

## 1 Thessalonians 2 (17-20) – My Heart is With You

One of the hardest things in life or ministry is having to deal with disconnection. You make friends, make bonds, make plans, make memories, and live life together for a time. You're knit together in love. It's real, it's sweet, it's deep, and it's good. And then, perhaps suddenly, you are separated. Maybe it's necessary because of a job, or some life situation. Maybe someone has been forced to be somewhere else. Or maybe someone has gone to be with the Lord. In any event, you feel the distance.

Paul has been talking about his relationship with the Thessalonians. He wasn't physically with them anymore. But he wanted to be. And they wanted him to be. Their hearts were still connected. But his enemies had forced him to leave, and now they hindered him from returning to them.

*But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart* – this is some serious emotion. Paul was saying he felt like he was ripped from his family. Imagine your favorite shirt or skirt or dress or suit being torn in two by your enemies. And most people know the feeling of being ripped off, and it can just rip you apart. Paul felt worse than that.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul talked about being like a mother to them. Then he said he was also like a father to them. And now, he is saying he felt like an orphan. This is powerful imagery. Have you ever felt that way? Like someone has been ripped from your life? Your heart is still with them, but you feel the distance. You desire to reconnect. And there are other loved ones with you, but when you think of this person, you feel alone.

Paul cared deeply about these people. Even though he wasn't with them for very long, and he hadn't been away from them for very long. Have you ever made this kind of connection? And have you ever been disconnected, just when you had made a deep connection? Paul didn't want to leave the Thessalonians so abruptly. He was forced to. And he had not been gone very long, but his heart longed for these people. Forced separation hurts.

Paul was not indifferent about the churches he planted after he left them. He continued to care for them, pray for them, write to them, and visit when he could. And when he planted a church, he liked to stay longer than the three weeks or so that he did with the Thessalonians. Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months (Acts 18:11), and in Ephesus for 3 years (Acts 20:31-32).

*we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you.* Again, notice the strong emotional component of Paul's words here – *more eagerly and with great desire*. Paul was proclaiming his love for this church. And he wanted the kind of connection and care that can only come with direct contact.

Today, we have a multitude of ways to stay connected to the people and places we care about. It is a good thing. Still, even in today's digitally connected world, even with the advent of social media, smart phones, and "FaceTime" communications, fellowship with people in person is the best. When you care, you want to be there.

I don't doubt the Apostle Paul would have made great use of today's technology. But I also believe he would have continued to travel to his churches as much as he could. Personal contact is vital for people you love and labor with. And this is why we support missionaries we know and see and hug and pray for personally. We want them to come and be with us. We want to lay hands on them, bless them, and send them.

We get excited when our missionaries come to see us again. We enjoy it when we go to that church out of town where together we once again pack food for people around the world. We have friends and loved ones who stay with us for the winter, but then go back north for the summer. And when fall comes around, we wait for the first Sunday when we see them again. Or people who had to move away, but who watch us online, and talk to us by text and social media. Others are shut in, but our hearts are with them, and it is sweet when we can visit. We have others who have to leave us for a month, but we look forward to when they get back, with their new baby.

One of our pastor's leaves on assignment overseas, and we want that big bear hug when he comes back. Our family will travel to see my grandson at his AirForce base. How we rejoiced when my granddaughter came back to live among us. How we weep for another granddaughter, even though she plans to be back in just a week. We already miss our dear sister, whose last Sunday is today, as she moves out west. And I yearn for the day when I get to see my dearly departed mom in glory.

Nothing will ever replace personal, physical contact. And this is why I never stop looking forward to eternity. Because although right now I have the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's word, and God's people, I long to see Jesus, and be able to touch him. That will be my greatest experience, your greatest experience, our forever moment. And he will never say goodbye.

*I, Paul, again and again.* In vs.17, Paul says "we," referring to himself, Silas, and Timothy. But in vs.18, he makes it personal. He wanted to make sure they knew he was invested in and concerned about their spiritual condition.

*but Satan hindered us* – This would mean Satan through his personal activity or through his proxies. The hindrance may have been an illness, or the opposition of the Jews, or some combination that Paul ascribes to the agency of Satan. Whatever it was, it was enough to prevent Paul from returning. Paul never made it back there because Satan was blocking him.

The Devil and the demons are going to get in the way of faithful Christian ministry. And they influence people who are against the gospel to be against true and faithful ministers and ministries. And it is not limited to God's obvious enemies. Even God's people can be used by the enemy to do his will in opposing and oppressing gospel work (Matthew 16:23). And false ministers appear to be doing the Lord's work (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

True gospel ministry will be met with satanic opposition. There are things that you attempt for the Lord, but Satan hinders it. And the church may do many good and noble things, but it will never be able to do all things. You

can put forth maximum effort. But you cannot expect the church to be everything imaginable to every person. Gospel work is not meant to suit everyone's tastes or fulfill every person's felt needs. It is meant to change and shape people's tastes and meet our most essential needs. And God uses opposition, without and within the church, to deepen our faith.

