

Believers are Worthy of the Kingdom of God

Just before Jesus died on the cross, the disciples asked Him what would be the signs of His return, His second coming. Jesus answered their question by giving them a series of signs that would occur before His second coming. Jesus' answer is given to us in Matthew chapters 24 and 25. In Matthew 24:4-8 He said,

See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will mislead many. You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Matthew 24:4-8 (NASB)

Birth Pangs. Then Jesus listed some more important signs such as: an escalation in wars, famines, and earthquakes, and that has been occurring even in our lifetime. He called them the beginning of "birth pangs." Then He described more serious signs of the end times,

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. Matthew 24:9-14 (NASB)

SIGNS OF THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST. Now what signs did Jesus give the disciples in this passage? What types of things did He say would occur before His second coming? He said that individuals would claim to be the Christ, and already that has happened down through history. He said wars would increase and that has occurred over the centuries. Then He encouraged the disciples and us to not be frightened because those things do not signal the end of the age, for He said, "That is not yet the end."

Here Jesus said Christians will suffer persecution. We will be killed because we follow Christ. When He said that many people will fall away from the faith, He referred to an opposition against Christ by the world and to a smaller number of people who would become believers. In addition, when persecution increases, many tares or false Christians will leave the church and the real Christians will become obvious. 1 Timothy 4:1 says,



But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away

from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons . . . 1 Timothy 4:1 (NASB)

Later in our study, we will learn from 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that a massive apostasy will occur in the end times. That is, the world will reject Christ at an unprecedented level. Jesus also said that family members and friends will betray each other. Incredible hatred of Christians will increase. Believers will have to be careful who they trust. False prophets or false teachers will arise. Crime will increase in our communities and people will stop loving one another. The world will be characterized by hate and self-contentedness. 2 Timothy 3:1-2 says,

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money . . . 2 Timothy 3:1-2 (NASB)

This is already occurring in our world, including how we worship in our churches. There has been an explosion of false teaching and self-centered worship. Many of the new worship songs are about self; just read the lyrics! Then Jesus told them the end of the world would come when the gospel had been preached throughout the entire world. That is already occurring! The Bible has been translated into most languages, but I think the most important fact is that the Internet is already taking the gospel to every part of the world.

Last Half of the Tribulation. Then beginning in Matthew 24:15, Jesus described an important event that will occur in the middle of the tribulation. Jesus refers to the Abomination of Desolation that is described in Daniel 9:27.

Therefore, when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Matthew 24:15-16 (NASB)

When Jesus said this, He affirmed the prophecy of the book of Daniel and revealed that Daniel 9 refers to an event in our future—in the end times. Daniel 9:27 prophesizes that the tribulation is a seven year period of time. In the middle or after 3.5 years into the tribulation, the Abomination of Desolation

will occur in the holy place in the temple. When Jesus said the holy place, He was referring to the holy of holies. This means the temple must exist in Jerusalem by the middle of the tribulation. In order for the temple to exist, then Jerusalem must exist. If Jerusalem must exist, then the nation of Israel must exist for this prophecy to be fulfilled. Now we need to remember that for almost two thousand years, the nation of Israel had not existed since the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. But on May 14th, 1948, the nation of Israel was re-born after World War II. When that happened, Jesus' prophecy and the prophecy of Daniel 9:27 came true. Other Old Testament prophecies that refer to Israel returning to the land began to be partially fulfilled. This means that God has allowed us to see this very important sign which reveals the tribulation is very close. How close, we do not know. It could be tonight, tomorrow, or still many years away. But it is much closer than any other generation before us has been allowed to witness. The rebirth of the nation of Israel is tremendously significant.

Then Jesus continued describing events that would occur before His coming. He referred to the great tribulation in Matthew 24:17-28.

Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. So, if they say to you, 'Behold, He is in the wilderness,' do not go out, or, 'Behold, He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Matthew 24:17-28 (NASB)

Then in verses 29-30, He described His second coming!

