

Justification and the Judgment of Jehovah

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering--

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels

⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

¹¹ 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,

¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Simul Justus et Peccator

HOW CAN A SINNER BE deemed righteous? This is **the great pressing question** of the salvation, at least if you know yourself and God even slightly. If God is holy and we are not, if God dwells in unapproachable light and we are darkness, how can anyone ever hope to stand upright before him on the Day of Judgment?

Perhaps only a little less pressing is the question that so many people ask themselves in bad times, "**Has God abandoned me in my suffering?**" Suffering can cause many Christians great doubt that they are favored by God, all the more when modern day Job's counselors tell them that suffering is the opposite of what God has ordained for those who, if they are Christians, should be having their best life now.

David is a good example of the **second question**. David suffered. A lot. In many psalms he openly questions God in

his suffering. But he always returns to hope. Psalm 31 begins, “In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!” (Ps 31:1). David needed deliverance from something terrible. His adversaries were relentlessly attacking him because of his trust in God, and it was causing his very life force to slowly drain away. So he asks for deliverance. Deliverance from a righteous God.

The Protestant history of my **first question** may very well begin here, in this “**your righteousness**” phrase, that is the righteousness of God. Martin Luther struggled greatly over it, even as he did its NT companion, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:17). R. C. Sproul summarizes Luther on this:

What does this mean, that there’s this righteousness that is by faith, and from faith to faith? What does it mean that the righteous shall live by faith?” ... the lights came on for Luther. And he began to understand that what Paul was speaking of here was a righteousness that God in His grace was making available to those who would receive it passively,

not those who would achieve it actively, but that would receive it by faith, and by which a person could be reconciled to a holy and righteous God.¹

Luther puzzled long and hard over something he did not understand about this phrase, “the righteousness of God.” It has to do with Greek words *dikaios/dikaioné* (righteous/righteousness) and the way the Latin Vulgate translated them as *justificare/justitia*. For a thousand years, the Latin translation was the one essentially used by Fathers of the church. The word *justificare* comes from two words: *justus* meaning justice or righteousness and the verb *facere* meaning “to make.” Thus, *justificare* means to make righteous. Thus, justification came to mean the means whereby God makes people righteous.

Luther’s problem is that he was too introspective. He knew his heart better than most, and it was desperately wicked. He knew that he was most certainly not righteous. But he also believed quite strongly in God. He was a Christian. He could not make sense of the problem that Alister McGrath puts in three simple points:

¹ R. C. Sproul, “Justification by Faith Alone: Martin Luther and Romans 1:17,” *Ligonier Ministries* (Oct 25, 2017), <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/justification-faith-alone-martin-luther-and-romans-117/>.

1. God is righteous.
2. Humanity is sinful.
3. God justifies humanity.²

God hadn't made him righteous; he hadn't justified him. So he started to look at the Greek term, which had long been neglected, even though that is the original language of the NT. What he discovered was that *dikaios* did not mean to “make” righteous, but to “count” as righteous or to “declare” righteous. It is a legal term, a courtroom term, just like its OT counterpart *saddiq*.³ And so, as Sproul paraphrases him, Luther said, “Woa, you mean the righteousness by which I will be saved is not mine?” It is what he called an alien righteousness, a righteousness that belongs to someone else, that originates outside of us, which is credited or declared to a person legally because of Christ's righteousness.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

³ I will pass by the whole fascinating discussion of the added layer of the Hebrew. The best discussion of this complicated matter is possibly McGrath, *ibid.*, 6-21. Also, I will point out that while many of us often say that this is “the gospel,” it is better in my opinion to say that this is the subjective gospel, as opposed to the objective gospel, which the declaration simply of who Christ is. The subjective is how the objective is applied; it is not a different gospel, for the subjective is all part of who Christ is and what he came to do.

This, he discovered, is the gospel.⁴ It is how the great problem of a righteous God justifying sinners occurs, thereby creating this strange person who is simultaneously justified and sinner (*Simul Justus et Peccator*).