Remember that even though Satan is opposing us, he can only do so within the limits that God allows. God's plan was to use the Devil's plan to further God's work. So, within the limits that God allows, Satan hindered Paul and what he wanted to do. Because God had other plans.

Now you might wonder why Paul didn't just "bind the Devil," as some teach. Well, it's not as if Paul wouldn't have known about that, or taught about that, if this was some doctrine or practice that you and I are supposed to do. And in 2 Corinthians 12:7-8, when Paul said he was given a thorn in the flesh, which he said was a minister of Satan, he didn't say, "Satan, I bind you." Rather, he went to the Lord and pleaded for it to be taken away.

God's divine providence rules over Satan's plans. Paul tried more than once to return to Thessalonica. But Satan successfully frustrated Paul's plans. Still, it was all part of God's larger plan. Paul's desire and Satan's designs accorded with God's own plans regarding Paul's gospel work. God used Satan's plans to put Paul where God wanted him to be.

Charles Spurgeon – Remember this, had any other condition been better for you than the one in which you are divine love would have put you there.

Elisabeth Elliot – This hard place in which you, perhaps, find yourself, is the very place in which God is giving you opportunity to look only to Him.

Satan has plotted the death of many martyrs, and God has permitted those deaths. Yet God's purpose was not thwarted. Indeed, God's purpose was advanced. The death of those martyrs brought eternal blessing for them and for the cause of the gospel. Satan never wins against the gospel.

Consider the ultimate example, Jesus Christ our Lord. Satan's plot was successful; Jesus was killed on the cross. But it was the route of redemption for all God's people. As 1 Corinthians 2:8 says – *None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Everyone will suffer in some way. And Christians are guaranteed to suffer if they want to be godly. 2 Timothy 3:12 says – *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* However, there is a way that you can avoid suffering persecution. All you need do is compromise.

In vs.17-18, Paul said that he tried more than once to see the Thessalonians again, but he was hindered. Still, some might have believed he didn't really want to see them again. So, now, in vs.19-20, he answers that possibility by giving a reason why he wanted to see them again.

*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?* Paul lived in light of the Lord's return, and he called on all Christians to do the same. His chief hope is the return of the Lord himself, and the start of eternity with Jesus. But in the context of eternity, he also hoped in the eternal reward of his labor for the Lord. This would be manifest by those Thessalonians who had come to the Lord and were disciplined through his ministry. He looked forward to the glorious return of Jesus, but also our glorious reunion with the saints whose lives we touched.

When Jesus comes back, how great it will be to see him. To be in his immediate presence. But it will also be great to see one another, glorified, and with Jesus. Imagine those Christians who are near you in that moment, when Jesus returns, and we are *caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air* (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This is why I often say, "I'll see you here (on Earth), there (Heaven), or in the air (at the Lord's 2<sup>nd</sup> coming)."

Yes, as the marvelous hymn says, when you get to heaven, and when you see Jesus, you will sing and shout the victory. But remember it says when we *all* get to heaven, when we *all* see Jesus, we will *all* sing and shout the

victory, together. How happy I will be to see you and all the souls I touched for God's kingdom in the name of Christ. It will be the same for you.

While we wait for the glorious day of Jesus' return, it is a wonderful thing to encounter those who know Jesus now. Whether it be out and about, on some special occasion, or with those Christians you see at church every week. And it is a great joy when you reconnect with someone you know who loves the Lord, after not seeing them for some time. Or discovering an old acquaintance who has come to the Lord since the last time you saw them.

*Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.* Paul's joy in the presence of the Lord would be the people whose lives he touched. Your crown is going to be the people whose lives were influenced by your words, your works, your prayers, and your lifestyle. Your eternal reward is the impact, both in breadth and depth, of your life on the lives of others. And it will be more than you now know. Those prayers, those words, those resources, those relationships, brief or lifelong, they will yield eternal fruit, eternal reward, eternal joy.

Paul is currently in heaven, and so are all of the saints of his time. But he has not received his full reward yet. The time of full reward is in the future, and as vs.19 says, it will begin *at his coming*. The Greek word for "coming" used here is used 24 times in the NT. 16 of those 24 are referring to the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ. The return of the Lord is a major theme in 1 Thessalonians.

And Paul continually emphasizes that this truth is a motive for holy and hopeful living. He says that the Thessalonians were going to be his crown, his joy, and the fulfillment of his hope. When Paul says *crown of boasting* he isn't speaking of sinful pride, but of God, and what God has accomplished through him. The point is that the return of Jesus should motivate you to live for Christ, win others to Christ, and edify your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Father, we look to that day when we will all be together, forever. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Brothers and sisters, until we meet again, my heart is with you. And I'll see you here, there, or in the air. Amen.