But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.
Matthew 24:29-30 (NASB)

Next in verse 31, He described the judgment of unbelievers after the universe is destroyed.

And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. Matthew 24:31 (NASB)

Then in Matthew 24:34-36 Jesus told the disciples that only God the Father knew when the end would come. In verses 38-41 He gave the disciples more signs about the end times when He said,

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so, will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Matthew 24:38-41 (NASB)

When He said that people would be eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage in the end times, it is a picture of a world given to pleasure. The world will be given to eating, drinking and “marrying”! In Luke 17:28-30, Jesus added this description of what had happened at Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus’ point is that this will describe what will occur in the end times. He said, the world will be given to eating, drinking, selling, planting and building. Now there is nothing wrong with any of those things by themselves, but Jesus’ point is that the

world will be given to these things. Jesus’ reference to Sodom is also significant since Sodom was the center of homosexual sin. Then God added fireworks to their party when He sent down fire and brimstone on their party. Our world wants a non-stop party, and anyone who gets in the way of their fun will be persecuted. We are seeing that today, too! Therefore, Christians are going to be persecuted. It is already happening at an unprecedented level, increasing all the time.

RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH. Now I read this long passage of Scripture in Matthew 24 so that we have understanding that in our lifetime, Jesus’ prophetic signs are now occurring! We are witnesses to the most significant events in human history, second only to the events in the tribulation and the second coming of Christ. As we continue to move closer to the second coming of Jesus, we are going to see an increase in human suffering and an even greater increase in the persecution of Christians. At some point the rapture of the church will occur. It will occur unexpectedly—like a thief in the night. Then the Antichrist will appear, and the seven-year period of tribulation will begin when peace is announced in the middle East. Now we do not know if President Trump’s efforts to establish peace in the Middle East is the same peace treaty mentioned in Daniel, but it could be. We will talk more about this in our future studies.

INTRODUCTION TO 2 THESSALONIANS. This brings us to our new study, which is in the letter of 2 Thessalonians. This book was written to encourage the Christians in the city of Thessalonica who were being persecuted. The persecution was so bad that they thought they had missed the rapture and were in the tribulation that Jesus had discussed with the twelve disciples. In their day, the nation of Israel still existed. The city of Jerusalem and the temple still existed. The date of the letter of 2 Thessalonians is about A.D. 51-52. Jerusalem and the temple was not destroyed until almost twenty years later in A.D. 70. Therefore, the Holy Spirit had 2 Thessalonians written to help these Christians have a more accurate understanding of the end times. This means that as we study this book, we are going to have a better understanding of what is happening in our lifetime and will happen in our future. I think it is significant that the persecution of these Christians in Thessalonica was so bad that they thought they had missed the rapture! Since we know

the rapture will occur just before the tribulation, and Paul is going to tell them that the rapture had not yet occurred, this becomes an example for us of Christians being severely persecuted before their rapture. In fact, some of our fellow believers are already being killed in other countries today for being followers of Christ. It is wise to know the biblical signs of the end times so that we can understand what is happening.

The Author. The first verse of 2 Thessalonians introduces us to the author of this letter or book and to whom it was written.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:1 (NASB)

First, we are told that Paul was the author of the book and this fact is reinforced by 2 Thessalonians 3:17 which says,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. 2 Thessalonians 3:17 (NASB)

This tells us that Paul wrote this letter by hand himself. Why did he do that? Apparently, someone was teaching these Christians false doctrine by saying that they had missed the rapture. It will become obvious they had great fear and were very anxious. This reveals that Paul was very concerned that these believers understood the truth about the future. Therefore, he wrote this letter himself in order to assure them that what they were reading was from him.

