

³ We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, ^[a] and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another 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 ⁷ and 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 glory of his might ¹⁰ on 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.

An Indicator

There is an odd invention that's been equipped in cars for years. It's on the steering column so it's easy to miss and you have to use your left hand to move this lever up or down in order to activate it. When activated the controls lights at the front and rear of your car which indicate which direction you wish to turn. It's a modern marvel which is rarely used and if so it's by accident as someone drives down the freeway mile after mile leaving you uncertain if they actually want to change lanes or not.

So what does this have to do with our lesson? It's an indicator of intention and as we head off toward the end of the church year we look at the end times and God begins to indicate his intention to exit and bring justice.

It's as if God is driving us home, where all on a big bus, and the children are fighting in the back. The warnings have already gone out, "Don't make me pull this thing over." But, life goes on and we wonder when? We've been on the freeway for 50 miles now and the blinker is still on. When will God come? When will God bring justice? Why hasn't he done anything?

The Thessalonians were struggling under severe persecution quite possibly asking the same questions and yet the apostle Paul assures them, "God is just." The lights are on these persecutions and your perseverance under them are an indicator of God's just judgment. Paul encourages them with an indicator.

That exit couldn't come soon enough. They were a congregation that was birthed under persecution and grew in spite of suffering. Paul came to Thessalonica and explained that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:3) he persuaded a number of Jews but others became jealous. They formed a mob, started a riot in the city, and dragged Jason (a citizen who housed Paul and Silas) before the city officials and made him promising that another riot would not start. Paul and Silas were forced to leave. They moved on, 50 miles off the beaten path to Berea but the Jews followed and stirred up another riot.

These jealous Jews just won't stop. They did everything in their power to stomp out Christianity. There was no end to what they would do. In fact some say that the first mass crucifixions were in Thessalonica. The Christians there suffered. Paul speaks of two types of persecution "diogmos" describes a religious persecution. The other "thlipsis," describes hostile actions. Not only was this fledgling congregation shunned by families for their new faith, they were insulted, beaten, and put to death. The Thessalonians endure the constant pressure, maybe even questioning, "Where are you God? When will you bring justice? When will we find relief?"

Paul writes, *"This is an indication, evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you are counted worthy of the kingdom of God. God is just to repay those being hostile to you with hostility."* – There is a purpose behind the wait. It's evidence of God's righteous judgment. Their condemnation is deserved. This persecution and their endurance under it are an indicator of God's justice as well as an indicator that they are counted worthy of the kingdom of God. That exit couldn't come soon enough.

The same kind of people who saw Paul and Silas as troublemakers when they first came to Thessalonica are the same type who saw Martin Luther as a troublemaker when he nailed 95 theses to the door of the church. The Lutheran church was born under persecution and grew in spite of hostility. Luther didn't want to leave the church he was thrown out of it. The name Lutheran is not because we honor Luther but rather a derogatory term invented to brand Christians as heretics so Catholics could kill them.

Even today Christianity is still under pressure – some have family that won't have anything to do with them. Others face something more academic, "You believe that! How stupid are you?" We haven't experienced much physical

hostility but that doesn't mean we won't or that others haven't. How do we handle it? Often trouble is seen as an indication that God is angry. Our culture glorifies success and teaches that if you are successful then you're good with God. It's easy to praise God when life is problem free but when trouble comes it's tempting to question him, "Why? Where are you when I need you? Why don't you do something?"

Then God through the Apostle Paul says, "Okay, I'll do something." *"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you... this will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord."* Suddenly I'm not so sure I want God's justice. That's the way we often work. We complain that God isn't doing anything but then when says, "Ok, I'll do something," We're not so sure we want it.

That's because when dad pulls the car over you know that justice will be served and since I was usually caught up in the mess – I was in for it too. God is just. No one will get away with anything. There will be no valid excuse such as I didn't know. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey God. Since the creation of the world God's power and his divinity have been clearly seen. There is no-one who with a valid excuse. God has made it plain both through creation and his word what he expects. God's justice is a scary thing. So when a sinner like me questions God, "When Lord?" When will you do something?"

God has done something about it. He did not and does not overlook sin and just forget about it. He has to do something because he is just. He sent his son who took his seat next to us and lived a perfect life. He was perfectly obedient. Lived a perfect life but then stepped in and took the blame for all. It's not that God the Father was such an angry vengeful God that he had to kill someone for sins but he volunteered the one he loved most, his son Jesus, who willingly took our place.

Not only has God forgiven sin but he has counted these Thessalonians worthy. It's not because they've remained faithful that they are worthy but that God saw them through them all. It's another signal that God is with them, that nothing can snatch them out of his hand. Nothing in all creation can separate us from him. The only reason he holds onto them because of his son. Paul doesn't pray that they be removed but rather for strength to endure.

The Thessalonians were never promised a life free from danger – instead Jesus told us, *“A servant isn’t above his master. “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you (john 15:20).* Paul assures them that in God’s plan of justice, sufferings are temporary. Justice will prevail and God himself is the one who will bring justice. When will this happen? *“It will happen when God 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.”* And this includes you as you hear God’s Word.

God has done something about injustice, persecution, and affliction. So when he turns around on Judgment Day you don’t have to worry about it. You’ve been forgiven for calling God unjust and complaining about the evidence that you are a Christian. You’re forgiven and you’re counted worthy, not because of your suffering but rather because of Christ. This is evidence that you are part of God’s kingdom.

Hang in there, hold onto God’s promise. The evidence is all around. It’s more than a blinking light at the front and rear of a car. It’s a beacon of hope directing us back to the cross, where God gives us the strength to endure whatever may come. Suffering is never fun. You will never enjoy it but it does signal the end. It does signal relief.

You know how to use the indicator. You know how to use the means of grace. Make use of them. If the world persecutes you for your faith may it drive you ever back to Jesus, back to his word and sacrament. Make use of the means of grace during your time of grace. Life won’t always be fun. But where we are going is relief. Next week is Saint’s Triumphant Sunday – we know where they’ve gone – the signal points us home. You may be asking, “Are we there yet?” wondering when will this trip ever end. Paul writes, the indicator is on, until then glorify God, marvel at his presence among us in Word and Sacrament. Pray, be positive, and encourage one another in Christ. Amen.