2 Thessalonians

This may seem like a rather strange way to begin the letter of 2 Thessalonians, especially when you consider that the word “justify” or “justification” never appears a single time in *either* of these letters! Nevertheless, it isn’t the word that matters most, but the **concept**. What we are going to see is that the concept is right here at the beginning of this letter. In fact, I will argue that it takes up the entire first chapter. What it has to say about this topic and the secondary topic of suffering which is intimately related to it is both profound and helpful, especially if you struggle with any aspect of the

⁴ The debate over justification continues to this day. In preparation for this sermon I read a paper from **N. T. Wright** called “New Perspectives on Paul,” Tenth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, *NTWrightPage*, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/new-perspectives-on-paul/>, in which he offers his own critique of Luther, but also defends sola scriptura while distancing himself from the radical wing of the New Perspective. I found it quite fascinating. I also looked at **J. V. Fesko**, “Augustine and His Realism,” excerpted from his *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine*, p. 10-14, <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/justificationfesko2.html>; **Arne Redse**, *‘Justification by Grace Alone’ Facing Confucian Self-Cultivation* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 81-85; and portions of **Brian Cummings**, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

salvation that God promises to those who have faith in his Son Jesus.

The structure is straightforward for a letter. The first two verses are the **prescript**. They are very similar to the prescript of 1 Thessalonians, the only difference being that our authors add a second “**God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” at the end after the “**grace to you and peace**” greeting.

1Th 1:1	2Th 1:1-2
Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.	Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Je- sus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

After this comes the **thanksgiving** portion of the letter. This takes up the rest of Ch. 1 and is all the farther we will go today. The **main body** of the letter continues on from **2:1-3:15**. It talks first about the **Second Coming** (the Parousia; 2:1-12), a theme raised several times in 1 Thessalonians and in our opening thanksgiving. There is a short transition (**2:13-3:5**), followed by the last portion which deals with the disorderly and basic instructions for the congregation (**3:6-**

15). The letter closes with a benediction, greeting, and second benediction (3:16-18).

The entire first chapter, including the prescript and thanksgiving are 12 verses. In the Greek they take up only three sentences (1-2, 3-10, 11-12).⁵ The theme of grace in/from/of/according to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ begins and ends the chapter. Faith is the first thing mentioned after the first of these and the last thing mentioned before the last of them, thereby leading some to see a kind of strange chiasm, which has vv. 5-10 as the center with staircase-like repetition of themes in the middle.

- A. Grace, in/from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1-2)
- B. Thanks God always for your faith (3-4)
 - C1. Righteous (*dikaios*) (5)
 - C2. Righteous (*dikaios*), trouble (*thlibo*) (6)
 - C3. Troubled (*thlibo*), Lord Jesus (7)
 - C4. Lord Jesus, glory (*doxa*) (8-9)
 - C5. Glorified (*endoxazomai*) (10)
- B¹. Pray always for you to complete your faith (11)
- A¹. Grace, of/according to God and the Lord Jesus Christ (12)

⁵ On this whole structure see Michael Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 210.

As we move into this passage, I hope to make it clear that nothing here is incidental or “filler.” Every word has purpose and that purpose helps to reinforce the main thoughts which are to **first** encourage the Thessalonian Christians in their faith, particularly by explaining all about a doctrine which elsewhere is called justification, and **second** to prepare the people for the main parts of the letter about the Day of the Lord and the warning associated with it.

Greetings

It begins with three names and a place: “**Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians...**” (**2Th 1:1**). These are obviously the same three men who wrote 1 Thessalonians and who earlier, as seen in Acts 17, originally went to this city to preach the gospel. Silvanus is Silas, the man who replaced Barnabas when he and Paul had a disagreement over Mark’s worthiness to go on missionary journeys with them.

The main thing to recall from their stay in Thessalonica is that they were only there **three weeks**, when the hard-core Rabbis of that city almost had them killed by a mob before they managed to sneak out in the night to flee to Berea.

