

Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!*John Newton (1725–1807)*

Day of judgment! Day of wonders!
 Hark! the trumpet's awful sound,
 louder than a thousand thunders,
 shakes the vast creation round.
 How the summons
 will the sinner's heart confound!

See the Judge, our nature wearing,
 clothed in majesty divine;
 you who long for his appearing
 then shall say, "This God is mine!"
 Gracious Savior,
 own me in that day as thine.

At his call the dead awaken,
 rise to life from earth and sea;
 all the pow'rs of nature, shaken
 by his looks, prepare to flee.
 Careless sinner,
 what will then become of thee?

But to those who have confessed,
 loved and served the Lord below,
 he will say, "Come near, ye blessed,
 see the kingdom I bestow;
 you forever
 shall my love and glory know."

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Tried With Fire: Vindication and Retribution***Kevin T. Bauder*

Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica with their backs still torn from their whipping in Philippi. In spite of their pain they made themselves bold to preach the gospel (1 Thess 2:2), so that some Jews and many Gentiles believed (Acts 17:1-4). Quickly, however, opponents of the gospel organized persecution (Acts 17:5-9). The new believers at Thessalonica smuggled Paul and Silas out of town at night, sending them on to Berea (Acts 17:10). The departure of these evangelists did not halt the opposition, though (1 Thess 2:14-15). Finally, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out how the young believers were holding up under persecution (1 Thess 3:1-5). Timothy delivered a glowing report (1 Thess 3:6-7), prompting Paul to send a letter of encouragement and instruction back to the church. Still the persecution and affliction endured (2 Thess 1:4), so Paul wrote a part of a second letter to help explain the sufferings of these faithful children of God (2 Thess 1:5-9).

This text is a little gem. It may be the most extended discourse in the Bible about why God allows faithful believers to suffer persecution. It implies that God permits persecution for three reasons.

The first reason is that faithfulness in persecution proves how genuine one's faith is (2 Thess 1:5). Perseverance is a manifestation of true saving faith and of loyalty to the kingdom for whose cause believers are persecuted. The point is not that persecution somehow merits salvation. Instead, sufferings illustrate that God's judgment of worthiness—which will be pronounced upon all believers at the *Bema*—is fully justified. God is not wrong to save people when, as a consequence of saving faith, He is able to turn them into such persevering saints. Indeed, the fact that God entrusts them with suffering is already evidence that He rightly judges them to be worthy (for Christ's sake) of spending eternity with Him.

The second reason that God permits persecution is to arouse a longing for "rest" or relief (2 Thess 1:7)—a longing which He fully intends to satisfy. One grows weary of being mocked, abused, harried, and tormented. When persecution ends, the relief can be intense. This relief is what believers will experience at the rapture, when they are forever freed from opposition.



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Paul does not simply focus to the rapture, however. He also points to Jesus' glorious descent to earth (2 Thess 1:7-8). Something happens at Jesus' coming to earth that does not happen at the rapture. While saints experience relief from persecution at the rapture, they must wait to receive vindication at the second coming. At His coming Jesus will judge those who have persecuted His people. He will deal out retribution to those who have rejected Him and harmed His saints. In that hour, the roles will be reversed, and those who have experienced persecution will exult in the destruction of their tormentors.

This is the third reason that God permits persecution. When He deals out retribution He will place His justice on full display. Those who have groaned under the machinations of the wicked will be satisfied that God never overlooked any of the evil that was done to them. Evildoers will be banished forever from the presence of Christ's glory as they are sent into everlasting destruction (2 Thess 1:8-9).

In these verses, Paul is clearly not trying to establish an eschatological timeline. He is viewing the coming of Christ and all its judgments as a single, complex event. He does not distinguish the rapture, the glorious coming of Christ to earth, or the final judgment at the great white throne. He wants to encourage persecuted believers, and the entire unfolding complex of Jesus rescuing His people and judging the wicked provides that encouragement.

Paul links events that will be fulfilled at different times. Church saints are liberated from persecution at the rapture. They are vindicated at the glorious second coming, which follows the rapture by seven years. God judges the wicked with eternal separation from His glory at the great white throne, which follows the second coming by a thousand years. Paul joins all of these together under the description, "When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day" (2 Thess 1:10). The expression "in that day" encompasses at least one thousand seven years.

One must not try to turn this passage into a proof text about the timing of eschatological events. That is neither its purpose nor its nature. Paul is offering encouragement, not prophetic chronology. Consequently, he offers a single eschatological snapshot taken with a wide-angle lens. That snapshot reveals that God has a purpose in allowing the persecution of His children. In fact, He has multiple purposes.

When we are persecuted, we need to remember that God has counted us worthy of a great honor. He is entrusting us with an opportunity to put His transforming grace on display. When we remain faithful under persecution, our perseverance matches up with the high position to which God has called us. Furthermore, God intends eventually to grant us both relief from persecution and vindication in the presence of our tormentors. Indeed, He

will use the everlasting condemnation of our persecutors as an object lesson to illustrate and exonerate His own justice. When we experience persecution, we are entering into a cosmic drama in which God wins—and we win with Him.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
