

Paul's Glory and Joy

Call to Worship: Psalm 75:1

1st Scripture: Acts 17:1-15

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Hymn Insert- *10,000 Reasons*

Hymn Insert- *Amazing Love*

Hymn #387- *I Love to Tell the Story*

Introduction:

We have already seen the great care that Paul (and his companions) had exercised toward the Thessalonians, when seeking to minister to them, when they were there in Thessalonica. Clearly, although he had not known them for very long, he had developed a deep, godly, parental affection for them. Recall the words of verses 7-12, again:

"But we were gentle among you, *just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.* For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, *as a father does his own children*, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

Now, when Paul states these things, it is important to understand that he was not simply trying to flatter the Thessalonians. His actions among them, and the tone of this present letter, absolutely confirm all that he is saying here. Paul really loved these brethren! Now, how is it that anyone, let alone a former self-righteous Pharisee (who was an accomplice in the murder of the beloved deacon, Stephen; and who jailed men and women, for their faith in Christ), could love a heathen, foreign, unknown people in this way, and that, after only knowing them for such a short time (a few weeks!). What could possibly drive someone, far beyond the bounds of natural capability, to have this kind of a heart for other, unrelated, foreign human beings?

This morning, we will seek to open up the answers to these questions, as we, once again, find the Apostle Paul, pulling back his flesh, and exposing his sincere heart of love and affection for the Thessalonians. And hopefully, by the grace of God, such a love will continue to rub off

on us, as we find that it is not beyond the pale of our reach, or the reach of any, who are in union with Christ for that matter!

I. Paul's Glory and Joy

Paul had just spoken about the wrath that has come upon the hardened persecutors of the Thessalonian Christians, who were filling up the measure of their sins by contending with Paul and those who were seeking to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He wanted his audience to know that God was not impotent, unconcerned or unaware of the unjust ways in which the Thessalonian brethren were being treated. Vengeance was in the bosom of the Lord.

Paul continues to address this matter, as it relates specifically to the way in which he and his companions were chased out of Thessalonica by this wicked opposition. He wanted to further explain what had happened, from Paul's standpoint, after they were forced to leave, so as to reassure the Thessalonians of his genuine love and concern for them. In other words, Paul had not given up on them, as if they became unimportant once his own life was threatened. And so, he continues on in verse 17, with the statement, "But we (Silas, Timothy and I), 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."

Now, notice the strength and urgency of this statement for a moment, brethren, so that you can get a grasp of the real sense of what Paul is trying to convey to the persecuted Thessalonians:

1- John Gill notes this about the words, "having been taken away from you": "they were, as it were, passive in it; they were forced away on a sudden, they did not go of themselves; the word used is very uncommon and emphatical, and may be literally rendered, "we being orphanized from you"; which represents this parting to be like the separation made by death, between parents and children; when either parents are deprived of their children, or children of their parents, and are left orphans or fatherless; and just in such a destitute and desolate condition were the apostle and his companions in, in their account; nor need it to be wondered at, when they are before compared to a nursing mother and a tender father, as they were to these their spiritual children..."

And so, clearly, Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that their being forcefully separated from them in this way, was a painfully agonizing reality, and no small thing.

2- Paul further speaks of their being taken away from the Thessalonians in presence only, and not in heart. In other words, he wanted them to know that their minds and their hearts were continually with them, even though their physical bodies had been wrenched away. Again, you get a strong sense of the loving care they had for the Thessalonians, who might be tempted to think, "Wow, these guys preach the Gospel to us, tell us about suffering, but then run away with no concern for us, when we are faced with all of this persecution." Paul is saying, as it were, "Far be it from us! We had no choice, and we have not stopped thinking about you all, since we were taken away."

3- And furthermore, Paul had planned to come back to them very quickly. They "endeavored more eagerly (the idea of "endeavoring more eagerly" gives the sense of fixed strength upon fixed strength; it is to take great pains to the power of...) to see your face with great desire! Notice, the superlative language, brethren! "Endeavored, more, eagerly, great, desire...!" Do you see the sense here, brethren, in which Paul has dipped the quill of his pen into the blood of his pulsating heart, when penning this letter? He is shouting aloud, "We care! We love you all! We long to see you!"

And so, what is Paul talking about here? When they fled to Berea, they had intended to go back to Thessalonica again. But, even as they prepared to do this, the Jewish opposition from Thessalonica had made their way across to Berea, with great violence in their hearts, such that, Paul was forced to the coast (and that, apart from Silas and Timothy), where he was put on a boat and shipped off to Athens. Things didn't go according to plan. "Our hearts were longing to get back to you; we wanted to see your faces with great desire, especially because of all that had happened, but we were wrenched away, and forced even out of Berea, when we had made plans to return to you."