With more trouble from these same men following them to Berea, Paul flees to Athens. Later, they would send Timothy back to the city. He then reported on how things were going and eventually was reunited with Paul in Corinth, from where he probably wrote these letters. Real men in real places writing to real Christians with real struggles. That's the nature of NT letters.



The letter's greeting now commences. “... in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Two of the three Persons of the Trinity are here, while the third—the Spirit—will appear in **2:13** as the one who sanctifies them. He can sanctify them (thereby being “in” them), because they are “in” the Father and the Son. That is, they belong to God, they are adopted into his family. They are in union with Christ. This

is their identity. They are a church in God, not in themselves. He owns them. They belong to him. He has bought them with the blood of Christ. They are not their own.

With all of the **identity confusion** going around these days, men thinking they are women, white people calling themselves black or Indian (of course, it must be “Native American”), Social Justice Warriors outside and inside of Christianity demanding that you identify with groups rather than individuals, and certainly not as “Christians” first, this **one simple word “in”** is a powerful corrective to the insanity. Your identity, no matter what your race, sex, color, particular entangling sins, no matter your history or your grandfather’s history, or anything else is not those things, but Christ. You are Christians. We have got to recover this biblical identity again for a world, for it is an anchor in a storm of cultural relativism that seeks to ground your identity in anything but Christ.

Here though it is the Father and Son. Why? It is through them that “**grace ... and peace**” come. As I said, there’s something here that you do not find in the first letter’s greeting. Up through the word “peace” (**vs. 2**), everything is identical between these two letters. But this one adds something that feels redundant. We’ve just seen that they

are “in” “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Now they add that grace and peace are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Why?

Grace is attached to the Father; peace to the Son. That is, the Father is the source of grace because he sent his Son to bring peace between God and men.⁶ In what follows, we will come back to this idea that grace and peace are things that have their source in God. It is very important to see this up front. It sets the stage. The Apostle does not simply assume that they know this, even though he has already written them another letter saying the exact same thing. He knows they know this. But he tells them again. Not only to remind them, but to in fact ground what he will say next.

Thanksgiving: Justification Without the Word

We move into the opening **thanksgiving**. “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right” (3). Giving thanks (*eucharisteō*) is the main verb. Praising God is the idea. “Thank you God for these people!” A secondary verb accompanies it: *opheilō*. The ESV and many others

⁶Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings,” in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Boston: Brill, 2010), 311.

translate it as “ought.” Ought is a fascinating word, and I suppose I ought to like it, but I don’t because of the connotations it has today. The Greek verb means “to owe” or be “indebted.” The KJV translated it as “We are bound to thank God always.” Technically, the way “ought” used to be used (almost exclusively), it meant the same thing. Webster’s famed 1828 dictionary has these four definitions (and only these) for this word:

1. To be held or bound in duty or moral obligation.
2. To be necessary; to behoove.
3. To be fit or expedient in a moral view.
4. As a participle, owed; been indebted to.

All of those are perfectly fine, making “ought” a good word ... **back then**. The problem is, while its first definition is still something like this (Webster’s today has “used to express obligation;” Google’s go-to is basically the same), its second is “advisability” (Webster) or “something that is probable” (Google), as in “you ought to take care of yourself” or “five minutes ought to be enough time.” This absolutely does not convey the meaning of the word. Paul isn’t saying “we really should pray for you, but we don’t.”

It is better to say something like duty-bound, not in the past, but in the present. As it is an active verb (as is thanksgiving), I like this translation best. “We have to keep thanking God for you always” (2Th 1:3 CJB). But why is this thanksgiving “right” or “appropriate” here? Now we start to get into the real meat of the letter.

In the first letter we learned that part of the reason was because these Christians actually became a mark of the good works that Paul was doing and a sign that their labor was not in vain. In other words, their very existence confirmed that God is faithful. “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy” (1Th 2:19-20).

