



I THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13 ESV

17 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy. 1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, 3 that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4 For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. 6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— 7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. 9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? 11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

SERMON

How seriously do you take being physically present with other believers? In our day, unlike in the days of the apostle Paul, we can connect with one another by email or snail mail or by phone or by text or by zoom and any number of other means of communication. But not one of these can substitute being face to face with one another. God never intended us to lose the joy of a warm handshake or a hug or a smile or a slap on the back.

All of us felt the reality of this during the pandemic. It felt profoundly unnatural and even emotionally painful to be cut off from one another. It was bad enough not being able to gather on Sunday or in a small group. But even when we returned from isolation, we were told not to shake hands but give each other a fist bump. We were told to maintain six feet of social distance from one another. And perhaps worst of all, we were encouraged to wear those horrible masks. Now, for those of you who had no choice but to wear a mask because of potentially life-threatening underlying conditions, please don't be offended by that comment.

The reason for this multitude of uncomfortable and painful regulations is that it was in *violation of an impulse that the Holy Spirit has put in every Christian*. It is the impulse or the desire or the necessity of *close personal community and interaction with one another*. Loneliness and isolation will destroy the human soul and deprive us of the joy that God wants us to experience in our interaction with one another.

I know this to be true from what Paul says in this paragraph in 1 Thessalonians 2-3. Paul's vivid language confirms this. Let's note several things he says here in 2:17-20.

First, Paul describes his separation from the Thessalonians as being "torn away" from them. That's a very poor rendering of the one Greek verb found here. It literally means *to make an orphan* of someone. The pain and distress we felt in being forcibly separated from you was the same distress and pain that a parent feels at the loss of a child. Or perhaps it is more the experience of that child who has never known his parents at all. This child is all alone, with no one to whom they can turn and no place to call home. That is how I felt, says Paul, when we were chased out of Thessalonica.

Earlier Paul described his affection and love for these people by comparing himself to a mother gently and lovingly nursing her infant child. Then, in 2:11, he likened himself to a father whose love for his children is deep and passionate. And now, adding to this piling up of terms of affection, he says that the pain he feels in being separated from them is the pain of an orphan, a helpless child with no home, no mother, no father.

Is that how you feel when you are far removed from other Christians? It should be.

Second, observe that Paul says this happened only for a “short time” (most likely no more than 8 months). It wasn't like he was cut off from them and they from him for years and years. And although it was only for a “short time” that didn't diminish or soften the blow on his heart. To be away from you even for a day or a week or a month is almost more than I can bear, says Paul.

Third, look at how he describes the separation. Although I wasn't with you in person, says Paul, our hearts were still intimately connected. This season of separation never entailed a distance between my heart and yours. Don't you love that? Does that not tell you something not just about the character of Paul but also of the way God has fashioned our hearts as one in the body of Christ?

Fourth, Paul did everything within his power to return to them. Not just once, he says, but “again and again.” And this wasn't a matter of discharging a duty. Paul, Silas, and Timothy didn't make every effort to see them face to face because they were submitting to some legal requirement. Look at the language he uses to describe his passion for them: “we endeavored the *more eagerly* and with *great desire* to see you face to face.” I don't know if there is a more vivid and passionate expression of one Christian longing for the immediacy of face-to-face fellowship with other Christians. We “wanted” to come. It isn't that some external obligation was forced upon us. Our desire was truly heartfelt and sincere.

There is possibly yet another reason why Paul speaks in such urgent terms of his desire to return to Thessalonica. When he promised the Corinthians that he would return to them and then was compelled to cancel his trip, they accused him of being selfish and concerned only with his own well-being and comfort. They questioned his integrity. And when you read 2 Corinthians 1 you can hear Paul defending himself and his decision. My sense is that he didn't want to run any risk that the Thessalonians would follow the Corinthians and accuse him of being fickle and unreliable.

Fifth, “but Satan hindered us” (v. 18). What? How did that happen? Why did God let it happen? And what are the lessons for us?

Paul doesn't tell us how it happened. There are several possibilities. Perhaps Satan afflicted Paul with some disease that hindered him from making a trip to Thessalonica. Or it may be that Satan stirred up a military conflict that made it too dangerous for Paul to travel. Yet again, it may have been that Satan provoked opposition to Paul on the part of the political leaders in power at the time. Or it may have been that Satan stirred up such bad weather that it made it impossible for Paul to travel. Don't forget that when God grants him permission, Satan can exert an influence on the weather, as we see in the experience of Job.

I think there must have been something in Paul's condition or health or his relationship to the government that hindered him from making the trip. I say this because of what he says in 3:1-2. There he says that although he couldn't make the trip, evidently Timothy could. One is compelled to ask, if Timothy could get there, why couldn't Paul? This is what leads me to think that either Paul was thrown in prison temporarily or was sick or was compelled by circumstances that pertained solely to him.

Why did God let this happen? Honestly, we don't know. We do know that God can use Satan as an instrument to accomplish his purposes. For all we know, God knew that if Paul had made the journey when he first planned that he would have encountered opposition from thieves and pirates along the way. So he let Satan think that by somehow hindering Paul he was undermining God's ministry through the apostle. But he was simply a pawn in God's providential purpose.

But perhaps the most important question of all is ***why would Satan not want Paul to return to Thessalonica?*** I think the answer is found in Paul's language in vv. 17-18. Satan knew the value of Christians being in close proximity to one another. He knew what we've already discovered from Paul's statement in v. 17. Simply put, Satan hates when Christians spend time in each other's presence. He knows the encouragement that they give each other, the way they affirm and exhort and instruct each other. He also knows that when Christians gather together and pray and worship his power is curtailed and his influence is undermined.

And maybe Satan's efforts to hinder Paul in making his way to Thessalonica was because of what Paul says in v. 19. Notice the connection between v. 18 and v. 19. Satan hindered us "because" or "for" he knew how precious you are to our hearts and how you are my hope and joy and crown of boasting. Satan hates it when Christians grow to feel this way about each other, and he did what he could to prevent Paul and the Thessalonians from enjoying and growing from this sort of loving fellowship.

One more point to be made here, which is a beautiful illustration of God's providential purposes in all events. If Paul had returned to Thessalonica when he did, rather than remaining in Athens, *we would very likely never have had this letter!* In other words, the reason why Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica is because he was prevented from returning to them. If Satan had not hindered Paul there would have been no reason for him to write 1 Thessalonians! In a sense, we should probably give thanks to Satan for being responsible for us having these inspired words from the apostle. Well, no, we should give thanks to God who used Satan's activity to provide Paul with grounds for writing this letter that we otherwise might not ever have seen.

Let's consider one more example of **God's wise providence**. Since Paul was forced to remain in Athens, he took advantage of this opportunity to visit the synagogues and share the gospel with the Jews who were present. He then was taken by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers to the Areopagus where he preached one of his most famous sermons to the Athenians present there (see Acts 17:16-34). We are told that after his sermon "some men joined him and believed" (Acts 17:34). Pause for a moment and stand in awe at the providence of God! Had Satan not thwarted Paul's plan to return to Thessalonica, countless individuals in Athens might never have heard the gospel and thus might never have been saved!

We should ponder how this so often happens in our own lives. Well-made plans, strategies, and desires are often interrupted by the enemy. And how do we respond? All too often we complain and gripe and argue with God as to why he let this happen. Instead, we should trust God's providential control over all such events and look for the opportunities to serve him, and bless his people, and share the gospel with people we otherwise might never have even met.

I have to rejoice in knowing that while Satan thought he had pulled off a huge victory in preventing Paul from returning to Thessalonica, he was instead defeated by the providential turns in Paul's life and ministry. People are even now in heaven and not in hell because of what God did with Satan's scheme. God marvelously turned an evil act into an opportunity for gospel ministry and salvation!

Now, having said that, what precisely does Paul mean here in vv. 19-20? He mentions five ways in which the Thessalonians were a blessing to him. And don't forget: he had only known these people for 8 months!

He describes them as being his "hope," "joy," "crown of boasting," "glory," and then, as if to highlight "joy," he repeats it at the end of v. 20.

We know from what Paul says elsewhere (see 1 Cor. 4:1-4) that he fully expects to have his entire ministry examined and tested by the Lord when Christ returns. It is then that Jesus will reveal whether or not Paul has been faithful to his commission. When that happens, he is confident that the "hope" he put in the reality of their conversion will not disappoint. He is even now filled with "joy" at their spiritual progress and is certain that such will be confirmed when Christ returns. And on that day he will receive the reward of a "crown of boasting" that they remained faithful through trial and temptation.

Of course, Paul's ultimate "hope" was that he would be in the presence of Jesus for all eternity. But to be there without the Thessalonian Christians is unthinkable. My "hope," says Paul, is that you will be with me to enjoy Jesus forever. Nothing that anyone can do to me can rob me of the abiding and intense "joy" that I feel in knowing and loving you. If anyone should question the validity of my calling and ministry as an apostle, they should know that on the day when we stand before Jesus, I will point to you as my only boast, my only crown of success.

Timothy's Journey to Thessalonica and the Good News sent to Paul (3:1-10)

The burden of concern for the spiritual welfare of the Thessalonians became more than Paul could stand. So he decided to send Timothy to Thessalonica to check up on the condition of the congregation. Notice that the reference to their "faith" appears five times! It is found in vv. 2, 5, 6, 7, and 10.

Paul had expressed great confidence in the authenticity of their conversion (see 1:1-10; 2:13). However, he knows how suffering can often undermine our faith in God's goodness and promises. Timothy's journey to Thessalonica was designed to establish and exhort the believers there lest the persecution they were suffering might cause them to fall into doubt and anger and skepticism towards God.

We all feel this at one time or another. I've mentioned on numerous occasions that the greatest threat to our faith in the goodness of God and the fulfillment of his promises to us is suffering. It doesn't matter if it's physical illness, chronic pain, or in the case of the Thessalonians, social ostracism, beatings, imprisonment, loss of personal property, slander, and for some even death. Is there anyone here who hasn't wondered and pondered the possibility that God can't be trusted? When we hurt, regardless of the nature and cause of the pain, we typically ask ourselves: "Is God worthy of being entrusted with my life? Can I count on him to fulfill his word to me? After all, if he really cared, why am I the target of so much injustice and mistreatment?"

This is weighing heavily on Paul's heart. He says in v. 5 that Satan, whom he calls "the tempter," might have used these hardships and tribulations to corrupt the faith of the Thessalonians. Although Paul knew that many had truly come to faith when he preached to them, he feared that the "faith" of some was at best superficial and unable to survive the seeds of doubt that Satan would sow in their hearts.

Does this suggest that Paul believed some who were genuinely saved could have been so overcome by Satan, the "tempter," that they might lose their salvation? No. Let me remind you of the sequence of events.

First, after his evangelistic activity in Thessalonica, Paul and his companions were forced to leave. Many appeared to have truly trusted in Christ, but could it have been only an emotional reaction on the part of some?

Second, after departing from Thessalonica, Paul wondered if their professions of faith were real. After all, he says in 2:4 that Christians are "destined" to suffer in this way. Perhaps the anguish of being persecuted caused some, whose profession of faith was superficial, to abandon Christ.

Third, being greatly concerned, Paul sends Timothy to find out how they are doing. He then returns to Paul in Athens and reports that in fact their conversions were genuine and that they are standing strong in their faith.

Fourth, Paul then sits down and writes 1 Thessalonians, having been assured that their faith was genuine (v. 7).

I must pause yet again and repeat what I said earlier. Can you see what a true shepherd, a genuine pastor of God's people, feels and is willing to do for the sheep? When you look back on your spiritual journey in whatever church you may have attended, did the pastors display this depth of compassion and concern together with a willingness to do whatever was necessary to establish and encourage you in your commitment to Christ?

Listen closely once more to the urgent, heart-felt affection Paul had for these new believers. Look with me at vv. 6-10. Paul mentions several things that Timothy observed and heard when he made his visit to Thessalonica.

- There was "good news" about their "faith" (v. 6).
- There was "good news" about their "love", both for Paul and one another (v. 6).
- There was "good news" about how they fondly remembered Paul and his ministry to them (v. 6). He may have been out of sight, but he was certainly not out of mind.
- There was "good news" about how intensely they "long to see" Paul (v. 6). Paul is greatly encouraged that their affection for him had not diminished because of his absence.

But it wasn't only the Thessalonians who stood firmly in their faith and in their love for Paul. Paul testifies in vv. 7-10 how incredibly encouraged he is to hear of how well they are doing.

- Notwithstanding how badly we are being afflicted, notwithstanding the distress that we are under, your faith has "comforted" us (v. 7). Little else mattered to Paul, little else could affect his heart as did the spiritual progress of these people in Thessalonica.
- If that were not enough, Paul makes an incredible statement in v. 8 – "we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord." In obvious contrast with the twice stated burden of concern he had for them (see vv. 1,5), here Paul

says that he “lives” to hear they are standing firmly in their faith. Before this news came to him from Timothy, he was oppressed and anxious to an almost unbearable degree. But now the vitality of his spiritual life has been renewed. It almost sounds as if Paul was laboring under a spiritual death penalty, only to be raised yet again to joyful life when Timothy came with the good news of their progress.

- Again, Paul traces his deep and abiding feelings of “joy” to the fact that they are in good spiritual condition (v. 9).
- Finally, one prayer dominated his life: he prayed “most earnestly night and day” not simply to hear a good report about the Thessalonians but to see them “face-to-face” (v. 10).
- If there is still anything lacking in their faith, if there are lingering doubts about the goodness of God and the truth of the gospel, Paul wants to supply the truth that will bring stability and joy to their lives (v. 10b).
- In saying that he wanted to “supply what is lacking” in their faith, Paul does not mean their faith was artificial. He simply means that their faith needs more depth. Their faith, although genuine, needs to be strengthened and brought to full development.

