

# Our Just God Avenges Believers

**O**ur study is from 2 Thessalonians 1:6, 8-9. But before we begin to study this passage, I want to talk about the righteousness of God for two reasons. First, our study is about the righteousness of God. Second, so that you will understand why knowing God is righteous is so very important. Scripture has much to say about the righteousness of God. I will limit this introduction to three points. This was a comforting study for me and I hope it will be for you also!

**OUR HOLY GOD IS RIGHTEOUS.** The first point that we need to know about God is that He is righteous! Isaiah 5:16 helps us understand the definition or meaning of “righteous.” The verse says,

And the holy  
God will show  
Himself holy in  
righteousness.  
Isaiah 5:16  
(NASB)

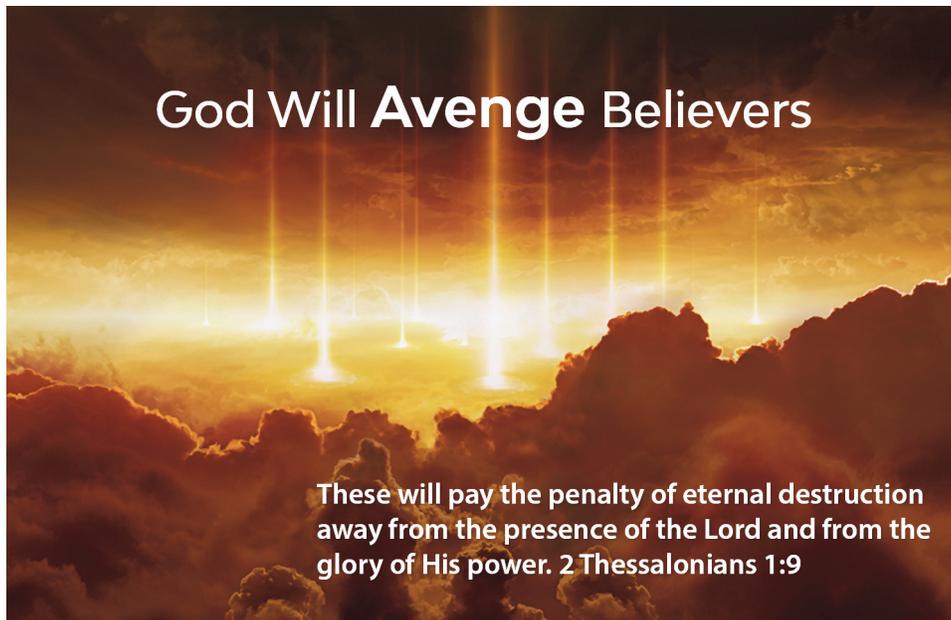
Notice that we are first told God is “holy.” Then we are told that as a result of His holiness, He is righteous. That is, holiness refers to a person’s character and righteousness refers to one’s behavior. In Matthew 15:18-19, Jesus said out of the heart comes evil deeds. That is, the behavior of a person reveals his or her heart. It reveals the character of the person or the inner person. I think we understand this concept. The reason we put criminals in prison is that their act of murder, robbery or whatever their crime reveals their true character. Our behavior reveals our character. So, the word “righteous” refers to behavior that is without sin.

Therefore, since God is holy, He will never be unrighteous. He is always righteous. Consequently, Scripture shouts loudly,

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous.  
Psalm 116:5 (NASB)

**OUR HOLY GOD JUDGES RIGHTEOUSLY.** This leads us to the second point that our holy God judges righteously. Because He is holy, He judges righteously. That is, all of His judgments are without sin. Listen to Psalm 7:9-11.

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the  
righteous;



For the righteous  
God tries the  
hearts and minds.  
My shield is with  
God,  
Who saves the  
upright in heart.  
God is a righteous  
judge,  
And a God who  
has indignation  
every day.  
Psalm 7:9-11  
(NASB)

Verse 11 teaches us an important truth. It tells us that God has indignation every day. The Hebrew word for indignation has the idea of “abhor” and “angry.” That is, when God sees evil, He is angry. He abhors it. It reminds me of 2 Peter 2:7-8 which says that Lot was tormented by the sins of the people in the city of Sodom. Lot lived in a wicked city and he was troubled by what he saw and heard. But when God judges, His judgments are not affected by emotion. His judgments are always objectively holy.

In Psalm 51, King David's prayer to God about his sin with Bathsheba is recorded and we are told he said this in verse 4,

Against You, You only, I have sinned  
And done what is evil in Your sight,  
So that You are justified when You speak  
And blameless when You judge.  
Psalm 51:4 (NASB)

Here David admits that he sinned against God. Then he said that God is blameless when He judges. God will act righteously when He punishes David. He is only righteous to punish us for committing evil deeds. So, the second point is that God always judges righteously.

**OUR HOLY GOD DOES EVERYTHING RIGHTEOUSLY.** The third point is that our holy God does everything righteously. Psalm 65:6-13 says that God does everything righteously. That includes sending us showers of rain, and providing us with produce, grain, and flocks for food. Acts 14:17 says God provides rains from heaven, and fruitful seasons to satisfy our needs. Then Matthew 5:45 reveals God does not play favorites,

... for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Matthew 5:45 (NASB)

The wonderful truth about God is that He always acts righteously, in sharp contrast to us.