Here it is stated “because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing” (2Th 1:3). Their faith was also a main reason for the thanksgiving in the first letter too. Now it is added that their faith is growing and their love is expanding. And this is body wide, not just a person here or there. (It is this kind of statement that makes me think this really was the second of the two letters, which scholars debate, since the letter is really only called “2” because it is shorter.)

This shows that God has been at work and is in fact continuing to do the very thing that was promised in the benediction of the first letter. “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1Th 5:23-24). He will and he is! There is nothing more encouraging than to see the church that you planted not only exist, but spiritual grow and thrive and mature. How much more than when you aren’t even able to be part of it because circumstances won’t let you?

Notice here the relationship between faith and love. Faith is what starts the Christian life. In other places we read, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God” (Rom 5:1). “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). Faith is that only instrument that God uses to justify a person. Justification by faith is that first moment of **conscious new birth** in the life of a Christian. It is through faith that God justifies. And it is justification that is the act of God declaring us not guilty or to put it another way, of declaring us righteous, imputing Christ’s righteousness to us, filling us with the Holy Spirit, and beginning to work in us.

This is where love comes in. We are not justified *by love*. Love is *the fruit* of justification, the fruit of the Spirit. It is what we do once we are justified, because we are justified. Christian's can't help it, because this is God's work in their life. A loveless person is an unjustified person. It is into this that James says, "You see that a person is justified by works and not faith alone" (James 2:24). What he means is, God necessarily produces love in their life. Christians do good works, and love is the summary of those works. As he says, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (2:8). And so love becomes the focus of his letter as it is expressed outwardly in the body of Christ.

This is the very same thing Paul is saying here. Your love is increasing for one another and it is every one of you. This is a sign of your faith, that it is growing abundantly. This is the reason for his thanksgiving. And it seems to me that it is a great *encouragement* to any body of Christians from that day to this who are growing in love that this demonstrates that truth faith is present, that God is working, and that God is therefore to be thanked. For there is nothing more precious in this world. Praise God that in this world this still

happens in a loveless world. It is absolute proof that he is real.

This also starts him into something more. In the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, the focus of their faith was really put on God's **electing love**. In this, it becomes God's **justifying power**. **Vs. 4** acts as a transition to this. "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."

It is transitional because, first, telling others about this kind of behavior and proof of God's power is the most natural thing in the world. So it makes sense to add this. These people are in a real sense their baby and they want to show the world (this is why the Apostle's often call their flocks "children"). The churches of Jesus Christ could use much more encouragement like this, to hear that there are churches that are steadfast and full of faith. So tell others if you believe you have this here. And tell us if you know of others that would encourage us too.

However true this is by itself, it is multiplied all the more when you add the **persecutions and afflictions** that they are enduring. The first letter exposed us to this. Obviously, those are not quieting down. They are not being allowed to

live quiet and peaceful lives by the people of that city. Rather, they are being relentlessly hounded and who knows what else: fined, brought to court, imprisoned, put to death?

In this light, let me tell you about **Pastor Wang Yi**, one of the leading writers, activists, and legal scholars in China, and pastor of the Chengdu Early Rain Reformed Church. Pastor Wang once met with George W. Bush to discuss religious freedom in China. Back on Oct 28, 2018 (so just three months ago), feeling the increasing pressure of the communist government crackdown on house churches, and knowing that they were soon coming after him, he preached a sermon called “Be Filled with the Holy Spirit.” In it he said,

I recently read a report in the *New York Times*. It was very good. It said that this country is waging a war against souls. Even though, in the list of problems facing this country, this war is not at the top. It is still the most important war because in this war, in Xinjiang, in Tibet, in Shanghai, in Beijing, in Chengdu, the rulers who are waging this war have chosen for themselves an enemy that can never be imprisoned, an enemy that can never be destroyed, an enemy that can never be subdued or controlled, namely the soul of man. Therefore, they are doomed to lose this war. They are doomed to fail.

When spiritual life and faith of Chinese people are oppressed, more and more of them will see in that very moment will seek, will examine the importance of faith and the soul. This is precisely because spiritual life is the essence of human life. Because faith is the one treasure that we are least able to lose. It is the most valuable treasure, in some sense the only treasure, that we sinners have.

