

## "Longing for the Saints" – 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Paul did not leave Thessalonica voluntarily. We see that in Acts, chapter 17. Those opposed to the Gospel had caused a riot, arrested Jason and dragged him to court. Paul and Silas were whisked out of town as the brethren were rightly concerned about their safety. They went first to Berea, then Paul went on to Athens, where he sent for Timothy and Silas to join him.

In First Thessalonians, chapter 2, Paul's pastoral heart is clearly on display. It is obvious that he didn't want to leave the Thessalonians when he did. He was greatly concerned about them, concerned about their spiritual welfare. He worried that he hadn't the time to adequately prepare them for the opposition they would inevitably face.

As I studied this week, I found myself identifying with Paul. It's not that I put myself in the same category as the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Far from it. I'm really nothing but a sinner saved by the grace of God but I have been called to this ministry. I have been called to be your pastor and I found myself wondering how I would feel if I suddenly had to leave.

Now, before I go on, let me emphasize that there is absolutely nothing in the works here. We have no plans to leave Canyon Community Church. Write that down in your bulletin so no rumors get started.

But I was thinking, what if Village Missions called and said something like: "We're concerned about your safety. We need to get you out of there ... the moving van is coming today."

I'd be worried about you because if Kris and I were in danger of serious persecution, you would be in danger too. It would weigh heavily on our hearts. I would wonder if I had done enough to prepare you for the trials to come.

As Paul continued his work in Athens, he couldn't stop thinking about those baby Christians he had left behind in Thessalonica. So, he felt a longing deep in his soul. He felt a longing for the saints because as Christians, we really are joined together in one, glorious, extended family. When one of your family members is hurting, it hurts you as well.

Let's begin looking into our text for this week.

*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. (1 Thessalonians 2:17)*

The Christian life is all about fellowship, *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) in the Greek. In the opening verses of his first epistle, the Apostle John writes:

*... that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have **fellowship with us**; and **truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ**. (1 John 1:3)*

This is all about relationships, family relationships. When you find salvation in Jesus Christ, you become part of His family.

*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, (Romans 8:16-17a)*

Every time Christians gather together, it is a family reunion.

We get to have a pot luck today and the food is always great, but the real blessing is sharing that meal with our church family. As we have fellowship together, as we enjoy this *koinonia*, John says we are, in fact, enjoying fellowship with God the Father and God the Son. How cool is that? It's like a little prelude to heaven. It's like a foretaste ... a teaser. Can you imagine how amazing it will be to sit down at the banqueting table of Jesus Christ?

So, when we are separated from the saints, it ought to cause just a bit of longing. I don't understand people who say "I love Jesus, I just don't like Christians." I don't like to be around Christians; I'll do my worshipping alone in the woods." I don't understand people like that, even though I was once one of them. But as I grew as a Christian, my anti-social tendencies gradually faded away and now, I really, really like being around Christians. In fact, when I'm not around Christians, I really miss it.

I miss my brothers and sisters back at Machias Community Church. I miss Pastor Ron and Marilyn. I miss our fellow Village Missionaries that I only get to see once or maybe twice a year. And when we're away from Canyon Community Church, I miss you. A lot!

Likewise, Paul longed for the Thessalonians. He had been taken away from them – he didn't want to leave and he was no longer enjoying their presence. That's an interesting word, presence - *prosōpon* (πρόσωπον). It literally means "before the face of". It's especially interesting because in Latin, the word is *Coram*. Really, it is! Now, our community name is not based on the Latin word – it's named after some guy - but wouldn't it be slick if we could add *Deo* to our community name? *Coram Deo* means "Before the face of God".

Okay, back to the subject at hand. Paul is quick to point out that he is not away from their presence in heart, not in spirit. Kris and I are separated from our church family back in Machias, but not in heart. We didn't actually lose anything when we moved here. No, we gained a whole new church family to be added to our old one; it is wonderful! Besides, whenever we are away, our absence from the saints we left behind is only temporary, because one day we will all be gathered around the throne of Christ. What a reunion that will be!

Still, Paul really wanted to see their faces. He wanted to go back to Thessalonica but he was prevented from doing so.

*Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. (1 Thessalonians 2:18)*

We have an enemy. Satan is real. Satan is personal. Satan has great power. And Satan is really ticked off because he knows he has but a short time. (Revelation 12:12)

We need to remember that because otherwise, we get mad at the wrong things. We get angry with the wrong people. We tend to get really ticked off at those poor, deceived souls that are nothing but prisoners of the spiritual war. Unbelievers are deceived ... by Satan and their own sin nature. We should be praying for them, not hating them! Please remember, wherever Christians are persecuted, Satan is behind it, but God is in control and He has given the devil just enough rope, and no more. Satan's power, though vast, is always limited by God. The evil he inspires is always superintended by God for the greater good.