Silvanus and Timothy. Then Paul includes Silvanus and Timothy in his greeting to the church. Now the question is: where were these three men when Paul wrote the letter? The answer is found in the book of Acts. The first place for us to visit is Acts 17:13-14. In that passage we are told these three men were involved in the establishment of the church in Thessalonica. This occurred during Paul's second missionary trip. We are also told that when Paul's life was threatened, the Thessalonians escorted Paul out of the city and onto the city of Athens. Then later Silvanus, also known as Silas, and Timothy met Paul in the city of Corinth. Therefore, it is most likely these three men were in the city of Corinth since 2 Corinthi-

ans 1:19 reveals that they then met in that city. That is where Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. The person, Silas, only appears in the book of Acts. Silas is his Aramaic name and Silvanus is his Roman name.

The Church In Thessalonica. Verse 1 also tells us that the letter was written to the believers in the city of Thessalonica which was located on the coast of Macedonia. Then in verse 2, Paul said,

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:2 (NASB)

When he said, "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" in verse 1, and "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" in verse 2, he revealed that those involved in this church were Christians. He said they were "in" God and "in" the Lord Jesus Christ. The Greek text gives us some very important information here that is missed in our English Bibles. There is no definite article in the Greek before "God our Father" and before "Lord Jesus Christ" in both verse 1 and 2. This tells us that Jesus Christ is "on a par"¹ or of the same importance as God the Father. That is, Jesus was not less than or more than the Father. They were of the same importance. Once again, we learn that Jesus was not a lesser being. Therefore, Paul is saying that he knows these are true believers since they are in God the Father and in Jesus Christ.

THANKING GOD FOR YOU. Then Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians when He said,

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:3 (NASB)

The Greek word for "ought" refers to a deep obligation. Paul's point is that he, Silvanus and Timothy were deeply obligated to thank God for the believers in Thessalonica. Why did Paul say this? Because while they were studying Scripture and being obedient, God was causing them to grow in the faith and love.

1. Robertson, A. T. Word Pictures in the New Testament (Luke 10:41). Broadman Press. 1933. vol. , p. 41.

Philippians 2:12-13 is a great summary,

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB)

The passage reminds us that both we and God the Holy Spirit work together to cause us to become more holy like Jesus Christ. Holiness includes faith and love.

This is also a great reminder for us that we need to be thankful for each other. We know that God urges us to rejoice always in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 and to give thanks in everything in Ephesians 5:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:18. This is an important reminder for us. How often it is that we fail to say, "Thank you, Father." Even worse we fail to value one another and miss the fact that the Father loves every fellow believer. Jesus suffered and died for all of them. They are part of the body of Christ. Paul's thanks for them is especially significant since we are going to discover that these believers needed to be motivated to persevere as believers in the middle of persecution. These believers were confused about doctrine. Their doctrine needed to be corrected and some of them were refusing to work and wanted other believers to provide for them. They were looking for a welfare system, but Paul will teach them that socialism is not God's design. Yet in spite of these errors, Paul thanks God for them. This a great example for us! Can I ask, "Are you thankful for every believer you know? Is there someone you want to avoid?"

True Faith Grows and False Faith Is Destroyed. When Paul says their faith had greatly increased, the Greek word that he used for "greatly increased" literally means "to increase exceedingly." It is a strong word. Their faith had increased exceedingly while being persecuted. We will learn they were being persecuted in the next verse. This gives us our first important principle that persecution will either cause your faith to increase or eventually will destroy your faith. John MacArthur states,

Persecution destroys false faith.²

This principle is revealed in the Sower of the Seed parable in the second soil, in Matthew 13:20-21. In this passage Jesus is explaining the meaning of seed scattered on rocky soil.

The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. Matthew 13:20-21 (NASB)

Now notice that this person hears the Word of God and is at first happy about what he has heard. But later this person falls away when affliction and persecution come. Now why will he or she fall away from the faith? Jesus tells us at the beginning of verse 21: they did not have a firm root. They were only temporary. They were never a true Christian. I had a man tell me one time that he did not like the term "true Christians." But Scripture is clear. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is actually a Christian! Eventually, persecution will cause some to fall away or turn apostate. Wealth and pleasure will also cause some to fall away. They leave the church and stop following Jesus because they were never real. The true believers did not fall away under persecution. They continued.