Romans 3:21-25 declares that God has been proven to be righteous because He offers salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. If He had not provided salvation by faith in Jesus, He still would have been righteous. For then He would have just inflicted wrath on the unrighteous. But when God provided a way to save us by faith in Jesus, He revealed His righteousness is an even greater way. The most amazing part of God's plan is revealed in 2 Corinthians 5:21 where we are told,

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

You see, Jesus died for our sins so that believers can legally be declared to be as righteous as God. As a result, Christians can be positionally righteous, even though we are not in our practice.

So, we have been reminded of three truths. First, God is righteous. Second, He judges righteously. Third, God saves believers righteously and sends unbelievers to an eternal hell righteously. Everything He does is righteous.

**REVIEW OF LAST STUDY—2 THESSALONIANS 1:4-5.** This brings us to our study, 2 Thessalonians 1:6, 8-9, which is about the righteousness of God. We discovered in our last study that the proof or evidence that God is a righteous judge is revealed when He saves believers who have been persecuted and have persevered. The illustration of this principle is that the Thessalonian believers were persevering while being persecuted. Paul's point is that their perseverance reveals God is righteous when He judges them to be worthy of salvation.

Now why would God be proven to be righteous when He saves believers who persevere or continue in the faith? The answer is that Scripture teaches that true believers continue in the faith under affliction or persecution. But unbelievers who falsely claim to be Christians will not remain faithful. For example, 1 John 2:19 gives us a quick summary of this biblical truth. It says,

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. 1 John 2:19 (NASB)

Scripture teaches us that God uses affliction and persecution to accomplish two purposes. The first purpose of affliction and persecution is to prove the genuineness of a person's faith. That is the message of James 1:2-3.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. James 1:2-3 (NASB)

It is proof of the genuineness of one's faith, proof of real faith. Remember that Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches that true faith in

Christ is a gift from God. They meet the requirements for salvation.

The second purpose of affliction and persecution is to cause believers to become more like Christ—believers are becoming more perfect. That is stated in James 1:4.

*And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:4 (NASB)*

In summary, affliction and persecution proves to others and to the demonic realm that believers are worthy of the kingdom of God. Consequently, no one can legitimately accuse God of being a partial and unrighteous judge. Therefore, when a believer perseveres or continues in the faith, it reveals they are worthy of salvation and God is righteous when He brings them into His kingdom. That is the message of 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5.

**GOD AVENGES ALL BELIEVERS.** Then in verses 6, 8 and 9, the apostle Paul declares that God is righteous when He sends those unbelievers who afflict Christians to eternal destruction. These three verses can be outlined in three sections. The first section is in verse 6. It is titled “God Will Avenge All Believers.” The verse says,

*For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:6 (NASB)*

The word “for” refers us back to verse 5 which explains why God is proven to be righteous. The Greek word Paul uses for “repay” is *antapodidomai*. It is a compound word of “return” and “to give back.” It is a strong word meaning “to completely pay back.” Also, the Greek word for “affliction” is *thlipsis*. It has the sense of suffering. This means Paul is telling us that when God afflicts those who afflict believers, God proves He is righteous. So, our righteous God will completely pay back with great suffering those who have caused us to suffer.

This implies that God would not be righteous if He did not punish those who afflict or persecute us. Do you remember Romans 12:17-21? There God encourages us that He will repay those who cause us pain. The passage says,

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 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. “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:17-21 (NASB)*

God says He is our avenger! God says that we are not to return evil for evil. Do not try to hurt someone because they hurt you. God will do the hurting! But when He afflicts the evil person, He will do it righteously. He knows who is truly guilty. He knows how to make them really suffer. I think we are also familiar with Galatians 6:7 which says,

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. Galatians 6:7 (NASB)*

This includes the righteous and the unrighteous. Also, Proverbs 11:18 says,

*The wicked earns deceptive wages,  
But he who sows righteousness gets a true reward.  
Proverbs 11:18 (NASB)*

This verse is extremely revealing. Here we are told the wicked man thinks he will be able to enjoy the result of his evil deeds. Maybe he was successful in denying a Christian the freedom to pray in public, to worship in church, or to speak about Christ in public. Maybe an unrighteous judge puts some Christians into prison because they refuse to violate their consciences. The unrighteous man may rejoice and maybe he or she is even praised by the others, but his wage is deceptive. His sinful behavior will not bring him lasting happiness. Eventually, God will give him just reward—either here or in hell. Oh, I would not want to be the person who afflicts or persecutes Christians. I would not want his just reward.

Another important passage is Romans 2:5-6. Here God

warns,

**But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS . . . Romans 2:5-6 (NASB)**

God is not stupid. He is watching. God will give each man and woman time to repent and to stop! If they continue to repeatedly sin, God will eventually punish them in this life or they will suffer God's wrath in the next life forever. God will repay each person according to his or her deeds either in this life or in the next life.