So when this country comes to take away our wealth, may the Lord fill us with the Holy Spirit. And may the Lord help us to use our persecution to preach a “persecuted gospel” to Chinese society, to make them examine the value of their souls, to make them ask themselves in the midst of their pitiful and wretched lives ruled by despotism and money and power, where is your honor? Where is your dignity? Where is your freedom? Either your dignity is in Jesus or you have no dignity.

A man who lives in Chinese society today but doesn’t believe in Jesus is a man who lives without one shred of dignity. He is a man who has been stripped naked by the rulers, robbed of his cloak and tunic. He is an utterly pitiful man. But we are not pitiful. We pitiful people have been clothed with the righteous garments of Jesus Christ.⁷

⁷ This excerpt of his sermon can be found here, at least for now. Wang Yi, “Be Filled with the Holy Spirit,” Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church, <https://www.facebook.com/prayforearlyrain/videos/226850664912193/>. Yi’s “My Declaration: The Faith of Disobedience,” (Dec 24, 2018) is a great read and can be found here. <https://chinachange.org/2018/12/24/my-declaration-the-faith-of-disobedience/>.

Just five weeks after preaching this sermon, on December 9, 2018, he and over 100 other members of this 700 plus member [house-church](#) were [arrested](#) by the Chinese authorities who then banned any reporting of the crackdown. As far as I can tell, he is still being “detained” by the Chinese government.⁸ According to *Open Doors International*, the number of persecuted Christians in the world rose 13.9% last year, which they say is a 30 million person increase from the previous year. Women are especially being targeted, simply for their faith in Christ.⁹ Seeing Christians undergo these kinds of sufferings for the sake of the gospel, and then not forsaking that gospel, is very *encouraging*. And it is one of the things Paul was boasting about to the other churches of Greece and Asia Minor.

I give you this portion of his sermon because I think in a rather remarkable way, he is focusing in on exactly what our letters has and will do now, thus embodying the very spirit of 2 Thessalonians 1. He talked about how [faith](#) is really the great treasure that we have. But he ended saying that we

⁸ The story of his arrest and background of the church and what they are doing as of late 2018 can be found here. “The Crackdown on Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church: A Backgrounder,” *China Change* (Dec 21, 2018), <https://chinachange.org/2018/12/21/the-crackdown-on-chengdu-early-rain-covenant-church-a-backgrounder/>

⁹ [Ng Jing Yng](#), “Persecution of Christians Worldwide up by 30 Million More People”: Open Doors International,” *Salt & Light* (Jan 17, 2019), <http://saltandlight.sg/news/persecution-of-christians-up-by-30-million-more-people-open-doors-international/>.

have been clothed in the righteous robes of Jesus Christ. This is justification language through and through. Listen in this light to where Paul takes his opening thoughts.

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering” (2Th 1:5). One scholar writes of this that “the righteous judgment of God” is the center of an apocalyptic scene (6-10) that revolves completely around justification.¹⁰ How does this work?

When I first read through the passage and thought about this phrase “the righteous judgment of God,” I confess my thoughts went to their sufferings and therefore something like Job, where God had decreed to let Job suffer. I attached in my mind “the righteous judgment of God” to “for which you are also suffering.” Thus, the phrase meant something like God’s righteous judgment is that you should suffer. In fact, I had a completely different title and direction for the sermon because of it. Then I realized that while their suffering *is related* to the point of the righteous judgment, they are not actually the recipients of God’s judgment here, at least

¹⁰ Paul A. Rainbow, “Justification According to Paul’s Thessalonian Correspondence,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.2 (2009): 267 [249–274]. <https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/bbr19b04.pdf>.

not yet, and not in the sense of suffering. Rather, that dubious honor belongs to their enemies who are persecuting them! This is why you have to read things in context.

