

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
November 10, 2013**

“Last Judgment”

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10

God’s Court in Session

- 1. Justice will be served**
- 2. Relief will be given**

Hymns: 234 – 206 – 337

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 –

³ *We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.* ⁴ *Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.* 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.* ⁶ *God 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.* ⁸ *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.* ⁹ *They 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.*

Have you ever been in court? If you have, you have probably witnessed a serious scene that you will not forget. Two lawyers are positioned on opposite sides who want to win their case. In between is a defendant who must stand up to the charges that have been brought against him. The court stenographer is poised

and ready to record all the proceedings. And up on the platform in front is the judge. The judge is not there to put up with any nonsense. He holds a position of authority that will not be questioned. You must rise when he enters the room and you must be quiet unless he gives you permission to speak. Court is a serious matter.

The scene in our reading for today describes a serious matter like this. The focus of our service this Sunday, as we are in the season of the Church Year called “**End Times,**” is “The Last Judgment.” Our reading today is from the book of 2 Thessalonians, which will serve well in giving us thoughts on this. Both 1 & 2 Thessalonians have sections where the Apostle Paul had to teach the Thessalonians about the end times of the world, due to some misunderstandings and fears that they had. So today, let’s see “**God’s Court in Session!**” We will learn two things about what will happen in this court, the highest court that exists.

1. Justice will be served

Our reading says: “*We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.* ⁴ *Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.* 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.* ⁶ *God 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.* ⁸ *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.* ⁹ *They 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.”*

To understand the strong words that Paul writes, we need to know what had happened at this church long ago when he had come to town and founded it. Acts 17 contains this account. Paul had come to Thessalonica, located in what now is northern Greece. For three Sabbath Days (Saturdays) he had discussed with the members of the synagogue there that Christ was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the OT promises of God to send a Savior. The reaction was mixed, to say the least. Some of the synagogue members there believed Paul's message from God and started the Christian congregation in Thessalonica. Most rejected his message, and reacted violently. They went downtown, we hear, and formed a mob that then went to the house where the small group was gathered. They dragged out the new leaders of this Christian church and brought them to the court in Thessalonica. They shouted and accused these men of causing trouble and defying Caesar by saying Jesus is a King. There was great turmoil. Finally, the Christian leaders were forced to post bail and were released.

Paul left town rather quickly to avoid causing them more trouble. We don't know what persecutions followed, since we're not told. But he soon followed up his visit with the two letters we have today, 1 & 2 Thessalonians. I believe we can be certain that trouble and persecution continued for the Christian church there.

Therefore, Paul takes the opportunity to tell them about the end times of the world and God's court. **One of the first points he makes is that the return of Christ is certain, and justice will be served.** How will it happen? *"This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."*

- *"Revealed"* – The Greek word for being revealed is "apocalypse." It is the same word for the title of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, meaning that book is the apocalypse (revealing) of Jesus Christ also.
- *"Blazing fire"* and *"powerful angels"* – We have details about his coming! The blazing fire and powerful angels are consistent with

other places that God acts in Scripture. Perhaps you remember that when God exacted judgment on Adam and Eve and expelled them from the Garden of Eden, the entrance was guarded by cherubim (angels) and a flaming sword. You might also remember that when it was Elijah's time for his OT ministry to be over and for God to take him miraculously to heaven, a flaming chariot and flaming horses appeared as he went to heaven in a whirlwind. Jesus tells us that the angels will serve as "harvesters" on the Last Day as they separate the unbelievers from the believers.

God's court will certainly be convened.

We also hear about the serious justice that will be meted out in God's court. The words that are written here in the original language are very strong:

- God will pay back trouble – You probably have read many Bible verses that tell you not to be "paying others back" for evil that is done to you. One reason this is proper is not because they won't be paid back, but because God will pay them back, a sobering thought.
- God will punish those who don't know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus – this is a little stronger in the Greek. Literally, it uses a word for "complete vengeance." Complete revenge will be exacted for two groups, those who have not acknowledged God as the Creator and Ruler of all, and also those who have knowingly rejected his Word and his ways, another sobering thought.
- They will pay the penalty – the word here is the same as that of a sentence that a court gave.
- Everlasting destruction – Hell is a punishment that will not end.
- Shut out from the presence of the Lord – Literally, "shut out from his face." This is the exact opposite of the OT blessing that Aaron pronounced on the people: *"The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."* The opposite would happen to those

troublers who had opposed Paul's message about Jesus Christ!

Justice will be served in God's court!

As we consider these sobering thoughts today, it would be good for us to ask ourselves a couple questions. First, will this really happen? If you think that is a silly, simplistic question after reading these verses today, consider that many Christian churches in our modern times have rejected the idea that God will judge unbelievers unfavorably and send them away from his presence to hell forever. Some will say that "God is love," and that a God of love certainly would never do such a thing. Others who don't regard the Bible as God's inspired Word but merely a human book will tell you that the human writers are offering their opinions that were influenced by the times they lived in.