This helps us understand that the message of 2 Thessalonians 1:6 is that God will punish those who afflict believers with great suffering. This is another proof that God is righteous. God would not be righteous if He did not make our persecutors suffer! So, we do not have to pay back evil with evil. If someone has afflicted you and you are a believer, then God is going to righteously and completely pay back the individual or individuals who caused you to suffer, either in this life or in the next!

**GOD PUNISHES ALL UNBELIEVERS.** Verse 8 now explains who God will afflict. The verse includes anyone and everyone who is not a believer. In some sense all unbelievers afflict believers.

**. . . dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 2 Thessalonians 1:8 (NASB)**

The Greek word for "retribution" is *ekdikesis*. The word is sometimes translated as "justice" and "vengeance." It has the idea of full and total punishment based upon what is just. This verse along with verse 6 reveals that God will justly avenge believers by afflicting total pain and suffering on those who afflict or persecute believers. God will completely and justly make those who afflict believers suffer to the fullest extent they deserve. God will do this justly because He is righteous.

You may remember in Genesis 18:25, we are told that Abra-

ham made this statement while he was praying to God.

**Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? Genesis 18:25 (NASB)**

This passage reveals that God will not treat the righteous and the wicked equally. He righteously judges. God's holiness demands that He will make the unrighteous suffer.

*Unbelievers Who Do Not Know God.* Next notice that 2 Thessalonians 1:8 says there are two groups of people who will experience God's vengeance.

The first group are those who do not know God. This group of unbelievers are those who do not have a personal relationship with God. Romans 1:18-21 helps us identify this group. The passage says that every person on this planet knows that God exists. Why? Because the creation is screaming that there is a Creator. Yet, men and women choose to reject the obvious. Romans 2:14-15 also tells us that God has written His moral law in our consciences. Yet again, sinful men and women reject the obvious. There is a God, but they reject Him. Therefore, this verse does not mean that people do not know God exists. This verse is saying unbelievers do not want to have a relationship with God. As a result, they will suffer God's vengeance to the fullest degree. What is worse, is that their judgment is all the more deserved in light of Jeremiah 29:13-14. The passage teaches that if any anyone will seek after God, God will let that person find Him. The point is most are not interested.

*Unbelievers Who Do Not Believe In Christ.* The second group of people are those "who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." In 1 John 3:23, people are commanded to believe in Jesus.

**This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 1 John 3:23 (NASB)**

Acts 17:30 also records another command to repent, that is to turn from our sin and turn to Christ.

So, 2 Thessalonians 1:8 identifies two types of unbelievers

who will experience God's vengeance. Both did not seek Him and both did not believe in Jesus Christ. Now some may think that is not fair. They say that many people have never heard the gospel. I would like to read a comment by Harry Ironside from his commentary on 2 Thessalonians. It answers this question. He writes,

People ask, "Is God going to judge the heathen? Is He going to send them to Hell for rejecting Jesus Christ when they never heard of Him?" The answer is no. He is not going to send them to Hell for rejecting Jesus Christ, but He is going to judge them for their sins.<sup>1</sup>

**GOD PUNISHES UNBELIEVERS FOREVER.** Verse 9 describes the punishment that all unbelievers will experience.

*These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (NASB)*

Since the Greek word for "penalty" has the sense of "just," we are told that every unbeliever will justly pay the penalty of eternal destruction. They earned the judgment they will receive! They sinned, they rejected God the Father and Jesus Christ, the only Savior and Lord. Therefore, our holy God, who judges righteously, will send them to eternal destruction.

Verse 9 says their punishment will include separation from the presence of God. Scripture teaches that hell or eternal destruction is a fiery place and is a place of intense pain. Revelation 20:10 describes this eternal destruction as a lake of fire and brimstone where people will be tormented forever and ever. Think of your oven turned up to the highest temperature and then expand your oven to the size of an enormous lake. That is like the future eternal home of unbelievers.

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus gives us a parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In that parable Jesus tells us there is a great chasm between heaven and hell. That is, part of the punishment will be that unbelievers will never know their Creator.

Finally, Matthew 25:30 adds that eternal punishment will

be a place of darkness and of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Mark 9:43-44 says it will be a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

This is God's plan for unbelievers, especially for unbelievers who afflict believers. We have previously learned that there will be degrees of suffering and torment in hell. A number of passages teach this truth. Two of them are Luke 12:47-48 and Luke 10:13. Unbelievers who afflict or persecute believers will experience the highest level of suffering.

**CONCLUSION.** So, how should a Christian respond to this message? The apostle Paul wrote this opening chapter to encourage the Thessalonian believers in the midst of their persecution. They were helpless to stop it. So, Paul told these believers that God would avenge the wrong inflicted by those who reject God the Father and Jesus as Savior and Lord. God will afflict these unbelievers with horrible pain according to the great evil they inflicted.

I am encouraged by this study and I hope you are. Our just God is our avenger!

1. H. A. Ironsides. 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Ironside Commentaries. Loizeaux. 1997. P. 65.