Again, brethren, as we surf through Paul's thoughts here, one by one, see the heart of the man, behind the written letters.

Paul continues, "Therefore we wanted to come to you -- even I, Paul, time and again -- but Satan hindered us" (vs. 18).

And so, Paul now expresses with fervency that not only did they desire to get back to the Thessalonians; not only did they plan to return, but they sought to put those plans into action, on several occasions, but were hindered. No matter how hard they tried, they found themselves blocked by Satan. Now brethren, before we move on to the next two verses, there are two significant things that should be brought out here:

1- Notice again, how Paul seeks to unburden his heart to the Thessalonians here, with the ink of his quill. For a moment, he even separates himself from Silas and Timothy here, to say, "Look, even I, Paul, made several attempts to get to you myself, but I was hindered." Now, he does this, not to elevate himself above Timothy and Silas, but rather, to ensure them that he also shared the same desire that they had. Now, why would he feel compelled to do this? Because Timothy and Silas did get to see the Thessalonians again, while Paul was at Athens (and then Corinth). Remember, Paul sent Timothy to the Thessalonians from Athens, to help establish them in their faith (see chapter 3:1-6). And also, in Acts, we find that Silas was later sent as well, and he would have seen the Thessalonians before this letter had gotten to them. And so, Paul is saying, "Look, we all tried, again and again to get to you, and even I, with Timothy and Silas having finally gotten to you, tried, but was hindered." Not only was Paul hindered, while at Berea, but furthermore, he ran into conflict and trouble in Athens and Corinth, leading him to spend much time in Corinth. And so, he wanted to ensure them, that he himself, was also determined to get back to the Thessalonians on several occasions, but was hindered...by Satan.

2- Notice, that Paul attributes his frustration to the active work of Satan here, and not the sovereignty of God. Why does he do this? Wouldn't it have been equally true for Paul to say that God had sovereignly ordained to keep Paul from going back to Thessalonica up to this point? Of course. However, again, he could equally say that it was Satan, who, working through the unconverted Jews and Gentiles, had hindered him as well. For Paul, both realities are true. On the grander scale, God, who ordains and sovereignly overrules all things, had deflected Paul in another direction (even contrary to his natural desires) for a time, and that, by use of the ill motives and wicked actions of Satan, who was very much, in opposition to God, stirring up enmity against Paul and the Gospel. Again, brethren, see the sovereignty of God, and the accountability of his creatures, working in harmony here, in accordance with Paul's

circumstances. Satan really hindered Paul, by wicked and cunning means. And God ordained this for good, at the same time, with good and pure and righteous motives. I note this, especially to say that Paul was not too "Reformed" to acknowledge that Satan was a real, living, breathing, active threat, who actually hindered him from doing what he righteously sought to do. Let this give us a properly balanced understanding of both the sovereignty of God and the accountability of His creatures, lest we emphasize either truth in a way that eliminates the other. [Satan is a lurking about, roaring lion, of whom we must be aware. And God is completely sovereign over all things. Both truths combined, leave us no reason to live in fear or anxiety, while maintaining a sober and watchful spirit at the same time. Neglect either of these truths and you will either slumber and fall into sin, or be so overwhelmed with anxiety, that you will be crippled and incapable of taking Gospel risks for Christ and His church].

Moving on, again, take notice of the large and extensive heart of Paul for the Thessalonian brethren:

"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" (vs. 19-20).

Here Paul gives the reason for why they were so anxious to get back to the Thessalonians and to ensure that they were standing firm against all opposition. Here is the very center and core of Paul's heart concerning the matter. "More than anything in the world, we want to see you there in glory at the finish line! Nothing else in this life matters more to us, than to see the people of God remain faithful unto the return of Christ! That is all our hope! That is the very heartbeat of our joy; indeed the crown of our rejoicing. The crown is that which is most evidently seen upon the king's head. It is that predominant ornament, which most displays the king's glory. And here, Paul says, in essence, "That which sits upon the very head of our joy; that which best reflects the motivation for the stirring joy that rests within us, is you, standing faithful and complete in the presence of Christ, upon His return. Give me nothing else in this world; give me not all of this world's riches and pleasures combined; just give me the utter satisfaction and pleasure of seeing you all make it home! "For you are our glory and joy!" What is Paul ultimately saying here, brethren? That the success of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ was his

foremost interest, upon which the deepest joys of his heart were attached! The churches were everything to Paul and his companions! Out of everything in this world that could serve to best represent the glory and joy of human beings (and many, many things can and do fill that gap), the church; the bride of Christ was what shaped the very heart and affections of Paul. And that is why he was so intent in trying to get back to the Thessalonians. You strive for; you run after, that which means most to you in life.

