

The Lord's Vengeance, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

Code: 81-39

This morning we are going to return to the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, and this is a very sobering passage – as you know from last week, and you'll find out again this morning – one, which I suppose in some ways seems out of place, in very brief letter of only three short chapters to a church that was full of love and full of faith, full of hope, faithful, enduring, spreading the gospel far and wide so that their reputation had gone into all the world. And yet here in this little epistle our placed some of the most terrifying words that have ever been revealed from heaven. There is much in these epistles about the love of God, the salvation that He provides. But nowhere in any epistle is there the power and potency of warning of eternal judgment such as here.

Now Paul was a judgment preacher, that is not deniable. He spoke often about judgment, he spoke often about sinners. He said that sinners were storing up wrath against the day of wrath back in Romans 2. He said as people live in an ungodly way and reject God and reject the gospel, God is patient, God is tolerant, God displays mercy, and sinners carry on their open rebellion against Him. But all of it is being written down in heaven so that God is keeping a record of the offenses against Him, and they are accumulating to that day which will come, that day of wrath.

The world is so use to mercy, so use to God's patience, that it exploits its sinfulness freely and joyfully. It relishes its sin. And because that sin does not have necessarily immediate consequences people get used to mercy. In fact, they get so used to mercy that they think divine justice is unfair. That is a deadly mistake to make. Scripture tells us there is no fear of God before the eyes of men. There is no fear of God, there is no fear of judgment. There really is no fear of hell, broadly speaking.

Some people have thought that while Paul is a judgment preacher, on the other hand, Jesus was not. Jesus preached love and kindness and forgiveness and compassion. The truth of the matter is that Jesus was even more of a judgment preacher than Paul. In fact, Jesus was a hell fire preacher. He spoke in very explicit terms about unquenchable fire, about conscious everlasting punishment. Three times in the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter He talked about the fires of hell. That's His first sermon recorded in the New Testament. In Matthew 10:28 He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but fear Him who is able to kill both soul and body in hell."

He designated the Pharisees and the scribes of Israel as sons of hell who make more sons of hell of their converts. He told a story about a rich man and a beggar, and He said the rich man died and was in hell, in torment. He spoke in Matthew 25:46 of eternal punishment. In Matthew 8 He spoke of that eternal punishment as outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. And in John chapter 5, He says that God had made Him the Judge, so that when that inevitable day of wrath comes – that day of the Lord as it is identified – He Himself, no other than the Lord Jesus Christ, would be the final judge and executioner.

The final judgment is described in the book of Revelation in chapter 20 in a few verses at the end of that chapter. Let me read them to you, starting at verse 11. "I saw a great white throne and Him who

sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and its books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." That is future history describing the great white throne final judgment.

The Judge, as I said, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, He says, the Father has committed all judgment. He is the one who will return as Judge and Executioner. At His return this judgment will take place; and that is Paul's subject as we look at chapter 1 in verses 6 through 10.

"For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to those who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed – for our testimony to you was believed."

The key phrase here is in verse 7, "the Lord Jesus will be revealed." "Revealed" is the word *apokalupsis*, the apocalypse. That means the unveiling, the uncovering, the disclosing, the revelation. This is the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, His unveiling. In His first coming, though He was God in human flesh and He did the works of God and spoke the words of God, He was still veiled in human flesh, veiled in humanity. He was in the world, the world was made by Him, but John 1:10 says, "The world did not know Him." He repeatedly says to them, "You do not know who I am. You know the physical earthly features of My history, but you don't know My nature."

At His second coming, however, He will be known. He will be unveiled, and every eye will see Him, every eye will see Him. All of the universe will go dark, all the stars and sun and moon; and out of the blackness, according to Matthew 24:30, will come Jesus Christ in blazing glory, and every eye will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. So we're looking here at the apocalypse, the unveiling of Jesus Christ.

Now we saw last week three features of that unveiling – back to verse 7. He is going to be revealed from heaven, He's coming back from heaven. Acts 1 says He went to heaven in His ascension, He took His seat at the right hand of the Father where He has been interceding for His own. He is in heaven now. In terms of His glorified, resurrected body He is in heaven. He will come back from heaven, first of all, to catch away His church, and then seven years later He will come in this fiery judgment and to set up His kingdom. Now obviously His Spirit is omnipresent everywhere in the world, but He in actuality, in His resurrection body is in heaven at the right hand of God from where He will return and be unveiled in glory.

