

Divine Fire and Justice in Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians

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A Difficult Text

What does this passage mean? It has implications for how we understand hell and the relational demeanor of God for eternity, towards unbelievers.

^{1:1} Paul and 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 the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ 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; 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction: RFK in Apartheid South Africa

While on a trip to Apartheid South Africa in 1966, Robert F. Kennedy, then a U.S. Senator, met with a group of white South African Christians. He asked them, "Suppose God is black?" They responded with stunned and stony silence.¹ What will hardened white supremacists do when confronted with a God who takes the form of the person they have come to hate?

That incident is a decent illustration of what the apostle Paul envisions in 2 Thessalonians 1:6 – 12. But some additional data points from elsewhere in the biblical material needs to be mentioned. We are human beings and human becomings, which is a theological anthropology that Paul does not have time to elaborate here, but does elsewhere (Eph.4:17 – 19; Rom.1:21 – 32) because it originates from the developmental vision of humanity illustrated by Genesis 2:4 – 4:26. Therefore, persecutors of the Thessalonian followers of Jesus are shaping their own human natures and desires to oppose Jesus. They are not simply accumulating demerits on a scoresheet in God's mind; they are accustoming themselves and shaping their own selves to reject Jesus. But they will come face to face with him on the turning point of history called "the day of judgment." As Paul says here in 2 Thessalonians, Jesus will cause them affliction, categorically, regardless of whether they have a choice to repent at that point or not. And Jesus' presence will be an affliction to, and judgment of, them for interconnected and inseparable reasons. Why?

First, Jesus will unveil the truth: Jesus will vindicate his people and demonstrate that the persecutors were in the wrong. Jesus will call for the persecutors to repent, which will humiliate all of them. Probably some will be infuriated while others, one might hope, will be deeply remorseful and repentant. Why won't everyone simply repent?

Because, second, Jesus will unveil love: Jesus' love demands participation and not just passive reception. Like a human parent demanding that a stubborn child love and respect his sibling. The persecutors have fashioned their own human nature in such a direction of self-love and my-group-only-love at the expense of others they reject –

¹ Senator Robert F. Kennedy, "Suppose God is Black," *Look Magazine*, August 23, 1966; <http://rfksafilm.org/html/media/magazines/look.php>

while Jesus embraces them – will mean that Jesus’ demand that they participate in his love for others they despise will be torment.

The Early Christian Understanding of the Divine Fire and Justice of God

Who understood this text, and multiple biblical texts, this way? The early Christians, who recognized these factors in their study of Scripture and their understanding of the character of God. Significantly, they did not say that God has two major attributes, love-mercy-grace on the one hand, and retributive justice-wrath-anger on the other. God’s nature is one of love, but how we experience His love depends on our choices, because our choices shape our natures.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – 202 AD), was bishop of Lyons from 177 – 202 AD. He was a student of Polycarp of Smyrna, who was a student of the apostle John. Irenaeus was the theologian who wrote the first substantial theological treatise following after the New Testament. I quote multiple passages from Irenaeus of Lyons to show the continuity of his thought in a diversity of expression. Irenaeus says that God is like a singular fragrance, which is received either as a savour of life or a savour of death.

“3. For the apostle does also say in the Second [Epistle] to the Corinthians: For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them which are saved, and in them which perish: to the one indeed the savour of death unto death, but to the other the savour of life unto life. [2 Corinthians 2:15 – 16] To whom, then, is there the savour of death unto death, unless to those who believe not neither are subject to the Word of God? And who are they that did even then give themselves over to death? Those men, doubtless, who do not believe, nor submit themselves to God.”²

The passage in Paul from which Irenaeus draws is straightforward. Paul himself said that the savour of Christ is one smell. It is sweet to the one and bitter to the other. The difference lies in the noses of those who smell the savour.

