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Treasure in the Kingdom of God, Part 3

Christ gave a rather sobering charge in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 6:19-21, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Aside from the exhortation to value kingdom treasure, among which we have seen is God's people (1 Thessalonians 2:17-20), this text tells us that valuing kingdom treasure will have a major impact on your life in the here and now.

Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

We've seen that in Scripture the "heart" is the seat NOT of the emotions (in the Bible that is the bowels, cf. Matthew 9:36-39). RATHER the heart is synonymous with the mind.

Psalms 14:1a, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God...'"

In order to value God's people, the treasures we shall enjoy in heaven (1 Thessalonians 2:17-19), is to expect a transformation when it comes to our thinking and so our desires, griefs, triumphs, goals, passions, and the like. In fact, we see that in the epistle before us! In 1 Thessalonians 2:17-19, Paul was quite clear that one of his most valued, heavenly treasures was the people of God standing with him in glory.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy."

As this was the case, from Matthew 6:21 we'd expect that this ought therefore to have a significant impact upon Paul, and sure enough we see that it did.

1 Thessalonians 3:1a, "Therefore..."

As we've said many times... when you see a "therefore" in your study of the Bible you always want to ask the question: What is the "therefore" there for? In this case, it tells us that everything that follows in the next section (which is 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13) is the consequence! In the words of Leon Morris, "The chapter division here is unfortunate. [*Therefore*] links what follows to what has preceded." (Morris, 2009, p. 68)

Gordon Fee added this:

What is about to be offered is an explanation for his sending Timothy to them; the reason for it lies with the preceding sentences: they themselves are part of Paul's eschatological hope. Because of this, and with concern lest it no longer be so, he sets out to detail both the fact of, and reasons for, the sending of Timothy. (Fee, 2009, p. 113)

Accordingly, 1 Thessalonians 3 is a description of the consequence of when God's people are your treasure! In the next few chapters we are going to see a variety of implications and so the expected transformation that will come over us if we hold in trust God's people. Notice the first implication is that when people are treasured, sacrificing for them will be willingly endured.

1 Thessalonians 3:1, "Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind // at Athens // alone."

On the surface, this doesn't sound like much. Yet you must see that this is a most significant

statement! First of all, consider the first expression: “therefore when we could endure it no longer...” The word for “endure” is *στεγῶ* (*stegō*) which is a significant word in the Greek. It means “to cover,” “to ward off by covering,” “to bear up against,” and therefore “to protect.” It was used of a boat which was water-tight and/or a roof that didn’t leak.

The implication is that Paul here is leaking! His heart no longer can endure it! He is wracked with concern and/or grief over the plight of the Thessalonians! Again recall that the Thessalonians had a radical conversion such that the entire Christian world was talking about them.

1 Thessalonians 1:9, “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.”

Recall, Thessalonica was the closest port city to Mount Olympus. As such, the city became THE idol capital of the ancient world. Accordingly, when you thought of this city at that time, you thought of idols, idolatry, and so idolaters! Yet God radically transformed a small group of Thessalonian Jews/Gentiles into genuine worshippers of the living God. The result was brutal, harsh, and unrestrained persecution from three sources:

- (1) The Jews,
- (2) The state (recall Thessalonica’s primary deity as a free city of Rome was Caesar), and
- (3) Gentile idolaters.

1 Thessalonians 1:6, “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation...”

2 Thessalonians 1:4, “Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.”

What makes this doubly brutal is that Paul’s ministry amongst the Thessalonians spanned about six weeks! In other words, this young church sat under discipleship, training, and so teaching for less than two months! That’s all! After which Paul, Timothy, and Silas were chased out of the city and doggedly pursued for 50 miles by the Jewish leadership of Thessalonica. Recall, that in Berea Paul was chased out by the same men who forced him out of Thessalonica! Such was the conviction and so demeanor of the Thessalonian Jews- they truly were fanatical! Add to this that Paul purposed to go back to Thessalonica many times, yet Satan thwarted him (1 Thessalonians 2:18)!