Paul's Concluding Prayer on Their Behalf (3:11-13)

I need to bring a correction to how the ESV translates the opening words of v. 11. The word “himself” is not restricted to the Father alone. It should read: “Now may our God and Father and our Lord Jesus himself” direct our way to you. Paul is clearly uniting the Father and the Son in the request that they make it possible for Paul to visit Thessalonica yet again. We also see this in the fact that the verb “direct” is singular, even though its subject is plural (i.e., both the Father and the Son jointly are asked to “direct” Paul’s path to Thessalonica). Seyoon Kim says it best:

“Jesus has been exalted as God’s Son to exercise God’s lordship on his behalf, so that what God the Father wills the Lord Jesus executes, and what the Lord Jesus does is what God the Father does (cf. Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Cor. 15:23-28)” (297-98).

There are two primary requests that Paul makes of the Father and the Son.

First, he prays that God would operate in their hearts and minds so that their love for each other and for everyone else would “increase and abound” (v. 12). ***It is impossible for us to love one another too much!*** There is always room for “increase” and for our love to “abound” more and more.

There is also here a clear affirmation of the full deity or divinity of Jesus. Not only is he united with the Father in Paul’s wish that they will make his journey to Thessalonica possible, but he is himself the focus of Paul’s prayer that they will increase and abound in love. Notice that in v. 11 Paul refers to Jesus as “our Lord Jesus,” and then immediately follows this by simply referring to “the Lord.” The only person to whom prayer can be directed is to God, be it the Father or Son or Holy Spirit.

Allow me to deviate from the text for a moment to point out something of great importance. As most of you know, faithful Roman Catholics are often heard praying to Mary or to the saints in heaven, in spite of the fact that there is not a single syllable in Scripture which says that is permissible.

We should take note of the following papal declarations.

“God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that everyone may know that through her are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation. For this is his will, that we obtain everything through Mary” (Pope Pius IX, 1846-78). Note: not through Jesus but “through her” are obtained all these blessings.

“As no man goes to the father but by the son, so no one goes to Christ except through his mother” (Pope Leo XIII, 1953).

“It is the will of God that we should have nothing which is not passed through the hands of Mary” (Pope Pius XII, 1953).

Consider the prayer known as “Hail Mary.”

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

I don't want to come across as anti-Catholic, but why in the world would anyone pray to Mary when the Bible says repeatedly that we have immediate and direct access to Jesus Christ, God the Son? On the questionable assumption that it is even possible for Mary to hear our prayers,, I can almost envision her in heaven, pleading with Roman Catholics throughout history and into the present day, saying: "Please! Stop it! It is not for me to do anything for you. Go directly to your only Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who stands at the right hand of the Father to do for you what only he can do."

When I was quite young, living in Shawnee, I loved visiting my dad at the Federal National Bank building where he worked, and even later, when we moved to Duncan, at the Security National Bank, where he served as President. Can you envision me walking up to a teller and saying: "I'm sorry to interrupt, but would you take this note to my dad? I really need an advance on my allowance"? If I had, I can assure you that the teller, be it male or female, would have laughed in disbelief and said, "Why ask me? He's your dad. You should take it directly to him."

Here in vv. 11-13, Paul does what every biblical author and Christian person in Scripture does: he goes directly to the Father and to the Son with his petitions. No intermediaries. No delay. No fear that the person we ask to take our prayers to God might misunderstand or misspeak what we have requested.

I'm not denigrating Mary or overlooking the incredibly faithful role she played in submitting to God's desire that she be the mother of the Messiah. But there is nothing but confusion and even great danger in positioning her in between us and the Lord himself.

Second, Paul asks the Lord Jesus Christ to "establish" their "hearts blameless in holiness" before our God and Father when Christ returns (v. 13). Do you live in fear that when Jesus comes back and you stand before him at the judgment seat, you will be ashamed and terrified and fearful that you have nothing to offer him in the way of personal holiness and blamelessness? Do you live in constant fear that there will be nothing there for you but embarrassment and loss? You shouldn't.

You need never fear that you will come up short when you stand before the Lord. How do I know this? How do I know that Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians would be answered, and how do I know that ours will be answered also? There are numerous ways to answer this question, but two texts of Scripture will have to suffice for now:

"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 Jesus Christ. **HE WHO CALLS YOU IS FAITHFUL; HE WILL SURELY DO IT**" (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and **TO PRESENT YOU BLAMELESS BEFORE THE PRESENCE OF HIS GLORY WITH GREAT** [not with dread or regret or fear or shame], to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25).