Continuing in this thought, Irenaeus immediately goes on to use another analogy. God is like the singular sun, and how we experience the sun depends on how we shape our own human nature through our own choices:

“1. But, say they, God hardened the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants. [Exodus 9:35] Those, then, who allege such difficulties, do not read in the Gospel that passage where the Lord replied to the disciples, when they asked Him, ‘Why do You speak unto them in parables?— Because it is given unto you to know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven; but to them I speak in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear, understanding they may not understand; in order that the prophecy of Isaiah regarding them may be fulfilled, saying, ‘Make the heart of this people gross and make their ears dull, and blind their eyes.’ But blessed are your eyes, which see the things that you see; and your ears, which hear what you hear.’ [Matthew 13:11-16; Isaiah 6:10] For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind. In accordance with this word, therefore, does the apostle say, in the Second [Epistle] to the Corinthians: ‘In whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ should shine [unto them].’ [2 Corinthians 4:4] And again, in that to the Romans: ‘And as they did not think fit to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up to a reprobate mind, to do those things that are not convenient.’ [Romans 1:28] Speaking of antichrist, too, he says clearly in the Second to the Thessalonians: ‘And for this cause God shall send them the working of error, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but consented to iniquity.’ [2 Thessalonians 2:11]”³

Irenaeus, like Paul before him, is comfortable naming multiple factors. Taken by itself, for example, the verse from 2 Corinthians 4:4 might make Satan seem like the determinative factor, coming prior to human decision. Or, taken by itself, the verse from 2 Thessalonians 2:11 might make God seem like the determinative factor. However,

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.28.3

³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1

Irenaeus cites these passages because of they both contain the insight that unbelievers hold to lies. Their unbelief comes first as a human decision; their self-delusion comes next. This is evident because in the contexts of Romans, 2 Corinthians, and 2 Thessalonians, Paul says as much.

In Romans, Paul says that “they did not think fit to have God in their knowledge,” a human choice to which God responds by letting them make this choice and believing lies to justify it: “God gave them up to a reprobate mind” (Rom.1:28). In fact, by that time in Romans, Paul has already narrated two such exchanges (Rom.1:24, 26). In 2 Corinthians, Paul is speaking of the veil of Moses and the resistance to Jesus that he finds in the Jewish communities of his day (2 Cor.3:12 – 16). The result of this resistance to Jesus is that they do not see the glory of God because their hearts are veiled by their own unbelief, and instead their minds are influenced by the lies of Satan (2 Cor.4:3 – 4). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul says that, “those who perish [do so] because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved,” and “for this cause God shall send them the working of error...” (2 Th.2:10 – 11). In every case, the prior, upstream cause is human decision.

Irenaeus’ point is therefore continuous with the apostle Paul. And Irenaeus’ analogy stands: God is like the sun in the sky, giving light to all, but the health or weakness of our eyes depends on us. In that sense, God grants sight and inflicts blindness. But it is only inflicted because some people have chosen to make their eyes sick and weak. God does not make arbitrary decisions.

In the next passage, which is substantial, Irenaeus reinforces the importance of human choice. Here, he is explicit that human beings are the “cause” of their own destiny.

“3. If, however, you will not believe in Him, and will flee from His hands, the *cause* of imperfection shall be in you who did not obey, but not in Him who called [you]. For He commissioned [messengers] to call people to the marriage, but they who did not obey Him deprived themselves of the royal supper. [Matthew 22:3, etc]. The skill of God, therefore, is not defective, for He has power of the stones to raise up children to Abraham; [Matthew 3:9] but the man who does not obtain it is the *cause* to himself of his own imperfection. Nor, [in like manner], does the light fail because of those who have blinded themselves; but while it remains the same as ever, those who are [thus] blinded are involved in darkness *through their own fault*. The light does never enslave any one by necessity; nor, again, does God exercise compulsion upon any one unwilling to accept the exercise of His skill. Those persons, therefore, who have apostatized from the light given by the Father, and transgressed the law of liberty, have done so *through their own fault*, since *they have been created free agents, and possessed of power over themselves*.

“4. But God, foreknowing all things, prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after the light of incorruption, and resort to it; but for *the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, as it were, blind themselves*, He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him. Submission to God is eternal rest, so that they who shun the light have a place worthy of their flight; and those who fly from eternal rest, have a habitation in accordance with their fleeing. Now, since all good things are with God, *they who by their own determination fly* from God, do defraud themselves of all good things; and having been [thus] defrauded of all good things with respect to God, they shall consequently fall under the just judgment of God. For those persons who shun rest shall justly incur punishment, and those who avoid the light shall justly dwell in darkness. For as in the case of this temporal light, *those who shun* it do deliver themselves over to darkness, so that they do themselves become the *cause* to themselves that they are destitute of light, and do inhabit darkness; and, as I have already observed, the light is not the *cause* of such an [unhappy] condition of existence to them; so *those who fly* from the eternal light of God, which contains in itself all good things, are themselves the *cause* to themselves of their inhabiting eternal darkness, destitute of all good things, having become to themselves the *cause* of [their consignment to] an abode of that nature.”⁴

