What does it mean that Jesus Christ will be glorified in His saints?

The full sentence in this week's text (*2 Thess. 1:3–10*) provides a number of important details about the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, He will afflict the afflicters and provide rest for the afflicted (*see 2 Thess. 1:6, 7*). He will come down from heaven in the company of powerful angels (*2 Thess. 1:7*). He will come with flaming fire and execute justice on those who have rejected God and the gospel of Jesus Christ (*2 Thess. 1:8*). The wicked are destroyed (*2 Thess. 1:8, 9*) while the righteous bring glory to Christ (*2 Thess. 1:10*).

The events of the Second Coming set the stage for the millennium, during which time the earth lies desolate for a thousand years (*Rev. 20:1–6*). Though this week's passage does not tell us what happens to the righteous, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17 tells us that the saved join Jesus in the air at His return. John 14:1–3 further indicates that Jesus will take the righteous with Him to heaven.

**How** does Paul instruct believers to prepare for the second coming of Jesus? *2 Thess. 1:11*.

With verse 10 Paul is finished talking about the wicked and turns again to the fate of the righteous at the Second Coming. In verses 10–12, the glory of Jesus is exhibited in the character of those who believe in Him. Paul rejoices that his prayers and efforts for the Thessalonians will be vindicated at the return of Jesus (*see 1 Thess. 2:19, 20*).

Paul here sets the stage for chapter 2, in which he argues that the day of the Lord has not yet come. If it had, there would be flaming fire, destruction of the wicked, and the full glorification of Jesus in the eyes of all.

In today's passage, Paul shifts easily from God to Jesus, using the two names interchangeably. According to inspiration, Jesus is God. This teaching is very important to us. The greater Jesus is, the more powerful His salvation and the clearer a picture of God we receive as we contemplate His life, death, resurrection, and return. If Jesus is truly God, then the Father is just like Him.

**How can we learn to go about the business of living our daily lives, but with the expectation of the Second Coming? Why is it so easy, amid the daily rhythms of life, to forget about His coming? How can we learn to keep this amazing promise before us and go about our daily business, while still giving the promise the time, attention, and seriousness it deserves?**

**Further Study:** “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. . . .

“It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 21.

“The instruction that Paul sent the Thessalonians in his first epistle regarding the second coming of Christ, was in perfect harmony with his former teaching. Yet his words were misapprehended by some of the Thessalonian brethren. . . .

“In his second letter Paul sought to correct their misunderstanding of his teaching and to set before them his true position.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 264.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Does the truth of Scripture reveal itself more through intensive word-by-word study or in the broad themes that we can observe by way of wide reading? Or is there a time and place for both? Discuss the answer(s) in class.
- ❷ Read the Ellen G. White quote in today’s Further Study regarding how inspiration works. How does this help us to understand the “human element” that appears at times in the Bible?
- ❸ Does the thought of the Second Coming frighten you, or does it bring you hope? What does your answer say about your relationship with God or about your understanding of the gospel? Or both?
- ❹ However much truth there is to the idea that trials can strengthen our faith and character, what do you say to people whose trials are not only causing them to be bitter, resentful, and angry (in other words, not character-building) but are causing them to lose their faith?

**Summary:** In the opening chapter of 2 Thessalonians, Paul rejoices over the way in which the Thessalonian believers remain faithful in spite of much affliction. He encourages them by pointing to the great reversal at the second coming of Jesus. Whatever happens now, we have the promise that God will execute divine justice.

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Thessalonians 1:1–12*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Explain how belief in God’s divine justice at the Second Coming can encourage His followers to have patience and steadfastness of faith during earthly trials and tribulation.

**Feel:** Be confident that God will right all wrongs when Jesus returns.

**Do:** Trust that God is his or her Defender and that He will repay all wrongs performed against him or her.

► **Learning Outline:**

### I. Know: God Will Right All Wrongs

**A** The most difficult part of suffering is the feeling that God has deserted us. What passages or stories in the Bible illustrate that God is with us during our trials and will repay those who have wronged us?

**B** The penalty that the wicked receive is described as “eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (*vs. 9, ESV*). How does this penalty, and the fact that God is just in giving it, argue against the view that the punishment of the wicked consists of unending conscious torment?

### II. Feel: Strengthened in Trial

**A** God has promised, “‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’ ” (*Heb. 13:5, ESV*). How has this and other Scripture promises encouraged you during difficult times?

**B** How does knowing that God will vindicate His followers make it easier to endure adversity?

### III. Do: Practicing Patience

**A** Because trials are an inevitable part of life, what can we do during the easier times in life to prepare for the difficult times that will come?

► **Summary:** God is aware of the injustices inflicted on His followers and will vindicate their faithfulness and punish their enemies when Christ returns.



## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** **The certainty of Christ’s return in order to rescue His followers and punish the wicked has been a source of encouragement and hope for Christians during difficult times throughout all ages of earth’s history.**

Down through the ages, Christians have faced trials and persecutions as a result of their faith in Christ. The stories of what some early Christians were willing to endure are inspiring. One example of this involves persecution that erupted against Christians living in the towns of Vienne and Lyons in A.D. 177. A Christian who managed to escape reported that a young girl named Blandina was so severely tortured for hours that her body looked like a mangled, gaping wound. Yet, in response to the brutality, she would not surrender her faith. She would only say, “‘I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of.’ ”—*Eusebius: The History of the Church From Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 141.

How did Christians endure such savagery? The answer can be seen in what a Christian bishop named Polycarp said before he was martyred in A.D. 155. Although he was 86 years old, Polycarp was arrested for his faith and brought before the Roman governor. Due to Polycarp’s age, the governor pleaded with him to surrender his faith and escape punishment. After multiple appeals to revile Christ, Polycarp said, “‘For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’ ” When the governor threatened to burn Polycarp at the stake, Polycarp replied, “‘You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.’ ”—Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), p. 235.

Early Christians, such as Polycarp, were sustained in persecution because their faith was rooted in a deep appreciation of God’s love and the realization that this world will soon pass away when Christ returns to award the faithful and punish the wicked (even if some didn’t understand the nature of the final punishment).

**Consider This:** As Christians we often get so caught up in our own lives that we forget what God has done for us and what this world is really all about. How can we keep the big picture in view as we live?

## ►STEP 2—Explore

### Bible Commentary

#### I. Greetings and Thanksgivings (*Review 2 Thessalonians 1:1–5 with the class.*)

Whether it is a gift that we receive or something new that we purchase ourselves, once we experience the things of this world, our excitement for them usually fades quickly, and we are ready to move on to something new. While that is true of most things in our world, Paul's greeting in his second letter to the Thessalonians should remind us that it is not true when it comes to experiencing God's "grace and peace." Instead of immediately jumping into the pressing issues he needs to deal with in his letter, Paul first pauses to remind his readers, as he does in all his letters, of God's offer of grace. It is a subject of which Paul never tires. It changed his life and also transformed the hearts and lives of the believers in Thessalonica.

Paul's emphasis on his obligation to thank God on behalf of the Thessalonians may suggest that the new converts felt a little abashed about the way in which Paul had gone on and on about them in his previous letter and in front of others. Paul reminds them, however, that such thankfulness is not only required of the Christian (*1 Thess. 5:18*) but that the Thessalonians deserved it. God had not only produced a miraculous change in their lives, but evidence of His work in their lives continued to be manifest in how their faith, love, and steadfast hope in God were increasing. That was something worthy of boasting about, especially because all this was happening in the midst of trials and persecution.

But how could Paul see evidence of the righteous judgment of God in the lives of the Thessalonians when they were undergoing persecution? In the ancient world, people's tendency was to see tribulation as an indication of God's disfavor (remember Job's friends?). The evidence of God's righteous judgment has two aspects to it. First, to some extent, the evidence Paul saw was the steadfastness of faith that the Thessalonians displayed during their trials. Such resilience was certainly evidence that God was at work in their lives. But more than this, Paul also saw the persecution that they faced as evidence of God's righteous judgment. How was this the case? As Paul said before, Christians should expect persecution. If the presence of the risen Christ in our lives is truly a foretaste of God's kingdom that will ultimately supplant the kingdoms of this world (*Dan. 2:44, 45*), then it should be no surprise that this world will feel threatened and seek to hinder God's work and His followers. The persecution that the

Thessalonians were facing for their faith, and the persecution that His followers continue to face, is evidence that a new day is coming.