Accordingly, when Paul arrived at Athens, his concern for the Thessalonian Christians was so intense, the apostle had an emotional/spiritual breakdown. That is the idea behind “...when we could endure it no longer...” His emotions were leaking... he no longer could hold them in! Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

Even though he faced his own trials (3:7), Paul was more concerned about his people's spiritual well-being in the midst of their difficulties... [Paul's] love was far more than a mere sentimental desire for social fellowship with the church. It was Paul's desire to help the Thessalonians fulfill God's calling to be loyal to the truth and to experience spiritual maturity in their lives. (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, p. 76)

So what did Paul do? He willingly underwent sacrifice! Notice the second expression, "we thought it best to be left behind // at Athens // alone." Paul is piling word upon word here to denote the incredible lengths he was willing to go on behalf of the Thessalonians!

"We thought it best to be left behind." The idea behind "left behind" is that of being "abandoned" or "bereft." The word is used of leaving one's loved ones at death (Mark 12:19)! As such, the word is packed with emotion. And in fact, the word order is such that in this verse this is the emphasis of Paul's statement!

You ask, "What's the big deal?"

Let me ask you: "Where in God's word do we ever read of a minister 'serving alone' as a positive thing?" In fact, it is just the opposite. Christ sent His disciples out 2 by 2 to minister in the Kingdom (Luke 10:1). Accordingly, to be left alone is an accursed thing in Scripture!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up."

Recall John Calvin's words on Genesis 2:18:

The commencement, therefore, involves general principle, that man was formed to be a social animal... [And] although God pronounced, concerning Adam, that it would not be profitable for him to be alone, yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man's vocation, so that every one ought to receive it as said to himself, that solitude is not good... (Calvin, 2001, p. 128)

So Paul was willing to be abandoned and so "left behind." And yet, where was he?

"At Athens." You know your history well enough to know how significant this was. What was Athens at this time? The intellectual capital of the world! Most of you will recall that it was here that Paul entered the Areopagus to debate the Greek scholars and so present the glorious message of Christ (Acts 17). But what most of you probably do NOT know is that the "Areopagus" also was the judicial body of the higher court of modern Greece which had the ability to sentence a debater to death if they didn't like what they heard. In fact, Acts 17:19 is quite clear: Paul was taken before the Areopagus!¹ And so when Paul entered the Areopagus

to preach Christ, he did so at the risk of his own life! And from this text we learn he did it ALONE!

“We thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone.” The word in the Greek is *μόνος* (*monos*).² This is the topper! It is bad enough to be abandoned as a missionary... in the intellectual capital of the world. But to be completely alone, bereft of fellowship, encouragement, and support is tantamount to a death sentence when it comes to ministry!

Hebrews 3:13, “...encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Yet Paul was quite willing to forego the fellowship and encouragement of his fellow laborers if that meant that others in the body of Christ might be encouraged, built up, and/or established! Leon Morris wrote this:

It was with a very real sense of deprivation that Paul had said goodbye to Timothy. Though he knew that his helper’s departure had been necessary, he had felt himself abandoned. He had had to face the cultured philosophers and idolaters of Athens- and to face them alone. (Morris, 2009, p. 69)

How does this translate to modern life?

I dare say very few of us will have to be abandoned or excluded from the body on account of ministry as was Paul here (perhaps a nursing mother). Yet the question remains:

- Are you willing to be inconvenienced for the growth of another believer?
- Are you willing to be harmed for the growth of another believer?

Notice here what growth as a minister in God’s kingdom is to look like, it will involve a growing willingness to sacrifice time, money, convenience for the sake of another’s maturation in the Lord! It will involve a growing willingness to suffer slander, abuse, even persecution that others might know or grow in the Lord! Dr. MacArthur explains:

A true pastor is not an empire builder. A true pastor is a man who loves deeply... What we mean by that initially is he has affection for his people. He really cares about his people. And he bears a heavy, heavy burden of concern about his people. (Jr., 1990)

Later, he would write:

A man with a true and faithful pastoral heart is not concerned about his own success or his own reputation; nor is he preoccupied with his own trials. Rather, he is deeply concerned with the spiritual condition of his people, for whom he will suffer and rejoice with an unflagging affection. (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, pp. 76-77)

As you and I grow as servants of Christ, this will become more and more a part of our mindset! That brings us to what is a qualified minister.

1 Thessalonians 3:2a, “Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ...”-

When Paul couldn’t go to Thessalonica, he sent the next best thing, an immensely qualified servant of Christ, “Timothy.”³ We read of Timothy’s character and so his qualification in Philippians 2:19-22. And we read what God considers to be the essential qualities of a minister of Christ in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Galatians 1, Acts 6, 1 Peter 5, Isaiah 6, Psalms 101, and many other passages. However, Paul chose to highlight three traits which made Timothy qualified to minister to the Thessalonians; characteristics which must characterize us as well! Let’s consider them.