Irenaeus’ language is technical and precise. He starts with definitions which are positive. As with the story of the marriage supper banquet, God called all and intends to nourish all and celebrate with all. However, those “who do not obtain it is the cause to himself of his own imperfection.” God intends to give light to all, and “it,” that is, God’s

⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.39.3 – 4

light, “remains the same as ever.” But “those who have blinded themselves... are involved in darkness through their own fault.”

Such a state of blindness and deprivation is “an appropriate punishment,” Irenaeus says, but not as if blindness and deprivation are extrinsic, arbitrary conditions of punishment that have nothing really to do with the human decisions themselves. No: blindness and deprivation are the ontological conditions that are intrinsically and definitionally bound up with turning away from light and nourishment. So of course it can be said that God prepares an abode, or habitation, for both the faithful and unfaithful. Human beings are ensouled bodies in eternity so they must be somewhere, physically. What is important here is causation: “those who shun” the light “deliver themselves over to darkness,” and “those who fly from God” become “destitute of all good things.” They are the one and only *cause* of their condition.

John Chrysostom (c.349 – 407 AD) was the archbishop of Constantinople from 397 – 407 AD. He is well known for being one of the greatest commentators on Scripture, preachers (“Chrysostom” means “golden-tongued”), and courageous ethicists who regularly challenged the wealthy and the nobility to care for the poor. He is honored by the Eastern Orthodox as one of the three “Holy Hierarchs.” This honor means that he, along with Basil of Caesarea (c.329 – 379 AD) and Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329 – 390 AD), played pivotal roles in the shaping of Christian theology.

John Chrysostom says the same thing as Irenaeus of Lyons, two centuries later. Hell is due to our disordered desires and pleasures in the face of God’s demand to be cleansed. Sin even affects our perceptions, where we become addicted to it and call God’s cure offered a torment:

“In order then that we also may extinguish all the furnace of disordered pleasure here, and so escape the hell that is there, let these each day be our counsels, our cares, and our practice, drawing towards us the favor of God, both by our full purpose concerning good works, and by our frequent prayers. For thus even those things which appear insupportable now, will be most easy, and light, and lovely. Because, so long as we are in our passions, we think virtue rugged and morose and arduous, vice desirable and most pleasing; but if we would stand off from these but a little, then both vice will appear abominable and unsightly, and virtue easy, mild, and much to be desired.”⁵

The archbishop of Constantinople sympathizes with the struggle of his audience because he, too, finds the Christian life challenging. Why is vice so tempting and attractive? Why is Christian virtue sometimes arduous? John Chrysostom wants “the furnace of disordered pleasure” to be extinguished, and godly desires to grow up in their place, in us. “Our counsels, our cares, and our practice... our full purpose concerning good works, and... our frequent prayers” might seem “insupportable now,” but in eternity “will be most easy, and light, and lovely.” Virtue and vice will have the opposite emotional and appetitive impacts on us as they do now. Now, virtue seems “rugged and morose and arduous,” while “vice desirable and most pleasing.” But then, our desires will be fully reoriented. The present hope is that our perspective can be informed by the eternal future if we saw in the correct way. If so, then we will not desire vice. We will desire virtue, and find it “easy, mild, and much to be desired.” Such can only be the case if the paradigm of human being – human becoming holds true, and if the transformation and healing of our desires is the uppermost consideration.

The other two Holy Hierarchs of the Eastern Orthodox Church honored with John Chrysostom also agree. Gregory of Nazianzen, who was so respected that he presided for a time over the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, relates Jesus’ atoning work to the purification of his human nature using the motif of fire. This is the essence of medical substitution:

“But, in the character of the Form of a Servant, He condescends to His fellow servants, nay, to His servants, and takes upon Him a strange form, bearing all me and mine in Himself, that in Himself He may exhaust the bad, as fire does wax, or as the sun does the mists of earth; and that I may partake of His nature by the blending. Thus He honours obedience by His action, and proves it experimentally by His Passion.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew’s Gospel*, Homily 16