So He comes from heaven. Secondly, He comes with His mighty angels, His mighty angels. They belong to Him because He is God. He is God, and so He occupies a seat on the throne of heaven. He is God, and so the angels belong to Him. They will come for two purposes. They will come to judge. Matthew 13 says the angels will do the judging. When He comes it will be the Lord basically

distributing His judgment verdicts through the power of His angels. But they come not only to judge, but according to Matthew 25 they come to gather the redeemed into the kingdom. So the angels are His agents of judgment and His agents of collecting the saints into the kingdom.

Thirdly, it says He will come in flaming fire. That's not an earthly fire, that's not a fire made up of elements in this world, that is a glory fire. He comes in blazing, divine, heavenly glory. So this is the unveiling of Christ. This is the next event in human history to come. This is the apocalyptic event, the final unveiling of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So we saw those three features from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire. We also asked some questions and we're going to follow those questioned up.

Why is He coming? Two reasons. Reason number one, that we'll look at is retribution. Reason number two, which we'll look at next time, is relief, relief. You see the word "relief" in verse 7, you see the word "retribution" in verse 8. These are the two things to know about the unveiling of Christ.

Now I want us this morning to think about retribution. Go back to verse 8. "He will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution." On the face of it word seems ugly. It seems harsh. It may even seem extreme. But the word in the Greek is *ekdikēsis*, and the center root of that comes from the root that means "just." It's the root that we get in the word "justice" or "justified" or "righteous" or "righteousness." So this is full, just punishment; full, righteous vengeance.

God's retribution is not like man's retribution. It is not unruly, selfish, even sinful. It is not a passionate kind of flaming of anger, the kind that leads sinners to a kind of revenge that is ugly and self-seeking and perhaps even unjust. There is a story in Matthew 18 about a man who had some debtors, and they owed him a reasonable amount. But instead of helping them to pay what they owed, he grabbed them and threw them into prison; and judgment is pronounced on that man. That's human vengeance. That's human hostility, human anger.

God's full punishment has at its core His justice and His righteousness. That's why Romans 12:19 says this: "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." And that comes from Deuteronomy 32:35. Don't take your own vengeance; it will, no doubt, be sinful, selfish vengeance. Leave it to God, and God will take vengeance, and the Son will be the instrument of that vengeance.

Back in Luke 20 our Lord told a story, a parable about a vineyard. We're familiar with it, it starts in verse 9 of Luke 20. Just listen to this: "Jesus began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard;' – which they owed him, it was his vineyard – 'but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. He proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out. The owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I'll send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"

Now you know what that story's about, right? It's about the nation Israel, and it's about the fact that God placed them in His vineyard, as it were, to tend His truth, His word. And God sent prophets, and they abused the prophets, stoned the prophets, killed the prophets. Finally God sent His Son. And what did they do to Him? They killed Him.

What is God going to do about that? Verse 16, "He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others." When they heard it, they said, "May it never be!" But it was; destruction came on Jerusalem, on Israel in 70 AD, and the Lord turned to the church as His holy people.

But the way this ends is directly at the point of our looking at Jesus in judgment. "Jesus looked at them and said, 'What then is this that is written: "The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone"?' He changed the metaphor from a vineyard to a stone. They rejected the stone; and of course, that's language taken from Psalm 118: "The stone which the builders rejected became the chief corner stone."

And this in verse 18: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust," or grind him to powder. What a frightening image of Jesus who is the stone. If you fall on Him, He shatters you into pieces; if He falls on you, He grinds you to powder. This is speaking of Jesus in His judgment role. This is what happens when He returns, which Luke 21:22 calls the days of vengeance, the days of vengeance.

So let's ask some questions about this, this coming judgment at the return of Christ, and we'll ask the very proverbial questions. First, what: What is that final vengeance? What is it? Well, we already know it is retribution. It is full punishment. It is the avenging of wrong based upon pure and accurate justice and righteousness. But beyond that, what is it?

Let's answer that in verse 9: "They will pay the penalty." It is a just penalty. Again, this comes from the same root as "justice" and "righteousness." They pay the penalty. For what? For all their sins against God, which are endless. And as I mentioned earlier in Romans 2:4 and 5, they're just accumulating, accumulating, accumulating sin, building up for righteous recompense against all that sin when the penalty is paid. That word "penalty" is translated, same word in Greek. It's translated in Jude 7 as "punishment," just punishment. Again righteous punishment.