“And we sent Timothy, our brother.” τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν (*ton adelphon hamon*); simply put, Timothy was saved. He himself was redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. What does this mean? Because of the fall, every man is born with an overwhelming commitment to self; the love of self, the priority of self, the reliance upon self!

Think of it. It was with this that Satan tempted Eve. We read what the serpent said:

Genesis 3:5, “...God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”

Satan was tempting Adam with the idea that he was independent and so his own authority. Accordingly, in the flesh every man, woman, and child is committed to self-dependence and so autonomy! Yet when God moves salvifically in the heart of a person, He gives them a “new mind” (cf. 1 John 5:20). NOW that which characterizes the child of God is dependence upon Christ, not only as the basis upon which God accepts him, but also as the worldview out of which his life now flows. In fact, this is what “repentance” is all about as Christians. It is turning from self-allegiance/self-dependence to Christ-allegiance/Christ-dependence!

That was Timothy. As a servant of Christ he was dependent upon Christ in and through all things! His reliance wasn’t on his own wisdom, ability, or efforts. His all-in-all truly was Christ! Such will become our allegiance when God’s people are our treasure! Now flowing from this is a second characteristic, Timothy was “God’s fellow worker.” The word for “fellow worker” is συνεργός (*sunergos*) from which we get the English, “Synergy.” It comes from two Greek words, σύν/*sun* (with) and ἔργον/*ergon* (work).

Now in the Bible, to be a fellow-worker with God implies at least three things:

(1) His goal is your goal,

- (2) The means He has established for attaining that goal are your means, and
- (3) The attitude/mind with which you go about your service is His attitude/mind.

To be a “fellow worker” with God essentially is to be a gospel man or woman. Recall Paul’s words in Romans.

Romans 1:1, “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

The term used here is NOT the usual word we associate with being “set apart,” (*hagiois*, Romans 1:7). This a different term- ἀφορίζω (*aphorizō*). When used of a person, it implies both a negative and a positive action. Negatively it denotes the cutting off of all interests and attachments which are extraneous to the “set-apart end.” For example, Paul wrote this:

2 Corinthians 6:17, “‘Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate’ [same word], says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean...’” (cf. also Lev. 20:26)

Positively it speaks of the devotion of all faculties and ambitions toward the fulfillment of the “set-apart end.” And so we read this in Acts:

Acts 13:2, “And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me [same word] Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” (cf. also Exodus 13:11-12; Numbers 15:20-21)

The call of the Kingdom involves both! Thus Paul’s goals, life, future, happiness, and contentment were all “set apart” unto the gospel and so determined by it! Thus

- (1) Where He Went was dictated by the Gospel, Acts 16:6-8.
- (2) What He Ate was dictated by the Gospel, 1 Corinthians 8:13.
- (3) His Relationships within the church were dictated by the Gospel, Galatians 2:14.
- (4) His Freedom as a Roman citizen was dictated by the Gospel, Acts 16:28, 37.
- (5) What he Rejoiced Over was dictated by the Gospel, Philippians 1:18.
- (6) EVERYTHING he did was dictated by the Gospel...

1 Corinthians 9:22b-23, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

This too was Timothy. This is what is implied by the moniker “God’s Fellow Worker.” That Timothy was so identified tells us why he was qualified to go in Paul’s stead and minister to the Thessalonians! God’s will and way was Timothy’s will and way! Notice a third characteristic that qualified Timothy as a minister was that he was “God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ.” ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*en to euaggelion to Christou*). Timothy was all about

“the gospel of Christ.” Yet what is that?

With little pause, we assume Paul is talking about the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. Yet this is a very small part of what is behind this expression. The “gospel of Christ” literally is “the good news of the anointed one... of the Messiah... of THE KING.”

If we go back in Genesis to the beginning, we note that God created this world to be nothing less than a Kingdom⁴ over which He would rule with man.

Genesis 1:26a, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule...’”

Now Satan in his bid to destroy Christ, set his focus on toppling God’s Kingdom. Yet he could NOT do this with a direct attack on Adam and Eve; God of course would have defended them! SO in accord with his nature, Satan used deception and manipulation by which he got man themselves to rebel against God- which man did (Genesis 3:1-7)! With this, “the kingdoms of the world” were handed over to Satan as his dominion (Luke 4:5-7).