For to possess the disposition is not enough, just as it would not be enough for us, unless we also proved it by our acts; for action is the proof of disposition.”⁶

Although the term “blending” would become controversial in a later generation because of the inconsistent uses to which various Christians put it, at this point, the term “blending” cannot be said to mean that the two natures of Christ – divine and human – become a third thing by being blurred into each other, as opposed to remaining distinct in principle. Here, “by the blending” means “by the uniting.” When Gregory says, “that I may partake of His nature,” he has in mind the *divine* nature of the Son. We can ascertain this because Gregory speaks of the pre-incarnate Son as the subject. That divine Son is the one who “condescends to His fellow servants”; he is the one who “takes upon Him a strange form,” which is the human nature. Gregory is apparently paraphrasing 2 Peter 1:4, which says that we have become “partakers of the divine nature.” That divine nature is made available to us via the humanity of Jesus, by the Spirit who connects us to Jesus.

Then Nazianzen says:

“For I know a cleansing fire which Christ came to send upon the earth, [Luke 12:49] and He Himself is anagogically called a Fire. This Fire takes away whatsoever is material and of evil habit; and this He desires to kindle with all speed, for He longs for speed in doing us good, since He gives us even coals of fire to help us. I know also a fire which is not cleansing, but avenging; either that fire of Sodom [Genesis 19:24] which He pours down on all sinners, mingled with brimstone and storms, or that which is prepared for the Devil and his Angels [Matthew 25:41] or that which proceeds from the face of the Lord, and shall burn up his enemies round about; and one even more fearful still than these, the unquenchable fire which is ranged with the worm that dies not but is eternal for the wicked. For all these belong to the destroying power; though some may prefer even in this place to take a more merciful view of this fire, worthily of Him That chastises.”⁷

Gregory attests perhaps to his friend Gregory of Nyssa who was a universalist and thus had a “more merciful view of this fire.” Gregory himself, though, while he can respect the universalist position, does not hold it. He says that his understanding of “the unquenchable fire” is that it “is eternal for the wicked.”

Nazianzen appears to lapse into rhetoric where he suggests that God has two different types of anagogical fire: “cleansing fire” on the one hand and “avenging” fire on the other. But based on the passage above it, where Gregory uses the analogies of fire softening wax and the sun dispelling the mists of the earth, I suggest that Gregory differentiates the two effects of the fire. There is a cleansing effect, and an avenging effect. And people will experience one or the other. But there is one fire. What causes the different experiences is a choice of the human beings concerned.

Basil of Caesarea says that we cannot separate fire from its two effects, enlightening and burning. This is his explanation of how God could have one attribute – purifying love – and yet have two different effects on people:

“And let no one suppose it to be a thing incredible that the brightness of the light is one thing, and the body which is its material vehicle is another. First, in all composite things, we distinguish substance susceptible of quality, and the quality which it receives. The nature of whiteness is one thing, another is that of the body which is whitened; thus the natures differ which we have just seen reunited by the power of the Creator. And do not tell me that it is impossible to separate them. Even I do not pretend to be able to separate light from the body of the sun; but I maintain that that which we separate in thought, may be separated in reality by the Creator of nature. You cannot, moreover, separate the brightness of fire from the virtue of burning which it possesses; but God, who wished to attract His servant by a wonderful sight, set a fire in the burning bush, which displayed all the brilliancy of flame while its devouring property was dormant. It is that which the Psalmist affirms in saying ‘The voice of the Lord divides the flames of fire.’ Thus, in the requital which awaits us after this life, a mysterious voice seems to tell us that the double

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration* 30, paragraph 6

⁷ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration* 40, paragraph 36

nature of fire will be divided; the just will enjoy its light, and the torment of its heat will be the torture of the wicked.”⁸

Basil modifies the analogy to some degree. He takes fire as having two properties. Fire gives light and fire burns. Basil obscures the theme of human being – human becoming to some degree. But the basic framework of one thing having two different effects remains. In the end, Basil says, God will apply the brightness of fire to the faithful, “the just [who] will enjoy its light.” And God will apply the burning heat of fire to the unfaithful.

What is God’s ‘Retribution’ or ‘Vengeance’ or ‘Justice’?

