

6] Taken Away in Presence not in Heart (Sunday, December 13, 2020)

Scripture: Job 1:6-12; 1 Thess. 2:17-20

INTRODUCTION

This is our sixth Sunday now in the book of 1 Thessalonians.

What is this book all about?

It can be a challenge to adequately summarize the books of Scripture because they are so rich and varied in their exhortation and encouragement.

Here are two passages I believe capture the central message of 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thess. 3:8 For now we live, **if you stand fast in the Lord.**

Or another great summary passage would be the end of chapter 3.

1Th. 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, **direct our way to you.** **12** And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, **13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness** before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

I have mentioned before that this letter like the letter to the Philippians is filled with joy and encouragement.

It doesn't seem that there were any serious doctrinal errors to confront.

The main theological issue is the return of Jesus Christ and questions about the resurrection that we see in chapter 4.

This was a faithful church in terms of doctrine, but Paul, Silas, and Timothy were driven out of Thessalonica before they felt their work was complete.

You know what it is like to love something you are doing and not be able to finish it.

How much more of a distress when you are dealing with souls and spiritual concerns.

The language of the verses that we consider today is very rich in terms of proper feeling, desire, and affection.

We also encounter Satanic opposition.

And then most glorious of all, we have a beautiful focus on the return of our Lord!

May your focus not be just yourself but others in light of the return of our Lord.

1] Great desire, v. 17

2] Satanic Hindrance, v. 18

3] Resurrection glory and joy, vv. 19-20

1] GREAT DESIRE, v. 17

I have pointed out that a major part of chapter 2 has been a defense of how Paul and the others conducted themselves in Thessalonica.

We have noted that in this defense the concern is not their own personal reputation but the truth of the gospel.

In this defense there is still great concern for the church in Thessalonica.

As we focus on verse 17 there are a couple of things that we must keep in mind.

First, look at verses 7 and 11, where we consider the great concern of Paul for this church and how he ministered to them.

1 Thess. 2:7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children.

1 Thess. 2:11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children,

Second, we consider that this young church suffered for the gospel.

We don't have all the details of this suffering in either Acts or Thessalonians.

We already saw a witness to their suffering in verse 14.

1 Thess. 2:14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they *did* from the Judeans,

And look ahead also to 1 Thess. 3:3-4.

1 Thess. 3:3 that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. **4** For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.

The third thing to consider is that Paul and the others were **ripped away**, as it were, from their beloved children.

There is very strong language in verse 17.

It is a little difficult to bring out, but the verb taken away is probably not strong enough.

The verb has the idea of **being made an orphan**.¹

So, we go from the language of fathers and mothers, to now being made orphans.

This was a very difficult time for the Thessalonians and a painful time for Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

They were torn away, but this did not affect their deep love and concern for their well-being.

There was a separation in **face** but not in **heart**.

Further, Paul and the others made every effort they could make to return.

There was great **desire**.

¹ BDAG: *make an orphan of* someone, fig., of the apostle separated fr. his [p. 120] church ἀπορφανισθέντες ἀφ' ὑμῶν *made orphans by separation fr. you.*

The word **desire** used here is a common word often translated as lust, when it is used for something sinful or negative.

I don't think the translation lust would be appropriate here, but the desire of Paul and the others to be back with the Thessalonians was very great.

Unfortunately, I think one of the casualties of our modern society is we have lost in large part the depths of love that should characterize God's people.

There are a different reasons for this, but I am going to suggest that the language of verse 17 would not characterize too many Christians and churches.

It is not that we just reduce the Christian life to emotionalism or feeling.

But may the Lord work powerfully in our hearts to strengthen that love and serious concern for others that should characterize us.

We should often pray, Lord increase my true love and obedience to you and love for others.

2] SATANIC HINDRANCE, v. 18

It is possible that part of the false charges brought against Paul, Silas, and Timothy was that they didn't really care, because if they did, they would have come back.

Look again at the language of verse 18.

We wanted to come to you, even I, Paul, time and time again.

As we have been going through the book, I have tried to emphasize that this book is not *just* Paul's letter, but here we see in verse 18 that Paul is the primary author.

The ESVSB writes:

This reveals that Paul is the author of this letter and that he feels the need to defend himself with respect to the period of absence.

On multiple occasions then, Paul, tried to figure out a way to get back to Thessalonica but with no success.

Verse 18 states that it was Satan who hindered their return.

This verb hindered is not a common verb in the NT, used only 3 times. Hindered or thwarted would be good translations.

Now what did Satan do to keep Paul and the others from returning to Thessalonica?

The best answer is that we don't know. It has not been revealed.

Now we should go back for a moment to Acts 17.