Remember that on one occasion Satan wanted to sift Peter like wheat. Do you remember what Jesus told Peter that He did for him? Jesus said that He had prayed Peter's faith would not fail. Then afterward Peter was to strengthen others. This reveals that God wants our faith to be tested. When we successfully pass the test, our faith either grows or eventually fails. We discovered in our study titled, "How To Walk By Faith," that the signs of little faith are worry, fear, doubt, and anxiety. We also learned that faith grows as we remember God's faithfulness, as we obey Him, confess our sins, and spend time studying the Bible. So, we can say the principle like this, "True Faith Grows and False Faith Is Destroyed."

Love Grows or Is Destroyed By Sin. Then Paul said their love for one another grows greater. The Greek has the idea that their love is increased considerably. Again, we have another characteristic of a true Christian. Only true Christians truly love people. Matthew 24:12 reminds us that love grows cold

2. John MacArthur. 1 & 2 Thessalonians. The MacArthur Commentary. Moody

Press. 2002. P. 226.

due to sin. That is, sin kills love.

EXULTING IN THE BELIEVERS. Then Paul told the Thesalonians in the next verse that all three of them were telling the other churches about this church. Here is verse 4,

... therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. 2 Thessalonians 1:4 (NASB)

What was he telling other churches? Paul said that the believers in this church were persevering in their faith while being persecuted. These believers remained faithful to Christ even when suffering for Christ. We will learn in the following verses that their suffering and persecution was so bad that these believers thought they had missed the rapture and were already in the tribulation. This gives us a second principle. True Christians will remain faithful even when being persecuted. But non-Christians will leave.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE FATHER REVEALED. Now Paul is going to encourage them that they did not miss the rapture. Then he will discuss the timing of the rapture and the tribulation in chapter two. That will be helpful, but right now, he is trying to comfort them by causing them to think about God the Father. In verse 5 Paul says,

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. 2 Thessalonians 1:5 (NASB)

The Greek word Paul uses for "plain indication" is *endeigma*. It literally means "proof." That is, Paul says the suffering and persecution of these Christians proves God is righteous. Verses 4-5 reveal the first way that God the Father proves Himself righteous. He causes us to suffer and to be persecuted. Those who are real Christians will remain faithful to Him and to Christ until the bitter end, if necessary. Their perseverance reveals who is worthy of the kingdom of God. So when God the Father saves them, He cannot be criticized for saving people who are not real Christians because they remained faithful to Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 10:37-39,

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. Matthew 10:37-39 (NASB)

This passage also reveals that those who are worthy will remain faithful to Christ even to the point of giving up their life.

1 Peter 4:17-19 tells us that God uses suffering to purge the church of tares or non-Christians. When God does this to a church, Christians will suffer in the purifying process. When a person is willing to give up their life for Christ, that is encouraging. But when a Christian actually suffers and even dies for Christ, that is proof they are a Christian who is worthy to go to heaven. Let me add quickly, a Christian's willingness to suffer and even die for Christ does not earn them salvation, but true Christians will be willing to die for Christ.

CONCLUSION. Verse 5 is the end of our study. We have discovered the first way that God the Father is proven righteous. In our next study, we will discover the second way in which God is proven to be righteous.

Now we should be comforted that our God is proven righteous. It has revealed that we are worthy of eternal life. Why? Because it proves we are Christians who truly believe in Jesus and as a result have been transformed. We are real Christians. You might be surprised that I said we should be comforted that God the Father is proven to be righteous when we are suffering. The reason I said that is because our God should be the most important person and cause in our life.

We can also be comforted that we will not experience the horrible suffering of the seven-year tribulation, because Revelation 3:10 reveals that God will keep His worthy ones from the seven-year tribulation by rapturing Christians before the tribulation starts. Here is the passage.

Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Revelation 3:10 (NASB)

Here we are told that Christians will be kept from the hour

of testing. That is, the worldwide tribulation. This is a promise from God the Father to His worthy ones. We will learn more about that in the coming weeks.