II. Closing Thoughts and Applications

Having worked through our text for this morning, brethren, let us then conclude our time, by considering a few closing thoughts and applications:

1) Now, brethren, while Paul's heart here, ought to reflect the heart of all ministers of the Gospel, I want to suggest to you that in a broader sense, this ought to be the heart of every Christian. And so, let me ask you this morning, "What is your glory and joy?" What drum does your heart beat to? If we could somehow unravel the desires of your heart over the last year even; if we could flatten it out on a large piece of paper and analyze it, what would we all see? Is your joy bound to the things of this world? Is your glory a glory, which is composed of material possessions and worldly success?

See here, brethren, and I challenge you to find it in every one of Paul's Epistles, that Paul's foremost interest was Christ's church. Do you see that, brethren? Do you see a growing theology of the heart on fire for Christ, here? It's unnatural! It's supernatural! It's alien and foreign to everything that makes up our flesh. Ponder the superlatives again. In our study of systematic theology, I wonder if our seminaries and our schools ought not to devote some time to this very issue: A theology of the "heart on fire for Christ," which is visibly affirmed by one's attitude toward Christ's church. How does one carry this kind of love, devotion and concern for a foreign people, who spent but a few weeks with him? Clearly, something post-conversion happened to this former Pharisee, which brought this about. What was it?

2) Such a heart as this, brethren, can only be manufactured in the factory of Christ's love! It cannot be formed in our best, most prestigious, Ivy League colleges or even seminaries for that matter. It cannot be developed or nourished by any means of the flesh. It can only be formed,

and it can only be cultivated and grown, by constant, committed, ongoing personal fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ! One must, with Paul, trudge upon the multifaceted dimensions of Christ's personal love for us, if we are to gain such a heart as this. And it must be nourished and cultivated therein, continually. It cannot be left out, because like milk, it will spoil. You cannot dabble outside, in the outer courts of the temple to gain this. You must enter the Most Holy Place, with the blood that speaks better things than the blood of Abel. You must walk through the corridors of understanding the true and deep level of your own depravity, and you must take a good look at the unmatched glory of God, and you must be able to say, "I don't belong here! I am a man of unclean lips, among a people of unclean lips." "But ahh! The blood of Christ, shed by His very personal love for me, takes me right here! And I can stay as long as I desire! What love! What profound love has brought me here, to the place of 'all that matters!'"

It's during such moments as this, that the soul says, "This is all that matters, Lord! Take my life and let it be consecrated! What will you have me to do?" And He points out with His finger, as it were, and says, "Over there! My church! The apple of My eye! Love her! Help her! Build and preserve her!" And suddenly, the Thessalonians and every other Gospel needy people, become your glory and joy! Because Christ is your glory and joy, His glory and joy become your glory and joy! And His glory and joy is His church! [That we would all make it home!]

Brethren, when the church of Ephesus lost her first love, I want to suggest to you that she lost this. She had many good and noble qualities (perseverance, works, doctrine...etc), but she lost that which was most important. And this is what is terribly lacking in the churches of America, and sadly, most particularly, Reformed churches, who so value their doctrine (and rightly so), but have a declining interest in exercising that doctrine; in carrying it beyond our brains and into our hearts, unto a life of humility and sacrificial service for the church (The AM service alone is a poor testimony to this reality. We have regressed so far away from the heart religion of the early church (all things in common, one heart, one soul, all for Christ... No foot in this world-- see Acts).

3) Beware of having a condescending heart toward illegal foreigners, which is ever increasing amongst conservatives. These are precious souls. While it is illegal for them to be

here, they are here, nonetheless. And whether or not they should go back, I'll leave to the politicians, but while they are here, we must love them and preach the Gospel to them. They are our brothers and sisters in Adam, and we all share the same sin nature. Do not despise them. Remember from whence you came, and why you are, where you presently are. Your filth and sin are covered by an alien robe of righteousness, given you freely in Christ. Don't ever forget that!

4) To the unsaved... All that matters in this life; at the end of the day, when you rest your head upon the deathbed, you will find that all that matters is Christ. How you relate to Him now, makes all the difference in the world. It is the difference between eternal life and eternal death! I hold Him out to you, again, this morning; the incarnate, crucified, risen and exalted Christ. Don't miss Him in the clutter of this lost, dying world!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21