Acts 17:8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. **9** So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Acts 17:10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Some commentators suggest that this security or bail is connected to the Satanic hindering that we see here in 1 Thess. 2.

So perhaps Paul was trying to find a way to change the terms of whatever was worked out that led to their removal from the city.

It is a good suggestion and a possibility, but we can say it is not something we know because Paul did not express the nature of this hindrance.

John Calvin wrote:

For, whenever the wicked molest us, they fight under Satan's banner, and are his instruments for harassing us. More especially, when our endeavors are directed to the work of the Lord, it is **certain that everything that hinders proceeds from Satan**; and would to God that this sentiment were deeply impressed upon the minds of all pious persons—that Satan is continually contriving, by every means, in what way he may hinder or obstruct the edification of the Church!

Do you really take seriously that we are part of a spiritual battle as we serve the Lord?

Listen also to several NT passages speaking of what Satan does to pervert God's truth and church.

Acts 5:3 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back *part* of the price of the land for yourself?

2Cor. 2:11 lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

1Tim. 1:20 of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

1Tim. 5:15 For some have already turned aside after Satan.

Some Christian leaders or others blame all of their problems on Satan.

It can become a convenient excuse to cover wrongdoing.

It is not that we should blame every difficulty on Satan, but we are to keep in mind that ultimately, we fight a spiritual battle and Satan will do everything to pervert the truth and keep us focused on ourselves and trivial matters rather than the Lord and the spread of His gospel.

Eph. 6:10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.
11 Put on the whole armor of God, **that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.**

3] RESURRECTION GLORY AND JOY, VV. 19-20

There are skeptics who claim that the NT writers believed and predicted that Jesus would return in the first generation.

And because Jesus did not return in the first generation, the NT is not reliable.

Well, a careful reading of the NT shows that the writers of the NT never predicted that Jesus would return in the first generation.

Jesus did declare that a great judgment would come upon Jerusalem within 40 years of his ministry.

This great judgment did come in the events leading to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Otherwise, what Jesus taught in Matthew 24 after speaking of the judgment that would come was that the time of His return was not something revealed.

Matt. 24:36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only...

The calling of the Christian is to live in light of the return of Christ and be ready.

Matt. 25:13 “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

And think of this, what is two thousand years or more in light of eternity?

Here in verse 19 Paul stresses that far from not caring about the Thessalonians because of their forced separation, they found their **greatest hope, joy, and crown of rejoicing** that the Thessalonian believers would be in the presence of the Lord when He returned.

Think of how precious these words are – **you in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ as His coming!**

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been separated from the Thessalonians.

Their greatest joy, however, was not just getting back together with them, but the end of our separation from the Lord’s presence.

This passage about proper boasting has several parallels.

1Cor. 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.

2 Cor. 1:13 For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end **14** (as also you have understood us in part), that we are your boast as you also *are* ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Phil. 2:16 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Now doesn't death bring a believer into the presence of the Lord?

Yes.

2Cor. 5:8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be **absent** from the body and to be present with the Lord.

Death is the end of our earthly work, obviously, but our own death is not the end of God's work of redemption.

So, although Paul did consider his own death, our own individual death is not the greatest goal.

The greatest goal is in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ and the resurrection.

Think of this great truth.

What unites all of God's people over 6,000 years of redemptive history is that together we wait and long for the return of Jesus Christ.

The word translated as coming is a word maybe you have heard before in Greek – *parousia*.

It is a word used 24 times in the NT.

The main Greek lexicon defines it: **arrival as the first stage in presence, coming, advent**

α . of Christ, and nearly always of his Messianic Advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age: Mt 24:3.

James 5:7 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See *how* the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. **8** You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

2Pet. 3:4 and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of creation."

If you knew Jesus was coming in 5 years, would this affect how you live your life?

Because we don't know when, it is very easy to lose sight of the coming of our Lord if we are not careful.

May the Lord make this a reality more and more in our lives.

1] Our labor is not in vain. There is a final goal and direction to all of history.

2] We know that until our Lord comes, we will live in a world filled with pain, suffering, and death.

We groan while in this life, longing for the ultimate redemption.

3] We have assurance that although there will always be a battle, we are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us.

To stress one more time how much they cared about the believers in Thessalonica, Paul and the others wrote:

1Th. 2:20 For you are our glory and joy.

Glory refers to their giving him reason for honoring them before others.

Joy speaks of their own feelings of delight.

Both outwardly and inwardly, the church in Thessalonica crowned their ministry.²

CONCLUSION

May your focus not just be yourself but others in light of the return of our Lord.

Prayer

Hymn 240

² Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 13 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 68.

BENEDICTION – JUDE 24-25

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present *you* faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,

To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, *Be* glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen.