

Study 3 Love, Faith and Reunion

1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:13

Our passage, from one point of view, is a simple, heart-warming personal story of an evangelist and his converts. From Athens, Paul has sent Timothy to see how the Thessalonian Christians are going—because he had left in the midst of malicious accusations and civic uproar. Now, he has moved to Corinth and hears from the returning Timothy that they remain faithful. He is overjoyed and writes to allay any doubts they may have about him. He wants to assure them that their relationship with Christ is real—that is, encourage them in their faith—and far more important than any pain they may suffer. In doing this, he describes, first, the deep affection he has for them, and what he is doing to encourage their faith (2: 17—3:5). Second, he speaks of the reunion they both long for and the present love that will prepare them for the greater reunion with Christ at his coming (3:6-13).

The passage shows that love is important to faith, that faith leads to love, and that love longs for the proximity of the beloved. These things are important for us to see at a time when relationships tend to be flattened out, even legalized, because they have been removed from the Fountain of love in God. May the Father himself cause our love to increase and abound!

2:17—3:5

Note the intense language Paul uses for his relationship with the Thessalonians: 'torn away', 'endeavoured eagerly', 'great desire', 'face to face', etc. There are layers to this relationship. The most obvious is affection. But it goes deeper. Paul's identity is linked to theirs—they are his hope, joy, crown of boasting and glory. All his aspirations, energies and delight are focused on whether they believe the message of God's love in Christ.

Paul cannot be complete without them (3:8) and in this he mirrors our Lord who is glorified in those who belong to him (John 17:10; 2 Thes. 1:10). He is fundamentally other person focussed (cf. 2 Cor. 7:3). Clearly this cannot be a love that lacks a personal centre and must live in the shadow of others. The Christian has found him or her herself, or rather, been found by the love of Christ and has a deeply settled conscience and identity and confidence. Rather, this is the focus on others that is by choice rather than by necessity.

Again, this relationship is all with a view to what it will be at the appearing of Christ. In that day, everything will be what it really is and Paul is relating in a way that will make sense on that day rather than on the basis of what things seem to be now. It is a focus on what will be at the end of our history that prevents us from becoming utilitarian in our relationships. Is it any use loving others when so often love is unrewarded? Is it worth keeping on trying when the results still appear to be shallow? All this is to doubt the effectiveness of God pouring Holy Spirit love into our hearts. and a joy that anticipates sharing the glory of God.

Second, notice that the objective of his relationship is not that they will like him better but that they will trust Christ more. He sent Timothy to enquire (3:5) about and to encourage (3:2) their faith. We recall that he is eager than his visit has not been in vain (2:1) and now he says that it would have been in vain (3:5) if they did not come to trust in the source of all love. His life is not about attracting people to himself but to Christ. This is the great strength of all true Christian relationships that they do not feed upon themselves but on Christ and do not draw attention to their own unity but the one Unifier. This truth is lost on the world that thinks its bond (mateship in Australia) is its own greatness. God has decreed that all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17) and that is the way it will always be.

Third, the relationship of believers with Christ is necessarily in the context of afflictions. We have been destined for this (3:3). The destiny was set in Eden when God 'put enmity' between Satan and the woman and all her progeny (Gen. 3:15). We are caught into the battle God has joined with his enemy the devil and there will be trouble. We may grieve that the world does not understand, but not protest its hostility towards us. God has declared war on all that distorts his glory and the world smells the rivalry and reacts. It is his will that we reveal his glory through suffering (1 Pet. 4:16) and overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Paul has already spoken of being hindered by Satan (2:18), and wants to be sure that the tempter does not succeed in breaking the resolve of the believers.

After 1500 years of Christianity being the favoured religion of the West, the turned tide is wetting our feet and may do more than this. Opponents of Christ will want to silence or sully our testimony. Scorn and threat may come our way. This is the time for the endurance of the saints. It is worth noting that every church in the Revelation letters is called on to 'overcome'. There is always something to surmount, to change, to repent of, to endure and to each one who does so, an appropriate reward is promised.

3:6-13

The above section has revealed a relationship between the love of Paul and the faith of the believers, and all this in the context of a strong desire to be with them. Now Paul turns from longing to joy because he knows they are doing well. He speaks about their faith and love, and again, in the context of a hoped-for reunion with them (3:6, 10, 11). This gives us opportunity to see faith and love working together in wanting to be *with* the one beloved.

The gospel is eminently practical and dynamic. It makes life possible because it draws people together. The world speaks much about love but often has in mind a personal sentiment. Biblical love is focused on the other and a desire to be with the other. We note several aspects of the trio of faith, love and union (or reunion).

First, the longing to be together is mutual (v. 6). The world can, for a time, manage mutual concern and care in small groups or tribes—particularly when they are threatened, but here, Paul describes fellowship or communion. In fact, we don't succeed very well at all in being united without Christ. The stresses of family relationships are notorious. Disputes in churches are constant. The world's laws succeed best by keeping us out of each other's hair. But Christ gives us reason enough to long to be with one another. The gospel does not succeed by merely managing our disagreement but by taking the hate out of our hearts! (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:10.)

Second, faith and love go together. Love is 'not of us' but it is 'of God', so where there is faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, there will be love. This is reflected in Paul being comforted because they 'stand firm in the Lord' (v. 8). It is reflected also in his rejoicing before the Lord (v. 9). His desire to be with them is so he may do something that will increase their faith (v. 10).

Third, 'our God and Father himself and Jesus our Lord' speaks of a fellowship from which all our human fellowship arises. We may say that the entire creation is the fruit of this relation between Father and Son by the Spirit. All our redemption is the outworking of the bond between Father, Son and Spirit. Clearly, we are meant to think of this relationship and its certainty as the certainty in which we live and love. We don't simply believe that God will save us; we believe that the promise of the Father to the Son concerning our salvation cannot help but be fulfilled.

Fourth, love 'increasing and abounding' is the way of holiness about which Paul want to speak more in his next section.

Fifth, our love is not an expedient to meet a contingency. That is, it is not simply that we need love to get along with each other. Rather, love is a preparation for a future because the

destiny of the world is to be gathered to Christ at his coming and for him to present us before the Father.