He goes on to say, “since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you...” (6). The word “just” here is the same word for “righteous” (judgment) in the previous verse. It is the word *dikaios*. Listen to how it is related to justification in the following verse: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous (n: *dikaios*) before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (v: *dikaioō*)” (Rom 2:13). This is our first hint that we have justification in view in this righteous judgment.

Let’s think of what God is going to do here. To the great relief and thanksgiving of these Christians, he will repay those who are afflicting them, essentially, with an *eye for an eye* (the *lex talionis*). God will repay with affliction those who afflict you. Affliction for affliction, eye for eye. What they pay out, they will receive in return—from God! This is first and foremost the “righteous judgment of God” in vs. 5. Justice is fair. There couldn’t be anything more just than this for God to do with them. In fact, as McGrath points out, this word *dikaios* meant entirely a just, legal punishment in secular Greek. In other words, this is the perfect word to use with a

bunch of Greek speaking Thessalonians. God is going to “justify” those wicked people, by giving them exactly what they deserve.¹¹

Curiously, this is the same point that caused **Martin Luther** to become so agitated. He realized that he was himself a sinner and that if God were to give him his just dessert, he would have to go to hell. Here we are seeing how “justify” means punishment, even though originally the Hebrew word meant to declare righteous. When you add to this that the Latin word further complicated things, changing the legal term of rendering a verdict to an ontological term of “making righteous,” he knew he was still a sinner and for many months he was in great despair. Until he figured out the gospel and how it is that God is not *making* people righteous (yet, not fully at least), but *declaring* them righteous; not declaring them guilty when they are, but declaring them *not guilty* even though they are. This single idea rooted around the words we are now discussing, changed the entire course of Europe and the world. It turned everything upside down.

¹¹ It was only when the Jews translated the LXX that this word took on a new meaning, mostly because they didn’t have a better one to use, a word that would fully capture the salvific and legally *positive* sense of *sdq*, which never meant to punish, but only to vindicate or acquit or declare to be in the right. McGrath, 19-20.

Because that's what the gospel does, especially when men actually believe it.

I believe this is one of the reasons why it is important for you to see justification in our passage here. It is precisely because it doesn't use the term yet uses the idea that you can be helped to see the gospel here in some ways more clearly than in other places. Here's what I mean.

After God promises to justify the wicked in their wickedness, he goes on, “and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” (7-10). While the majority of this long Greek sentence is still about the punishment of those who wickedly persecute Christians, it begins with **comfort** for those being persecuted. God will “**grant them relief**,” and not only them, also the Apostles who are in the same boat as well.

Basically, all of this comes down to [the future Judgment of God](#) at the Second Coming (*Parousia*, vs. [10](#)), and we will look at this next time. Today, my focus is really on helping you see justification here. The granting of relief is half the good news and it is taken up in the further understanding of what will happen to those who are presently persecuting the Christians, who do not know God, and who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ. There's a lot here, but I want to skip today to the last two verses as we wrap up.

“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, so that the Name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” ([11-12](#)). It is this clause, “that our God may deem you worthy of his call” that scholars say bears directly on justification.¹²

“[Deem worthy](#)” is judicial language. Indeed, one calls it the linguistic equivalent of to “justify.” God is deeming some unworthy and therefore judging them, consigning them to hell. He is deeming others worthy in another judgment, transferring them to heaven on that Great Day.

¹² This and what follows is from Rainbow, 267-28.

But how can a sinner be deemed worthy of anything? It tells you that **this worth is all related to God's call**. Not to their inherent goodness, but to God's call. As it says in **Romans 9:11**, "not by works but by him *who calls*." It is the effectual calling of God that becomes the game-changer. Listen to the other parallels of vs. 11 in the Thessalonian letters.

The most recent one is vs. 5, "That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God." This is related via the word "worthy" (make you worthy of his calling, **vs. 11**). In other words, to be considered worthy of the kingdom comes because of his calling. In 1 Thessalonians 2:12 it said God "calls you into his own kingdom and glory." And in the next chapter it will say, "God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved ... he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (**2Th 2:13-14**).