The dean of one of the seminaries of the largest Lutheran synod in our country wrote this in his book *"Invitation to Faith"*: "The church has generally spoken too dogmatically about who is going to hell or who is going to heaven. The importance of these terms is their recognition that we are responsible for our lives, and that God is sovereign in his judgment of us. But our destiny remains a mystery which Christian faith awaits with expectation." In other words, we don't really know what's going to happen in the judgment.

How different this is from the clear testimony that Paul gives us in these verses!

Another question that we should ask ourselves is about our attitude when we suffer for the faith. Are you harassed for your beliefs? Do you get heat for your Christian faith? Are you suffering repercussions or unpleasantness because of your Christian convictions? If so, the temptation might be for you to pay back others with hateful words or vengeful actions. God encourages us here to be patient. **It is not ours to retaliate, for when the time comes for God's court to be**

convened, justice will be served in his perfect and fair way.

2. Relief will be given

Our reading has another perspective that we will learn from this morning. It also speaks of the other side of the coin and gives us assurances about the favorable judgment that God will also give when his court is convened.

What does it say about the relief that will be given? *"You will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.* You will be considered worthy of living in the kingdom of God forever on that day. How? And why? After all, consider the evidence against you in God's court. Have you seen how "justice" is portrayed in our country's symbolism? It is portrayed by a lady who is standing, holding a scale in one hand for the two judgments that can be given and a sword in the other hand. A striking feature of her appearance is that she is blindfolded. The sense behind that is that Lady Justice shows no favoritism due to her impartiality. That's not quite the picture of an all-knowing God, is it? When it comes to your record of the past, his blazing eyes are not covered, but he knows all and has seen all that you have done. He is completely aware of your sins. He knows perfectly the wrongs that you have done. He knows your complete record. If God were fair to you, what would you be receiving from the One who sees all? We must admit that our verdict in God's court should be, "Guilty as charged!" and the sentence should be. "Away from me, you evildoer!"

Yet here Paul tells us that we will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God. Why? What is the difference? Paul says, *"This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."* Through faith in the same message that Paul preached in Thessalonica centuries ago, we will receive salvation. Through the Christ who fulfilled God's plan of salvation, we are declared not guilty. For Jesus came to live the perfect life of good works that we have not lived, and to do it in our place. He came to die on a cross to pay

for our sins when we could not acquit ourselves. He came to suffer the abandonment of the face of his heavenly Father. He cried out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" on the cross as he suffered the full punishment of hell that we deserved. He won our forgiveness and salvation by his suffering, death, and resurrection. **Therefore, you will be counted worthy!**

We also hear, "(He will) *give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.*" This refers to the afflictions that had come to them due to their faith. There is an interesting picture in the original word for "relief." It's an archery word. The concept is that their life now has the tension in it that an archer has as he has his bow drawn and is waiting to shoot. Could anyone hold that position forever? If you've ever shot arrows, you know that this is an uncomfortable position. The word for "relief" pictures the archer who has relaxed his bow. What a relief it is not to be holding that position anymore! The tension is gone. Relief has come. Such is the picture of what the Lord Jesus Christ will bring us when he comes to grant us relief in his court and relief from the sinful world's influences around us.

Finally, Paul tells us that "*on the day he comes (he will) be glorified in his holy people and... marveled at among all those who have believed.*" We will be glorified with him! As Paul also wrote to the Philippians, "*Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his heavenly body.*" We will share his glory as his people! And we will marvel at him. The book of Revelation begins "*Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.*" When the full revelation of Jesus Christ comes, we will be awestruck and floored by the majesty of his presence!

As we consider these marvelous thoughts from 2 Thessalonians today, we should ask the question, "Do you want it?" That may seem like a strange question at first, but think about it. Are there days where your goals have become different? I've found that in many people, even

Christians, goals for life can change into becoming comfortable here in this life, that staying here forever is what's first and foremost on our minds. We can be tempted to center our plans on wishing we could live forever on this earth and even make our plans in that light, perhaps even thinking that if God would call us from this life or Jesus would return that some regrets would be felt because our minds had become so earthly-minded. Are you tempted in that way? If so, listen to Paul's words this morning and rejoice that God's court will soon be in session!

As we close our look at God's court, realize that we have answered a mysterious question that many people ask. Many today ask in the light of Judgment Day, "Is God love? Or is he just?" In God's Word we see the clear answer to this question:

1. Justice will be served

2. Relief will be given

As we look ahead to the great and dreadful day that God's court will be convened, may the promises that we have in our Savior Jesus give us comfort and faith. May God preserve us in that faith until the day we meet him face to face. And may we anticipate with joy the day when our Savior will return to deliver us safely to our heavenly home! Amen.