Now no text outside of the detailed passages of Revelation is as potent as this one in portraying Jesus as the Judge. And what He is doing when He returns is exacting a just penalty on sinners who do not know Him, do not believe the gospel. Jesus is the Judge and the Executioner. This is terrifying truth. This is truth that people don't like to talk about; even preachers don't like to talk about it. But it's very dangerous not to talk about it, and I'll show you why.

Back in Ezekiel chapter 33, God speaks to Ezekiel, chapter 33; we'll just pick it up in verse 6. "If the watchman sees the sword coming and doesn't blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand." Spiritually speaking, we as preachers, all of us as Christians are watchmen on the wall who see the sword coming, the sword in the hand of none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Now as you for, son of man,” – title for Ezekiel – “I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.”

That is very serious. If you don’t warn sinners, then their blood is on your hands. It doesn’t mean you lose your salvation, it does mean that you come under serious discipline from the Lord. Could even cost your life. And yet, how common it is, even for preachers, to avoid speaking of judgment and hell.

So that’s the first question: “What? What is this vengeance?” It is divine justice. It is retribution. It is time for God’s wrath to be struck and for sinners to pay the penalty; which leads to the second question: “Why? Why?” And the answer is so simple that it’s really stunning. Verse 6: “For after all it is only just. For after all it is only just.” It’s that simple. There’s not some kind of long, drawn out explanation with all kinds of caveats. Why would Jesus come back to do this? Why would He come back in such avenging judgment? “For after all it is only right.”

In Job 37:23 Elihu, one of Job’s friends, was correct when he said this about God: “The Almighty; He is exalted in power and He will do no violence to justice and full righteousness.” God will never be unjust, He will never be unrighteous. This vengeance is just.

Such devastating, eternal punishment is the just penalty. It is the correct punishment, it matches the crime. It is righteous vengeance. It is coming from the one righteous God to sinners who have lived in disobedience and unbelief and impenitence against Him. It is not more than sinners deserve, it is not less than sinners deserve; and if you think the judgment is too great, you fail to understand the greatness of the crime. Human beings underestimate the horror of sin, that’s why they can’t comprehend the horror of hell. It is justice from the perfectly righteous Judge who always does right. Revelation 19:2, “His judgments are true and righteous.” His judgments are true and righteous. No capacity in Him to be unjust or unfair.

“After all,” it’s axiomatic. “After all.” That’s just point blank. There’s no sense of defensiveness in this statement: “After all.” That ought to be clear to everybody: “After all.” This is certain; this is right; this is true. It is only just. It is only *dikaïos*, righteous. In fact, it is the only righteous way to deal with those who have sinned against God.

The Scriptures emphasize the absolute righteousness of God in final judgment, the righteousness of Christ as the Judge. In this very, very public judgment before the whole universe of men and angels, all will acclaim God is righteous. He is righteous in acquitting believers because their sins were paid for in the death of Christ, to whom their sins were imputed. He will be declared righteous in damning the ungodly; for they rejected the only way of forgiveness and are left to pay the penalty themselves. God’s vengeance is based on His righteousness.

You might think to yourself, “Well, how am I supposed to understand that? Isn’t there some deeper philosophical reality here that can take a little of this horror off this doctrine?” No. It is only just for God to repay. It’s only just. That’s all you get; that’s the answer. It’s no more sophisticated than that, no more philosophical than that. God’s vengeance is based on a principle. It is an inviolable, spiritual

law bound up in His holy nature; God must give back punishment that matches the crime.

And by the way, in Colossians 3:25, it says, “God is no respecter of persons.” God is no respecter of persons. So it isn’t that He’s more kind with certain sinners than others, He is no respecter of persons. This is all legality. This has nothing to do with some affection that God might have for certain people – Jews, or maybe Gentiles. “There is judgment” – Colossians 3:25 – “without partiality.”

An illustration of this in Luke 13; very, very remarkable one. “Our Lord was confronted by some folks on a certain occasion,” – chapter 13, verse 1 – “and some folks reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” Now Jesus lived in Nazareth, that’s in Galilee. Some of the Galilean people went down to offer sacrifices at the temple. They went in to offer their sacrifices, and while they were offering their sacrifices, Pilate’s men came in with knives and slaughtered them; so their blood was mixed with the blood of sacrifices. This is disturbing to the Jews who are asking the question of our Lord, because these are not people sinning, these are people obeying the Old Testament law. These are people doing exactly what God told them to do.