Thessalonian Parallels of "make you worthy of his calling" (i.e justification)			
2Th 1:11	1Th 2:12	2Th 1:5	2Th 2:13-14
"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."	"We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory ."	" That you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God ."	"But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved , through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ ."

Let's think about the calling of God for a moment. What does it do when God effectually calls someone effectually? Think of Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave or Ezekiel speaking to the dry bones. What happens? **They come to life**. The effectual call of God brings people to life!

Now, in classic Reformed thought, the effectual call and justification by faith usually are thought to happen **simultaneously**. They often speak of only a logical ordering, where the call comes logically prior to faith and justification, not temporally prior. I'm fine with that, though I have wondered for years if it isn't possible that God calls someone, brings them to life, and then later they come to faith. I liken this to a human being conceived and then nine months later born.¹³ As this phrase deemed worthy of they calling seems to separate justification from the calling, perhaps this makes more sense.

Clearly, the call leads to justification, as Paul says in Romans, those whom God **foreknew** he also **predestined** ... those he predestined he also **called**, those he called he also

¹³ This seems to be **N. T. Wright's** position in the paper cited above, though he does not use this language. See the section "4. Ordo Salutis."

justified... (Rom 8:29-30). In our chapter, the legal vindication seems to be the one spoken about at the end on Judgment Day. But that's just really the same eschatological event separated only by time. That's the good news of justification by faith alone. It means God is going to bring us to heaven. Jesus will never lose any that the Father gives him. Thus, someone concludes of our passage, "To be deemed worthy of salvation, glory, and entry into God's kingdom, over against 'the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might' (2 Thess 1:9), in a forensic context highlighting God's righteous judgment, is indistinguishable in substance from being justified."

I want to finish by going back and pointing out all of the things Paul says that God does in these verses, and I think this will help you see why this is such a great passage of **thanksgiving**, and why justification—though the language itself is not used specifically—is right here at the forefront of the Apostle's mind as he begins this letter. I'll begin with the **faith** that is growing and the **love** that is increasing (3). Faith is the **gift of God**, so that no man can boast (Eph 2:8-9). Love is the **fruit of the Spirit** (Gal 5:22). In other words,

these are the present works of God in the lives of Christians. He is doing what he said he would do.

Second, we have seen that **God in righteousness is going to judge** the wicked, giving them their just desserts, while granting rest to those who love God whom they persecute. These are both, also, **works of God**. They will take place in the future.

Third, there is a prayer that God make **deem** them worthy of his **calling**. This calling is a past event that takes place when the gospel comes in the power of the Holy Spirit to people's lives, thereby saving them. This calling and future justification works itself out in the “**every work of faith by his power**” (11). In other words, it returns to love and things loves does at the beginning. Christians do good works. These works are the works done by faith. Faith is God's gift. And therefore, these works are wrought in us by his power. All of this surrounds the thinking of why God would justify sinners.

Finally, remember that it all begins with **grace** and **peace** (2). We have also seen that it ends with grace (12). Three times in **vv. 1, 2, and 12** Paul speaks specifically about this grace and peace coming from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Grace is the starting point** for understanding

how and why God would justify a sinner like me. It is really the only explanation at the end of the day. He shows grace. I do not deserve it.

Thus faith, from God. Love, from the Spirit. Righteous judgment, from God. The calling, from God. Being deemed worthy, everything you need from God. Grace, from God. Peace, from God. The whole thing is from God, and this teaches you much about your justification and why God would declare sinners righteous.

Because of these things, I can be thankful for me and I can be thankful for you. This God changes people's lives from the inside out by his working apart from us, based on his good pleasure and his effectual call. He changes people doomed by nature to hell. He causes things to be “as they should be,” as McGrath defines OT “righteousness (*saddiq*) equivalent to justification. It is all of God. To him be the glory. May his word give you comfort in times of distress. May it be a light to you when all other lights fail. May it be the truth that cuts through all lies and the power that breaks all bondage. May it strengthen your faith and increase your love for him and one another.

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