And yet that clearly was NOT the end of the story! In Genesis 3:15 God gave a promise that He would raise up a King/a Messiah/a CHRIST who would destroy the work of Satan and so re-establish the Kingdom of God on this earth! That King of course was and is Jesus! Accordingly, the coming of Jesus brought with it “the gospel/good news of the Christ” which now you must see is the glorious proclamation of His rule and reign as a King! And so, not surprisingly the first thing we read about Christ as He began His ministry was this:

Matthew 4:17, “From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” - we see it again in...

Matthew 9:35a, “And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom...”

In fact, in anticipation of His triumph Christ gave this promise prior to His crucifixion:

Matthew 26:29, “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

Not surprisingly therefore the second coming of “the Christ” involves the destruction of the kingdom of Satan and the re-establishing of His own.

Revelation 11:15, “And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.’”

It was this “Gospel” which Paul proclaimed in his ministry. Paul summarized his preaching ministry this way:

Acts 20:25, “...preaching the kingdom.”

Accordingly, when Paul described Timothy here as a “God’s fellow worker in the gospel of MESSIAH” he indicates that Timothy was one who diligently labored for the coming and so the establishing of the reign and rule of the Christ over this world. He did this NOT ONLY by proclaiming the good news of His coming (which would have included His substitutionary death on the cross), BUT ALSO by himself living in light of this Kingdom and laboring for others to do the same.

Oh Christian! If you and I would value God’s treasures we too must be men and women who:

- Rely exclusively on the gospel.
- Co-labor with God in His Kingdom purpose.
- Labor to hasten the coming of Christ’s Kingdom in our lives in and in the lives of those around us!

Now lest this burden you, understand that Paul’s exhortation here ought NOT to enchain us BUT inspire us as we grow as servants of Christ. Don’t miss it. Every prescription in the Bible *when gazed upon through the lens of grace* becomes a description of what we all will want as we grow in the grace of Christ! Right? (cf. 1 John 5:3)

Accordingly, actively and fervently allow this passage both

- To enhance your understanding of that into which God in time IS GOING to transform you by grace.
- To direct your focus and labors as His servants. This is God’s program. As such, you will NOT be “beating the air” if you strive accordingly in your life!

What will happen to you if God’s People are your Treasure. You more and more will find yourself:

- Sacrificing for the health and welfare of God’s people.
- Relying on the gospel.
- Endeavoring to co-labor with God in His Kingdom purpose.
- Laboring to hasten the coming of Christ’s Kingdom!

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End Note(s)

¹ David Winecoff in a sermon preached at Providence PCA in St. Louis, MO.

² It is from this term we get the medical term “Mono” (Mono-nucleosis) which is a virus that is readily spread through saliva, mucus from the nose, and even tears. According to the *WebMD*, “If you have mono, you can avoid passing the virus to others by not kissing anyone and by not sharing things like drinking glasses, eating utensils, or toothbrushes.”

³ Gordon Fee wrote, “...since this is an ‘after the fact’ commendation (!), why do it at all? The answer in this case is a simple one. Paul is going to send Timothy back to Thessalonica as the bearer of the present letter; and the commendation is simply pro forma, where the bearer of a letter in the Greco-Roman world, even when known by the recipients, is ‘commended’—historically as a way of authenticating the letter by authenticating its bearer.” (The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, NICNT, p. 115)

⁴ For example, in preparing the earth in six days, God repeatedly differentiates between “the higher and lower” making the lower subservient to the higher. With the creation of the sun and moon, the Lord employed the language of subservice and rule (cf. Genesis 1:16-18). When God created man, the Lord fashioned him in His own image for the purpose of exercising dominion (Genesis 1:26). Adam was given the charge to name the animals of creation as well as his wife. This is the prerogative of headship in the context of a Kingdom (Genesis 2:20). All of this is “Kingdom” language. And so in the opening chapter of the Bible we note such things as: regency, co-reigning, serving, caring for, and lordly pleasure. Accordingly, as we gaze upon Genesis 1-2:3 we behold far more than simply the creation of a physical world. We behold the creation and the establishment of a Kingdom in which God would reign through man unto the Lord’s own glory and pleasure!