

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Paul's Relationship with the Thessalonians

Introduction

Paul is explaining himself and his purposes to answer his critics who said he had abandoned the Thessalonians, and would not return to see them. He reminds them in very moving terms how important and dear they are to him.

Paul's desire to return to Thessalonica

We were torn away from you (1 Thessalonians 2:17). "Torn away" – there was no pleasure for Paul in having to leave them. It was like being orphaned. Wider meaning – like a bereavement. Leaving them had been like losing a friend or relation by death. A very painful experience. But though torn away from them in person, he was not torn away from them in thought. Out of sight, but never out of mind. He tried again and again to see them, **Out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.**

The reason why they had not got back to visit was **Satan stopped us** (2:18). He does not tell us how Satan did this. Was it continuing Jewish opposition and a plot against him? Was it illness, the thorn in the flesh he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:7 as being a messenger of Satan? Was it trouble in the church in Corinth where he was living that he had to stay and deal with? Whatever it was, he was hindered, and Satan was the cause. N.B. Satan does exert powerful influence over the affairs of men when they serve the kingdom of God. Satan was behind the awful sufferings of Job (Job 1). Satan made constant assaults on the Lord Jesus Christ to prevent Him from doing God's will. He was behind the trouble in the early church, e.g. he filled the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit, and hold back some money (Acts 5:3). **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour** (1 Peter 5:8).

Yet God is supreme, and can overrule evil for good. God can ultimately bring blessing out of what is a set back caused by the devil. Satan is bent on destroying Christians, Christian families, Christian churches. He makes attacks on the character, zeal, consecration, harmony and the witness of the church. He hinders us from prayer. He distracts us by putting evil thoughts into our minds. Gossip, slander and libel cause hindrances and hold ups to the Lord's work. The people who know most about this are those who are going on well with the Lord, and churches which are making progress. If the devil is quiet, we must be doing little good, or as someone once put it, "There is no friction in graveyards".

Be aware of Satan's attacks. Expect and look out for them. Stand up to him. **Resist him, standing firm in the faith** (1 Peter 5:9). **Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes** (Ephesians 6:11). Trust God to overrule and bring good out of evil. **Resist the devil and he will flee from you** (James 4:7).

So Paul explains why he had not revisited the Thessalonians. It was not because he had turned his back on them. He wanted intensely to return. The temporary hindrance was caused by the devil. N.B. The value of explaining aims and purposes to get rid of misunderstandings. C.f. the failure in many marriages is the lack of communication. One of the reasons for misunderstandings among Christians is that they do not explain themselves clearly. Assume people understand and know, when often they don't. So we may appear rude, or ignorant. Or our actions and motives can be misunderstood. We owe it to others to be open and clear.

Paul's joy in the Thessalonians

Paul is almost lyrical in his esteem and admiration of the Christians at Thessalonica. They were his hope – which will be realized fully at the second coming; his joy – when he sees them at Christ's right hand; and his crown, στεφανος, a word given to the victor in a conquest. Then he repeats himself – **You are our glory and crown** (2:20). Paul's joy in this world and his glory in the next, are the Thessalonians, their conversion, changed lives, and whole-hearted service. When he thinks of them and how God has used them, it gives him intense pleasure.

Paul's word for the second coming, παρουσια, is used for the visit of a person of high rank, especially a king or emperor going to a province. It implies the need to be ready for that visit and coming.

So Paul points to the greatest joy in the Christian life outside our actual relationship with Christ – those we have helped in the way of Christ, e.g. led to the Lord, supported when tempted or in great trial, challenged by our example, explained a difficulty to. Our ministry and life have made all the difference. We may not know it at the time, it might only be revealed later. There is much we do not know while on earth, but it will be disclosed at the second coming. The result will be immense joy and satisfaction and pleasure.

James Stewart, in his "Teach yourself preaching", points out the value of keeping letters of appreciation from those we have helped, and going back to them and being encouraged by them, especially in times of depression. Samuel Rutherford, during his time in prison in Aberdeen jail in the 17th century, wrote a number of letters, and uttered many memorable sayings that were recorded. Two centuries later, in 1857, they were weaved into 19 verses of 8 lines each by Mrs Anne Ross Cousin, the wife of a Free Church of Scotland minister at Irvine. Six of these verses comprise the hymn "The sands of time are sinking". The tenth of these verses (not included in the hymn) says,

*"Fair Anworth on the Solway,
To me thou still art dear.
Even from the verge of heaven
I drop for thee a tear.
Oh! If one soul from Anworth
Meet me at God's right hand
My heaven will be two heavens
In Immanuel's land"*

This was Rutherford's experience of what Paul was feeling in these verses. This was his hope, his joy, his crown of rejoicing.

Conclusion

Paul's longing to see the Thessalonian church again is intense, they are so dear to him. The devil may be able to prevent him from visiting them in the flesh, but the devil cannot prevent them from being his hope, his joy and his crown.