It was Satan who was behind the cross. He inspired sinful men to commit the most heinous crime in history. But God superintended that dark act for the greatest act of mercy in the history of the universe.

*He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

Jesus was crucified; He was murdered to pay the penalty for our sins and in doing so, He extends an offer to each one of us. Only believe in the One God sent. (John 6:29) If you believe, if you accept the salvation God so graciously offers, you join our eternal family. And that is most certainly cause for rejoicing:

*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. (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20)*

What Paul wanted to see more than anything else, was those Thessalonian Christians standing with all the saints when Jesus returns. That is his reward. It is his crown of rejoicing. It is his joy. And let me tell you now, I really want to see all of you as we gather for the wedding feast of the Lamb! I pray for every one of you. I don't want you to hear the words "Depart from Me, I never knew you." I want to hear Jesus say to each one of you, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

So, why should you die? Why should you spend eternity in hell? Turn, turn from your evil way and be saved. Trust Jesus. Pray to Him: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe He was raised from the dead so you will be saved. (Romans 10:9) Please, I beg you. I want to see you in the presence of Jesus when He comes.

Now, this morning, we're going to do something quite scandalous. Really. Stand by and hold on to your seats because I'm going to dare to preach right through a chapter break!

You know, don't you, that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not inspired? They were added to make it easier for us to get around. I'm thankful for them but sometimes they come in unfortunate places, interrupting the flow of the message. I believe this is one of those places.

*Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3)*

Paul just couldn't take it anymore! He just had to find out what was going on back in Thessalonica. From Acts 17, we know that Paul summoned Timothy and Silas when he was in Athens and here, we learn that from Athens, he dispatched Timothy to Thessalonica. Timothy was given a very specific mission, that was pretty much two-fold.

We read about the first objective in these three verses. He was to **establish** them in their faith. *stērizō* (στηρίζω) in the Greek. It means to make stable. So, Timothy was to stabilize the faith of the Thessalonians. He was to strengthen and cause them to stand firm. And then he was to **encourage** [*parakaleō* (παρακαλέω)] them. We've seen that word before. It means to come along side someone for the purpose of encouragement, advice and exhortation. And then he was to make sure they were **not shaken** by their afflictions. Shaken is *sainō* (σαίνω) It literally means to wag, as a dog wags its tail. Metaphorically, it is to "wag" your mind away from the truth. So, this part of Timothy's mission was to minister, as needed, to the Thessalonians, to be a pastor to them.

Paul knew they would suffer persecution and tribulation. He told them so.

*For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. (1 Thessalonians 3:4)*

He wanted to make sure that they were grounded in Biblical truth so they could stand against that tribulation. But Paul had another agenda as well, and you can probably guess what it was:

*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. (1 Thessalonians 3:5)*

He expected Timothy to return and give Paul a report. He was afraid that Satan might have been successful in diverting the faith of that young church. If that were the case, Paul's labor in Thessalonica would have been a waste of time. It would have been in vain. It worried him and he wanted to know their spiritual condition.

Timothy would complete the second part of his mission by catching up with Paul in Corinth. We'll look into that two weeks from now, but before I let you go, I want to emphasize something that might seem almost ancillary to this passage. But still, I think it is really important.

This passage reveals a pastor's heart. A pastor's heart has a deep affection for the flock He has been called to shepherd. A pastor's heart has compassion for the trouble faced by his congregation. A pastor's heart is willing to tell folks what they need to hear, even if they don't particularly want to hear it. A pastor's heart puts the needs of the congregation before his own.

Paul was desperate to hear how the Thessalonians were doing, because he truly cared about them as brothers and sisters in Christ. It wasn't just Thessalonica, either. He felt the same way about Philippi, about Corinth, about Athens, about Berea, about Ephesus, everywhere he went, he was deeply moved by those who had come to saving faith in Jesus Christ and he cared about them. Because these churches didn't just comprise his own flock of disciples. Paul was just an under-shepherd. He realized that the flock really belongs to the One Good Shepherd. The Church belongs to Jesus.

This compassion, this affection, this commitment isn't just for those who stand in pulpits on Sunday mornings. We all need to develop pastor's hearts. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul called for the elders from Ephesus, and gave them a strict charge.

*For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:27-28)*

We need to shepherd one another, to feed one another, to exhort one another, to care for one another, because we comprise the Church of God whom Jesus purchased with His own, precious, holy blood. Paul goes on to say:

*For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. (Acts 20:29-30)*

We need to look out for one another. We need to protect one another from the schemes of Satan. We need to strengthen one another's faith. And my prayer is that someday, whenever it is, after my departure, your faith will never be shaken, no matter what

tribulations you are called to face. No matter where the Lord takes me, I will long to see you, to be with you as we glorify our Lord in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

If you have trusted Jesus for your salvation, you are saints of God. I long to be in the eternal presence of the saints.