**Consider This:** According to Paul, persecution is evidence of the “righteous judgment of God” in our lives. How can we tell if the trials that we face are due to the gospel or because of our own attitude or behavior?

## II. Judgment and Justice at Christ’s Return *(Review 2 Thessalonians 1:5–12 with the class.)*

As the lesson points out, God’s judgment is troubling to many. The description of Christ’s “inflicting vengeance” (*ESV*) on the wicked, as described in verse 8, seems amiss. How can this picture of Jesus be reconciled with the loving Jesus in the Gospels? Here it is helpful to note that the English word *vengeance* is not the best translation of the word that Paul uses in the Greek. The problem is that the word *vengeance* in English is used in an excessively brutal sense today. For example, Dictionary.com defines the phrase “with a vengeance” as something that is done “to an unreasonable, excessive, or surprising degree.” This can certainly be seen in the kind of sadistic and excessive violence that Hollywood packs into movies involving someone seeking vengeance.

The word in Greek that the *ESV* translates as “vengeance” and the NIV translates as “punish” has no connection to the way in which our society has come to look at vengeance. The word in Greek (*ekdikēsis*) comes from the word for “just,” “righteous,” or “justice” (*dikaios*) and literally means “the giving out of justice.” This theme of justice is what Paul is focusing on in this passage. He has already mentioned God’s “righteous” judgment in verse 5 and described God’s actions as “just” in verse 6. While God still has to deal with sin and sinners who have continually refused His appeals to repent, we can take heart that God will act justly and fairly and with no sadistic element in His judgment.

A second word that deserves mention is the word *revealed* in verse 7. The New Testament uses three words to refer to the return of Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians we have already encountered the word *parousia* (see Bible Commentary section in lesson 8). The other two words are *apocalypse* and *epiphany*. The word used here is *apocalypse*. It literally means “to uncover something that has been hidden.” Although Christ is hidden to the eyes of the world today, soon He will be revealed. What a day that will be!

**Consider This:** The theme of God’s justice is an important concept in Scripture and is particularly meaningful to those who have been wronged. In what sense is God’s justice good news for you?

### ► STEP 3—Apply

#### Thought Questions:

- 1 Paul says Jesus will return “in flaming fire” (*2 Thess. 1:8, ESV*). What is “fire” a symbol of when associated with God and/or judgment? Consider the following passages: *Deut. 4:24, Exod. 3:2, Isa. 33:11–14, 66:15, Rev. 1:14*.
- 2 James says that the testing of our faith during the trials we experience can produce steadfastness (*James 1:4, ESV*). Trials can, of course, also cause people to become spiritually discouraged and to surrender their faith. How can we respond to such trials so that our faith will grow instead of waver?

#### Application Questions:

- 1 God can use our experience during trials to help others with similar difficulties (*2 Cor. 1:3–6*). In what ways could your experiences with difficulties be used to encourage others?
- 2 Paul was continually praying for the Thessalonians (*2 Thess. 1:11*). Is there anyone who needs your continual prayers? If so, what can you do to keep your prayers and faith strong?

### ► STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Class members may be tempted to think that this lesson applies primarily to Christians facing physical persecution around the world rather than to their own personal circumstances. Use the following activity to make this week’s lesson more applicable to the entire class.

**Activity:** Point out to the class that Paul refers to the challenges that are faced by the Thessalonians as both “persecutions” and “afflictions” (*2 Thess. 1:4, ESV*). Explain that while the former refers to assaults made on believers, the latter is more general and could refer to any number of difficulties in life. Have class members come up with a list of things that might fall into the category of “afflictions.” Then discuss with the class the significance of keeping both these terms in mind as we reflect on this week’s lesson.