So Jesus knows what’s on their mind. He said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?” You might assume that. They must have done something horrible for God to allow Pilate’s soldiers to slice them to death. He says, “I tell you, no, no, they aren’t any worse than any other sinners. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Maybe not that way; but you will perish.”

“Or” – He says – “do you suppose those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell” – apparently a construction project down at Siloam fell over and crushed to death eighteen people. “Do you suppose that they were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?” the people who didn’t get killed by the collapse.

And our Lord says the same thing, “I tell you, no, they’re no better or no worse. I’m telling you, unless you repent, you’re all going to perish, and you don’t know when, and you don’t know how you’re going to die. But when you die, you will perish,” because universally eternal judgment is the just punishment for rebellion against God. Sin deserves death and hell.

Man is not a helpless, careless victim; man is a chosen, purposeful, premeditated sinner. And the threat of God’s vengeance and divine judgment with this kind of severity is a means by which God makes the way of the transgressor hard – to borrow language from Proverbs 13. These kinds of texts are putting up roadblocks; you have to push through to get past. But sinners push through. Romans 1 says, “When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God. They became fools who thought they were wise.”

So why does God do this? Because it is just, it is right. Crimes committed against God bring a penalty that is commensurate with the crime. And the worst crime in the universe is to rebel against God. It’s right for God to repay.

Now he also says, “to repay with affliction those who afflict you.” The first group that God will repay are the persecutors of the truth, persecutors of the truth. Those who know the truth about God maybe know what the Bible says, maybe know the gospel, and not only believe it, but persecute it.

This is an old principle, it goes all the way back to Genesis 12 where God says concerning Israel, speaking to Abraham about the future people, “Whoever blesses you will be blessed, whoever curses you will be cursed.” And that’s just part of human history. It’s one thing to reject God, it’s something else to reject the gospel; it’s an even greater crime to take up the persecution of those who are God’s.

Such justice is right. And in the case of the Thessalonians, they were enduring persecution. Go back to verse 4. He is proud of their “perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.” It’s only right for God to repay, and He starts with repaying those who afflict His children.

Matthew 18, He says this: “Cause one of My little ones to stumble, you’d be better off if a millstone were hanged around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” Let the non-Christian persecutors understand that God’s justice is coming.

So what? Retribution – that’s the what – retribution: just, full punishment. Why? Because it’s right. And if you don’t think it’s right it’s only a reflection of the fact that you’re a fallen human being, and that you’re so used to mercy you think justice is unjust. It is just.

Thirdly, “Who? Who?” And Paul is quick to reveal that it starts with the persecutors. But it doesn’t end there. Notice verse 8, “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” Two descriptions, “those who do not know God.” Could be Gentiles; 1 Thessalonians 4:5, he says that, “the Gentiles who know not God,” the Gentiles who know not God.

Knowing God is foundational. In our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer in John 17, verse 3, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. This is eternal life, that they may know You, Father, the true God, and Jesus Christ whom You sent.” So, if eternal life comes to those who know God and know the Son of God, then eternal destruction comes to those who do not know God.

Again, this can be a Gentile. Back in Jeremiah 10, Jeremiah says, “Pour out Your wrath,” – talking to God – “pour out Your wrath on the nations that do not know You, on the families that do not call Your name.” This is a prophet praying that God will pour out wrath on nations that do not know God, do not call His name.

You say that seems harsh. But you have to remember what it says in Romans 1, that the knowledge of God was available to everyone by the creation. That’s why wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness, who reject the truth. “They are without excuse,” – Paul says – “because the truth was available through reason and creation and” – in Romans 2 – “through the moral law written in the heart.” There was enough, there was enough of God revealed rationally in the universe and morally in the heart to lead even a Pagan in the direction of God. The truth of the matter is what happened is defined in Psalm 9, verse 17, “The nations forgot God,” they forgot Him. We saw in Psalm 2 they fight against Him. So this can be the nations; they don’t know God.

Just a reminder; what happens to people who die and don’t know God? Some people want us to

believe that somehow God's going to take care of them, send them to heaven anyway. No. This is what this says, this can't be more explicit: "Retribution comes to those who do not know God," which ought to be a good reminder of how urgent it is to proclaim the gospel around the world, to fulfill the Great Commission, because there are nations all over the globe, people all over the globe who don't know God. And if they die not knowing God, what awaits them is retribution.

God can be known if they follow what is obvious in the creation and what is obvious in the moral law in the heart; and if they follow that, God would reveal the rest of the truth to them, the seeking heart. But instead of following reason and moral law, they reject it and become inexcusable, and give themselves up to sexuality, homosexuality, and a reprobate mind, as Romans 1 says.

