

Providential Joy

1 Thessalonians 2:17–20¹

Introduction

In many ways the circumstances we are in can determine our outlook in life. If our circumstances are less than desirable, we can tend to complain and even angrily insist that those circumstances change. I can understand these sentiments because, as a sinful human being, I have felt them. But I have failed to recognize is that the circumstances I am in should not determine my attitude. Rather, my attitude should rejoice in that God has allowed these circumstances for my good.

It is so much harder to remember that alone, though. And we as human beings were created to have fellowship, a fact that is rooted in the very nature of God being a trinity. God is a relational being, and thus you and I are relational beings. So when we experience the challenge of being apart, it is hard to remember truth because part of why the church exists is to convey truth to one another and encourage one another (Heb. 3:13; 10:25). And we long for that fellowship. I know that I have longed for the fellowship of the local body. And it is no wonder that any of us have longed for it, because in the end, this world is not our home; we are, indeed, just passing through, as the song goes. We will ultimately experience the joy of perfect, unified fellowship in our true homeland, for we are, after all, citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20–21).

Paul felt these very emotions that I am describing. He longed to see the church in Thessalonica, a place he had only been for a few weeks. And though he had only known them for a short while, Paul felt such an intense love and longing for them that his words flowed out in 1 Thessalonians 2:17–20 with superlatives. He desired to see these people, but he could not. And the lessons that he learned through his desire he now shares in holy Scripture for us today. I believe that he is teaching us that *though circumstances might prohibit it at times, true believers long for spiritual fellowship which foreshadows the ultimate joy we will experience in the presence of our Lord.*

2 Thessalonians 2:17–20 ¹⁷ But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. ¹⁸ Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? *Is it* not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

Preview Outline:

1. True believers long for joyous Christian fellowship (v. 17–18a)
 2. True believers recognize the enemy (v. 18b)
 3. True believers rejoice in the hope of Christ’s coming (vv. 19–20)
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Paul begins in v. 17 by exemplifying for us that—

I. True believers long for joyous Christian fellowship (v. 17–18a)

Paul’s longing for these believers is clearly evident in v. 17. He longs to see these believers intensely!

“But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart” — The word “but” indicates that Paul’s desire expressed in the rest of the verse is in contrast to the previous verses. Paul has just finished speaking about why he thanked the Lord for them in his prayers.

1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 ¹³ For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not *as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. 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, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, ¹⁶ forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up *the measure of* their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

The people who were “forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles” contrasts with the apostle’s desire to “see your face.” Though the one was forbidding interaction, the other intensely desired it.

The phrase “having been taken away” comes from one Greek word which literally means “to be orphaned.”² Paul had not simply left the people; he had been “torn away from” and “orphaned” from them. This conveys an anguish in his heart over the separation he had experienced from them. But he offers a glimmer of hope when he says that the separation was “for a short time.” This tearing away seems to be reminiscent of his experience as recorded in the book of Acts. There, Dr. Luke describes why Paul was so heartbroken over his absence from this assembly:

Acts 17:1–4 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and

²Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 216.

demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying*, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.”⁴ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

These people who joined Paul did so because they were persuaded of the veracity of God’s Word, for Paul was speaking (“reasoning”) to them “from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2). Paul had invested his ministry of the gospel into these people’s lives. But that time of rejoicing was to be short lived because the unbelievers of the city did not appreciate the gospel, a fact that should not surprise us today.

Acts 17:5–10 ⁵ But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. ⁷ Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” 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.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.

It should never come as a surprise that the world hates the message of the gospel. Jesus promised that those who hated Him would also hate us (Matt. 24:9). Paul had only seen these people for a few weeks and yet he felt such an intense love for them. He acknowledges that he was only taken away from them “in presence, not in heart.” Though he was physically not with them, he was constantly thinking about them. He expressed this similar concept in several others of his letters (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:3; Col 2:5).

“endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire; Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again” — Because he desired to see them, Paul made every effort to see them. The words he chooses indicate that “they took great pains, and this in the extreme, in their effort to return to the church.”³ Paul even intensifies his desire after he expresses the desires of him, Silvanus, and Timothy, by adding “even I, Paul!” This is exclamatory! But as Paul would soon relate, their plans would ultimately not come to fruition.

Application: Do you not feel the same tugging in your own heart? Do you not long to see and fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ? For some, this might not seem like a big deal. But for true believers, time spent away from the body causes an aching in the depths of who they are. If you have not longed for the time to be together with other believers, consider whether or not you might truly be a part of the body. If you cannot be with your brothers and sisters in Christ physically, you can at least bring them before the Lord in your constant prayers (1 Thess. 5:17).

³Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 151.

Though Paul desired to be with the church in Thessalonica, he ultimately knew learned that Satan would do everything he could to thwart their ministry. In the same way, true believers not only long for Christian fellowship—

II. True believers recognize the enemy (v. 18)

The next verse that Paul writes might seem shocking to some yet it is one that perhaps the church in America should recognize more: Satan will do everything he can to thwart God's plan and purposes.

“but Satan hindered us” — These are interesting words. The word for *hindered* means to “stop” or “thwart.” One commentator notes that it is a military term, adding “in order to stop the advance of enemy armies, soldiers would tear up and destroy the road to hinder their passage.”⁴ In essence, Paul is suggesting that Satan was tactically waging war against the efforts of Paul and his companions to come to the church in Thessalonica. Clearly, Paul knew that Satan would come to tempt them to abandon the truth of the gospel for Paul wrote a few verses later:

1 Thessalonians 3:5 For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

If you are thinking carefully through what the Bible teaches (in other words, if you are considering the the rest of theology) you might be questioning “how can Satan hinder or thwart God's servants?” This is an excellent question that should cause us to stop and consider what God says about Satan's attacks on his servants.

- (1) Satan has been granted power to perform evil. God created Satan with the powerful abilities (e.g. the ability to speak through a snake—Gen. 3:1 ff). Satan (whose name means “adversary”) has delusions of setting his throne above the throne of God (Is. 14:12–15); he tried to tempt our Lord to sin in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11); he is the “prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2; see also 6:12).
- (2) Satan seeks to destroy everything that God does. Satan desired to “sift Peter like wheat” (Luke 22:31); he is walking about looking for believers to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). He uses lies to thwart God's work (John 8:44), and to blind people from hearing the truth of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4).
- (3) Satan can only do what God permits him. Though Satan does have great power, he can only do what God allows him to do. This is best exemplified in the book of Job, where the Lord gives Satan permission to hurt Job and take away his possession, but to leave his life alone (Job 1:12; 2:6). Anything that Satan does is ultimately under the sovereign hand of God.
- (4) Satan may hinder the work that man intends for God only if it accomplishes God's purposes. Though some might consider Satan as an equal antithesis to God, he is by no means equal to God. He is powerless before God and if God so willed He could

⁴Green, *Thessalonians*, 152.

immediately destroy the Deceiver. But for sufficiently wise reasons (and for His own pleasure and glory) God permits Satan to exist and even at times deter what might be good works. For example:

Daniel 9:12–13 ¹² Then he said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. ¹³ But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia.

Daniel desired for God to explain a vision to him and the Lord sent a messenger to explain it to him, but he was hindered by “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” (I believe an allusion to Satan). Paul described how he had been hindered on several occasions from doing certain things (e.g. Rom. 1:13; 15:22; 2 Cor. 12:7). These hindrances that happen in life may very well be the work of Satan and his demons. But ultimately, God has permitted it for His own sovereign purposes.

Application: You and I do not have the luxury of acute spiritual insight into every situation we face. We do not always know whether or not it is actually Satan or one of his demons that is hindering us or the work we are attempting to do. But we do know that whether it is Satan or not, God will always accomplish His purposes and nothing that He decrees He will do will ever fail. If we are hindered in doing what we think is good and right, it is always because God has providentially allowed it to be so. We should always examine ourselves to make sure that we are maintaining a right relationship with God, so that when we are hindered in our plans, we view it as part of the Lord’s will (James 4:15).

Not only do true believers long for Christian fellowship and recognize the enemy, Paul finally notes that—

III. True believers rejoice in the hope of Christ’s coming (vv. 19–20)

Paul concludes this section with an exclamation of joy. His ultimate joy was knowing that His crown of rejoicing was the people with whom he had shared the good news of Jesus Christ.

“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.” — Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, acknowledged that his crown of exultation was the very people he had evangelized. One day, he would stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and exclaim “these are the people that I preached the gospel to and whom you graciously saved!” He longed to see the coming of Christ alongside those whom he had diligently labored on. Ought that not be the cry and desire of every believer who leads another person to Christ? Ought we not also long to stand one day with that person and see the coming Lord beside the people who we had the privilege of bringing to the Lord? We know that it is God who saves, but with Paul we long to see those “spiritual children” grow into Christlikeness even as a parent longs to see his or her child grow up into a mature adult. Paul echoed this sentiment to the church in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 1:12–14 ¹² For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. 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.

This ought to be our desire: to hope in the coming of Jesus Christ and to see our “spiritual children” there with us.

Conclusion

Though circumstances might prohibit it at times, you ought to long for spiritual fellowship now in this life, which foreshadows the ultimate joy you will experience in the presence of our Lord. This ought to be our longing while we are away from one another. And when we can at last be together, let us thank the Lord for the body of believers with whom we have this intimate and loving relationship.