What is the nature of retribution or vengeance spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 1:6 and 8? From a formal, technical standpoint, restorative justice and retributive justice are similar in that there are consequences for sin in both frameworks. This is central to an understanding of God responding to human beings to hold us accountable for our actions. If we translate *ekdikēsin* using the English word “vengeance,” then the question we must ask is, “What is God avenging? And how?” If we translate *ekdikēsin* using the English word “retribution,” in the sense of “disciplinary response to sin,” then the question we must ask, “What is God demanding or doing in response to sin?”

Retributive justice and restorative justice differ in one major respect as they answer those questions. In retributive justice, formally defined, the offended party inflicts pain on the offender that is proportional to the pain or offense received. If God’s justice is thought to be retributive, then the idea of “merit” and “demerit” kicks in. Human nature may or may not be seen as developmental, as in a virtue ethics framework, and capable of growth in virtue and character. But the framework would be more transactional, and the reward for good behavior is less intrinsic to the good action done and more extrinsic as in a reward of some sort. In Lutheran/Calvinist thought, God is an infinite being who takes infinite offense at our sin, seeing each sinful act as an infinite demerit. Therefore, God punishes sin infinitely unless He “satisfies” His own justice. This understanding of divine justice forms the foundation of the atonement theory known as penal substitution.

By contrast, in restorative justice, the idea is that the offended party calls for the offender to undo the damage they have caused. If God’s justice is thought to be restorative, then He is equally offended by our sin, but specifically because we have damaged something He loves: ourselves. In addition, in the case of the persecutors of the Thessalonians mentioned in 1:6, Paul says, “it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you.” God’s response is to call the offending human beings to undo the damage they caused. Since sin is fundamentally self-harm – a damaging of human nature in a deepening way, as seen in Adam and Eve’s internalization of the desire and power to define good and evil from within themselves instead of leaving that with God, and as seen in Cain’s further damaging of himself when he killed his brother Abel and thereby became unable to cultivate the land – God called Israel to ‘circumcise’ the sinful, unclean aspect of themselves away by pressing His commandments more deeply into their humanity (Dt.10:16). Since we all fail to do that, He provides “circumcision of the heart” Himself (Dt.30:16; Jer.4:4; 17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.36:26 – 36; Ps.51:9 – 11; etc.) in and through Jesus. This understanding of divine justice undergirds the atonement theory that I call medical substitution.

Adonis Vidu notes that *the* – or *a* – retributive model of pagan (secular) justice had already been offered by the classical Greek pagan tradition. This is seen, for example, in the myth of Hesiod’s *Theogeny*, where Zeus punished Prometheus and men for giving and receiving fire, which made men capable of technological development, which annoyed Zeus. Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock so that an eagle could rip out his regenerating liver every day in retaliation for this betrayal. Then, to men, Zeus gave women (Pandora and her box) as a source of trouble, in retaliation for causing him trouble. The early Christians, however, refused to “contextualize” Christian faith into this principle of retributive, retaliatory justice. They maintained the vision of Hebraic restorative justice. Vidu notes, therefore:

“While some would like to trace the doctrine of penal substitution precisely as understood by Calvin all the way back to Athanasius, Irenaeus, or Augustine, this is usually done at the cost of grossly distorting their

⁸ Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, Homily 6.3

thought. Nobody in this period gives any thought to the necessity of God's prosecuting his retributive justice as a condition of his forgiveness."⁹

Three decades prior to Vidu's book, Alister E. McGrath, in his book *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, already explored this issue fairly thoroughly. N.T. Wright says that McGrath's work is "required reading for anyone who wants seriously to engage with" the language and dogmatic history of justification.¹⁰ McGrath points out that "retributive justice" strictly speaking (in Latin *iustitia distributive*, so called because the principle of merit-demerit is thought to govern the *distribution* of rewards for actions) does not capture the essence of the Hebrew law and the Sinai covenant:

"Although there are many instances where *sedaqa* can be regarded as corresponding to the concept of *iustitia distributiva*, which has come to dominate western thinking on the nature of justice (despite the rival claims of *iustitia commutativa*), there remains a significant number which cannot. A particularly significant illustration of this may be found in the Old Testament attitude to the poor, needy and destitute. As we have noted, *sedaqa* refers to the 'right order of affairs' which is violated, at least in part, by the very existence of such unfortunates. God's *sedaqa* is such that God must deliver them from their plight – and it is this aspect of the Hebrew concept of *sedaqa* which has proved so intractable to those who attempted to interpret it solely as *iustitia distributiva*."¹¹

McGrath believes that "retributive justice" should not serve as the background for Paul's and James' view of atonement or definition of "justification." Doing so, in his view, is a category mistake and a linguistic error as we translate Hebrew into Greek and Latin.

"Righteousness" in Old Testament usage – both in the Hebrew Masoretic and the Greek Septuagint – therefore refers, first and foremost, to the relational vision and order God intended as expressed by the covenant community. That vision and order, as the Torah makes clear, includes the relational work that must be done by someone who has been in the wrong, with the full awareness of all parties (e.g. Ex.21:18 – 19, 28 – 36; 22:1 – 14).¹² By analogy, when I accept my child's apology, I work with that child to undo the damage done, repair relationships, and build the character needed; I most certainly do not pretend that the offense never happened, a sensibility further undergirded by the Psalms, as in the Proverbs, that the Israelites personally develop and grow in the covenant: "Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in the way" (Ps.25:8; cf. Pss.25:4 – 22; 27:11; 86:11; etc.).

Entering into this same discussion, N.T. Wright therefore says:

"If you want to understand God's justice in an unjust world, says the prophet Isaiah, this is where you must look. God's justice is not simply a blind dispersing of rewards for the virtuous and punishments for the wicked, though plenty of those are to be found on the way. God's justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice, because the God to whom justice belongs is the Creator God who has yet to complete his original plan for creation and whose justice is designed not simply to restore balance to a world out of kilter but to bring glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility, that he made in the first place. And he remains implacably determined to complete this project through his image-bearing human creatures and, more specifically, through the family of Abraham."¹³

⁹ Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), p.1 – 2

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan, Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.79

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.11

¹² For an in-depth treatment of Exodus 21 as an example of restorative justice, the Hebrew law court and judge, and its implications for the doctrine of justification, see Exodus 21:1 – 36: God the Restorer and the Laws of Restoration, available here: www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-torah-exodus. For more resources on restorative vs. retributive justice in theology, see <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2015/09/09/interpreting-jesus-and-atonement-practical-issue-6-is-retributive-justice-the-highest-form-of-justice-does-atonement-theology-impact-our-framework-for-criminal-justice/> and the works listed there; see also <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/resources.questions.politics.right.criminaljustice.restorativecriminal.htm> for more books and articles

¹³ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p.64; cf. p.73

When Wright comments specifically on the Sinai covenant, he denies that it expresses the principle of retributive justice:

“According to some, God gave the law in order to terrify people with the prospect of judgment, so that they would run to the gospel for relief. That appears to make some sense, provided you approach the whole thing from the works-contract point of view. But this is not, however, the sense Paul had in mind.”¹⁴

In this case, the *dike*- root words translated “justice” or “vengeance” in 2 Thessalonians 1 are responses of God to unbelief and wickedness. But it is not motivated by a divine desire to inflict pain to compensate God for all the wickedness that He had to endure. Restorative justice is still the key concept in all these selections, especially because these words are formed by the root *dike*-, which is the root of *dikaio*syne and other words that are laden with theological meaning. The Hebrew word *sedeq* for righteousness and justice – which stands behind the Greek *dike*-root words – refer us to God’s restorative justice.

Yes, as Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1, God will vindicate His people and respond to those who persecute His people. He will avenge the suffering of His people. The fiery ordeal that will come upon the unbelievers will be motivated not by God’s desire to get even, but by God’s desire that the truth of Jesus be front and center, and consequently that the persecutors of Jesus-followers repent and become Jesus-followers themselves. God will demand that the unbelievers – especially the persecutors – renounce their unbelief, repudiate their hostility, and receive their healing in Jesus and the fellowship of the people of Jesus. God will also be avenging the vision of humanness which the unbelievers have damaged, even in themselves. Because they have believed a lie, though, the unbelievers will cling to their own damaged human nature as if that were the truth. The love of God in Christ will itself be torment.

Judgment Will Be in the Presence of Jesus: The Meaning of ‘apo prosopou’ in 1:9:

Now for some less significant, but still interesting, details. Will Jesus’ judgment be away from his presence? Or in his presence and because of his presence? We can compare various translations.

“Away From” the Presence/Face of the Lord?

- They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ESV)
- These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (NASB)
- They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NIV)
- They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power (NLT)
- These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NRSV)

“From” the Presence/Face of the Lord?

- Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (KJV)
- These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (NKJV)
- who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (AKJV)

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2016), p.275

- These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (KJ21)
- who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ASV)
- who shall incur the justice of eonian extermination from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of His strength (CLNT)
- They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from his glorious strength (CSB)
- who shall pay the penalty [of] everlasting destruction from [the] presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his might (DARBY)
- who shall be punished with eternal destruction by the presence of the Lord and by the glory of his power (JUB)
- They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his power (NTE)
- who will pay the penalty: eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (WEB)
- who shall suffer justice -- destruction age-during -- from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his strength (YLT)

Two translations based on the Latin Vulgate, which comes from an earlier translation from the Greek:

- Who shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction, from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (Douay-Rheims)
- The presence of the Lord, and the majesty of his power, will condemn them to eternal punishment (Ronald Knox)

So which is it? Does the “destruction” come from being away from the presence/face of the Lord? Or does the “destruction” come from the presence/face of the Lord? The difference this would make is in articulating the question of, “Who wants to be with whom for eternity? Who wants to avoid whom for eternity?”

Parallel Passage: Revelation 14:9 – 10

In Revelation 14:9 – 10, the presence, not the absence, of Jesus brings divine fire upon the unbelievers. This passage is important because the theological point is made without using the preposition “apo.”

“Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.’” (Revelation 14:9 – 10, NASB)

This scene, “in the presence of the Lamb,” seems to coordinate well with the appearances of God in the Old Testament where God appeared in fire: the fiery sword stationed outside the garden in Genesis 3:24; the fire of the burning bush in Exodus 3:2; the fire of the pillar that led Israel out of Egypt in Exodus 13:21 – 22; the fire on top of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:18 and 24:17; the fire expressed in the bronze altar of the sanctuary in Exodus 27:1 – 4; the fire of the lamp of the sanctuary in Exodus 27:20, which probably symbolized the burning bush; the fire of the burning coal of Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6:6 – 7; the fire of Malachi’s vision of God as a purifier of precious metals in Malachi 3:1 – 3; etc.

The purpose of divine fire in Paul’s correspondence with the Thessalonians can be ascertained by his description of the return of Jesus as a day dawning with sunlight (1 Th.5:4 – 5). Since the sun was understood to be a fire, the connection between sunlight and fire is implicit but immediate. Paul also describes the Holy Spirit as a fire when he tells them, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Th.5:19). The Holy Spirit is given by God to us for our purification and sanctification (1 Th.4:7 – 8), that as we abstain from every form of evil (1 Th.5:12 – 22), we would be desiring, and participating in, what God will do in us when Jesus returns: God will sanctify us completely, so that we would be

without blame (1 Th.5:23 – 24). This understanding of the apostle Paul would make him consistent with the prophets of the Old Testament in how they understood God to be a refining fire.¹⁵

The Understanding of the Early Church About the Phrase ‘apo prosopou’

It is very significant that the two major bishop-theologians from the early church period who comment on this passage directly show that they understand it as meaning “from the presence of Jesus.”¹⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons says:

“Inasmuch, then, as in both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed] when God takes vengeance, in the one case indeed typically, temporarily, and more moderately; but in the other, really, enduringly, and more rigidly: for the fire is eternal, and the wrath of God which shall be revealed from heaven from the face of our Lord [2 Thessalonians 1:9] (as David also says, But the face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth [Psalm 34:16])”¹⁷

John Chrysostom says:

“There are many men, who form good hopes not by abstaining from their sins, but by thinking that hell is not so terrible as it is said to be, but milder than what is threatened, and temporary, not eternal; and about this they philosophize much. But I could show from many reasons, and conclude from the very expressions concerning hell, that it is not only not milder, but much more terrible than is threatened. But I do not now intend to discourse concerning these things. For the fear even from bare words is sufficient, though we do not fully unfold their meaning. But that it is not temporary, hear Paul now saying, concerning those who know not God, and who do not believe in the Gospel, that “they shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction.” How then is that temporary which is everlasting? “From the face of the Lord,” he says. What is this? He here wishes to say how easily it might be. For since they were then much puffed up, there is no need, he says, of much trouble; it is enough that God comes and is seen, and all are involved in punishment and vengeance. His coming only to some indeed will be Light, but to others vengeance.”¹⁸

These early Christian leaders, thinkers, and preachers attest to teaching 2 Thessalonians 1:9 as “from the presence/face of Jesus.”

The Use of the Greek Word ‘apo’:

650 Total Occurrences

ἀπ’ — 126 Occurrences

ἀφ’ — 42 Occurrences

Original Word: ἀπό

Part of Speech: Preposition

Transliteration: apo

Phonetic Spelling: (apo’)

Short Definition: from, away from

Definition: from, away from.

For example: ‘in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord’ (Acts 3:19)

¹⁵ For further treatment of the theme of fire in each biblical book, see material that I have drawn together: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/goodness-god-fire>, in particular *Hell as the Love of God* for a summary of systematic theology, early church citations, and biblical exegesis.

¹⁶ For more discussion about the thought of early Christian leaders, see: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire, in particular *Hell as the Love of God* for a summary of systematic theology, early church citations, and biblical exegesis. For an exploration of their atonement theology, see: www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-ec

¹⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.28.1

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Thessalonians*, Homily 3

NASB Translation after (1), against (4), ago (2), alike* (1), among (2), away (3), away* (1), because (9), before* (1), belonged (1), deserting* (1), distance (1), from (602), hereafter* (1), initiative (1), left (1), off (1), once* (1), since (11), since* (3), some (1), way (1).

Because the vast majority of occurrences of “apo” means “from,” we are on fairly solid ground to coordinate Revelation 14:9 – 10 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9. The fire and destruction come “from” the presence of Jesus. It may be that some kind of physical separation happens, simply because of the fact that Jesus has a physical human body, and resurrects every human being into a physical human body as well, so where will those human beings go? What will they do? Regardless of the answers to those questions, if God’s goal is to make all creation filled with His glory and presence, and be “all in all” (1 Cor.15:28; Eph.1:23; Col.1:16; 3:11), then in some way, the very resurrection bodies each person will have must be an expression of the presence of the Son.

Appendix A

The Use of the Word ekdikēsin: 6 Total Occurrences

2 Thessalonians 1:8 N-AFS

GRK: φλογός διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν τοῖς μὴ

NAS: dealing out retribution to those

KJV: taking vengeance on them that know

INT: of flame awarding vengeance on those that not

Luke 18:7 N-AFS

GRK: ποιήσει τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν

NAS: bring about justice for His elect

KJV: not God avenge his own elect,

INT: shall execute the avenging of the elect

Luke 18:8 N-AFS

GRK: ποιήσει τὴν ἐκδίκησιν αὐτῶν ἐν

NAS: you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.

KJV: that he will avenge them speedily.

INT: he will execute the avenging of them in

Acts 7:24 N-AFS

GRK: καὶ ἐποίησεν ἐκδίκησιν τῷ καταπονουμένῳ

NAS: him and took vengeance for the oppressed

KJV: [him], and avenged him that was oppressed,

INT: and did vengeance for the [one] being oppressed

2 Corinthians 7:11 N-AFS

GRK: ζῆλον ἀλλὰ ἐκδίκησιν ἐν παντί

NAS: what avenging of wrong! In everything

KJV: yea, [what] revenge! In

INT: zeal but vengeance in every [way]

1 Peter 2:14 N-AFS

GRK: πεμπομένοις εἰς ἐκδίκησιν κακοποιῶν ἔπαινον

NAS: as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers

KJV: for the punishment of evildoers,

INT: sent for vengeance [on] evildoers praise

The Use of the Word ekdikēsis: 2 Total Occurrences

Romans 12:19 N-NFS

GRK: γὰρ Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω

NAS: [of God], for it is written, vengeance is mine,

KJV: it is written, Vengeance [is] mine;

INT: indeed To me vengeance I will repay

Hebrews 10:30 N-NFS

GRK: εἰπόντα Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω

NAS: Him who said, vengeance is mine,

KJV: him that hath said, Vengeance [belongeth] unto me,

INT: having said to me vengeance [belongs] I will repay

The Use of the Word ekdikēseos: 1 Occurrence

Luke 21:22 N-GFS

GRK: ὅτι ἡμέραι ἐκδικήσεως αὐταὶ εἰσιν

NAS: are days of vengeance, so that all things

KJV: the days of vengeance, that all things

INT: for days of avenging these are