But this can also refer to a Jew. Yes, even the Jews who knew about God did not know God. You had Gentiles who didn't even know about God; you had Jews who knew everything the Old Testament revealed about God. But listen to what Jeremiah says to them, Jeremiah chapter 9. This is an amazing indictment, but it's the story of Israel: "Oh that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"

Why are you weeping, Jeremiah? Why are your people being slain? Why are they going to be hauled off into Babylonian captivity? Why? Down in verse 6 he says, "Your dwelling is in the midst of deceit because" – the previous verse – "you don't speak the truth. Through deceit they refuse to know Me."

The Jews who had all the revelation about God didn't know God. So there were Gentiles who didn't even know about God, and they rejected the path to God through reason and moral law. There were Jews who had the revelation about God, and they rejected that. The prophet Hosea chapter: "Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, for the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land. You don't know Me." Verse 6, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you. You have forgotten the law of your God, I will forget your children."

In John chapter 7, New Testament, verse 28, "Jesus cried out in the temple to the Jewish people, 'You both know Me and you know where I'm from,' – in other words, "You know Me in My human presence, you know I'm from Galilee" – 'and I have not come of Myself. You know I've come from God, that's obvious. But He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. You don't know God.'" Gentiles don't know God; some of them don't even know about God, they've never said His name. Jews know about God, but don't know God.

Galatians 4 is an indictment of those in verse 8 "who did not know God." Ephesians 2 is an indictment of those "who are without God in the world." Titus 1:16, "Those who profess to know God, but by their deeds deny Him, being detestable, disobedient and worthless." This is a horrific situation to be in, not to know God – not in the knowing about God; that's as damning as anything. There's a hell for those who don't even know about God. There's a hell for those who knowing about God don't know God. And that is why Jesus said in Matthew chapter 7 to those Jewish people who said, "Lord, Lord, we've done this and done that in Your name," "Depart from Me, I never" – what? – "I never knew you. I never knew you."

But there's even a greater guilt. There's a greater guilt than just not knowing God, whether you're a Jew or a Gentile. Go back to the verse, end of verse 8: "and to those who do not obey the gospel of

our Lord Jesus,” those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Over in chapter 2, verse 12, it’s referred to as “not believing the truth.” This intensifies guilt.

There is a hell for people who didn’t know even about God. There is a greater suffering – there are degrees of suffering in eternity – there’s a greater suffering for those who knew about Him but turned their back on Him. There’s an even greater suffering for those who knew the gospel.

Turn to Hebrews 10 and I want you to follow this, Hebrews 10. Here comes the most severe suffering. Those who know the gospel and reject it, listen to this, verse 26, Hebrews 10: “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” – and the sin there is the sin of unbelief, impenitence – “if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. All that is left if you reject the truth is a terrifying expectation of judgment,” – verse 27 – “and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”

Then listen to this, verse 28: “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment” – there is an indication that there are obviously degrees of punishment in hell – “there is a more severe punishment for the person who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant” – or the death of Christ on the cross – “by which he was set apart, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”

Oh, if you reject the Law of Moses, you die without mercy. But there is a much severer punishment if you trample under your feet the Son of God and His covenant, ratifying death on the cross, which set Him apart as the Redeemer. And further, in doing that you insult the Spirit of grace who offers you the grace of salvation in His name. “How much severer will that punishment be? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’” And He will repay equal to the crime. “And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Remember, you obey the gospel or you disobey the gospel, because the gospel is a command, it’s a command. It’s not just a story, it’s a command. Acts 17:30 and 31, God commands all men everywhere to repent and to understand that Christ is the Lord and Judge, and God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world. Romans 1, Romans 10, Romans 15, Romans 16 talks about salvation as the obedience of the faith, the obedience of the faith, because the gospel is a command: “Believe.”

So when the Lord is revealed in the apocalypse, the unveiling of Christ, there will be, first of all, retribution. And what is that? It is justice, equal punishment for the crime. Why? Because it’s right, and God always does what is right. Who? Those who do not know God, those who reject the gospel, and particularly those who afflict those who believe: persecutors.

And finally, “How? How does this punishment come? How does this fall?” Verse 6. Verse 6 simply says, “He will repay with affliction those who afflict you.” This indicates to me that there will be greater punishment in hell for those who are the persecutors of the believers. There is a severity of judgment for those who never heard the name of God. There’s a greater severity of judgment for those who heard the name of God and rejected it – Old Testament knowledge. There’s a more severe punishment for those who rejected the gospel, and there’s a more severe punishment for those who assaulted and persecuted those who believe the gospel.

But what is this punishment? In any case, those are only degrees. The punishment, verse 9, “These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction.” The penalty is eternal destruction. It’s forever. It’s forever. It can’t mean soul sleep. It can’t mean annihilation, because whatever this is is forever; and if you go out of existence that’s not forever. Whatever it is, it lasts forever. The Greek term is used 75 times in the New Testament and always means eternal. Even the references to past time, past references to eternity, as well as future references to eternity. But always eternity.

It is used of God in Romans 16:26 that He is eternal. It is used of eternal life, John 3:16. It is used of eternal salvation, Hebrews 5:9. It is used of eternal redemption, Hebrews 9:12 – and I could go on and on. It means eternal.

But in the case of these who feel the retribution of God, it is eternal destruction. That’s *olethros* in Greek. And let me tell you what the word means: ruin, eternal ruin. It speaks of a ruined life. It’s a conscious recognition of a ruined life. A way to understand it is, not that time passes – hours go by, weeks go by, years go by, millennia go by – it is simply a moment that never ends, one moment of grief that never ends, one moment that never stops – like the final stages of a cancer patient, only you never die, you just experience the pain, the uselessness, the hopelessness, the emptiness, the meaninglessness, the valuelessness; no purpose, no goal, no future, no hope.

Our Lord Jesus had some terrifying things to say about such an experience. It is a furious fire that gives no light to the impenetrable darkness. It is an experience of weeping and grinding of teeth in pain and frustration. Soul and body are both ruined as far as worth and beauty are concerned. Any vestige of the image of God is forever gone. Consuming worms never die, the fire is never quenched, and there’s no escape.

Two things define that kind of existence, back in verse 9. First, it is away from the presence of the Lord. It is away from the presence of the Lord. Wherever it is, the Lord isn’t there. Imagine an existence in a place where there’s no presence of the Lord. No human being ever living in this world has lived in such a place, because God is in this world, isn’t He. It’s in Him we live and move and have our being; His providences are all around us. We enjoy His beauty and His provision, even unbelievers.

This is a place where one is alone and there is nothing of God there – nothing of life, joy, peace, satisfaction, love, pleasure. That’s why it’s outer darkness. That’s why there’s weeping and gnashing of teeth. It’s just a place where God is never present, forever banished from the One who is the source of every good and perfect gift.

And then, secondly, Paul says, not only away from the presence of the Lord in any relational or beneficent sense, but also away from the glory of His power, from any visible manifestation of His splendor. Even in this world, you see the glory of His power, don’t you? You see it in the majesty of creation. You see it from the microcosm to the macrocosm. You hear it in music. You see it in art and beauty and love. But in that place you will be away from the splendor and majesty of His power. In other words, His presence won’t be there, and nothing that He does will be there.

This language the apostle Paul borrowed from Isaiah. Three times in Isaiah 2 Isaiah uses the phrase “the splendor of His majesty,” verse 10; “the splendor of His majesty,” verse 19; “the splendor of His

majesty,” verse 21. Even living in this world you see some of the splendor of His majesty; looking into space, something of the splendor of His majesty. In that world you will know nothing of the presence of God and nothing of the splendor of His power and majesty on display. And you will know nothing of the splendor of His majesty manifest in the lives of the redeemed. This will happen when our Lord returns, this final judgment.

What about people who die now? Their bodies go into the grave, their souls go into the place that God created for the unbelievers, hell; not the final hell, but still hell. The rich man died and was in hell. They will be resurrected to come to the tribunal in Revelation 20 and then sentenced to the final lake of fire. That all takes place when the Lord returns. And He’s coming; He’s coming in power and glory.

So that’s the message, that’s the warning. Make sure you warn others as well.

Father, again we come to You with hearts that are heavy. This is indeed a heavy, heavy weight to carry, to understand the horrors of eternity in a moment that never ends, a moment of pain and suffering. So, Lord, may we all examine our own hearts to be sure that we know You and You know us; and may we be energized to share the wondrous truth of the gospel, the good news that You will deliver us from the wrath to come through faith in Jesus Christ.

Bring sinners to Yourself today. Open the heart and the mind of those who have not believed, those who are accumulating wrath against the day of wrath. May they flee to You for the grace that is there, to receive forgiveness and deliverance, and rescue. Save them for Your glory we pray. Amen.

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