

A Faithful Minister's Passion

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Halifax: 20 August, 10:30 AM

Introduction:

Today we are continuing our sermon series in the book of Thessalonians.

- What a helpful epistle this is for our congregation at this time!
- The Lord loves us so much to give us such wonderful instruction for our help.

Just last week, we saw what makes the difference as to whether we benefit from His word or not.

- It is a wonderful thing when we see people profess their faith—when they officially receive the word of God,
 - but what matters all the more is that we do as the Thessalonians did and not only receive the word but also welcome it as the word of God!
 - That is what we do when we are truly born of God's Spirit—we look upon everything the word says as being from God, and we respond accordingly—
 - We repent, we believe, and we obey.
 - We don't look at the word as something we can take bits of and modify at our pleasure, but as God's word that has real authority in our lives.
 - I told you that if the word is not powerfully transforming you, you need to repent because you are wickedly suppressing the truth.
 - It is not an intellectual problem when people reject the word, it is just plain old rebellion and the way out is to repent and start welcoming it.
- Whenever you do that, we saw that it stirs up hostility in the people around who do not welcome it as the word of God.
 - They are trying to avoid the truth that you are welcoming, and it angers them.
 - Paul said that such persons do not please God and that they are storing up wrath that will fall on them in the day of judgment if they don't repent.
 - I pled with you last week to be sure that you are not only formally receiving the word, but that you are welcoming it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God that effectively works in you that believe.

Today, we will pick up with 1 Thessalonians 2:17 and read through to chapter 3, v. 5.

- This week, I want to focus on what this passage shows us about a faithful minister's yearning to see the people to whom he ministers in Christ at His coming—and how that yearning constrains and even drives him to minister to them.
- And then next week, I will plan to focus on what this passage says—especially in chapter 3—about what a minister actually does to establish and encourage those to whom he ministers—this work that he considers so essential for them.

Please pay attention now to the Word of God as I read it to you, beginning in 1 Thessalonians 2:17.

- See that you welcome it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectively works in you who believe.

1 Thes 2:17 – 3:5: But we, 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. ¹⁸ Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ 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? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy. ^{3:1} Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, ² and sent Timothy, our

brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, ³ that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. ⁴ For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

Thanks be to God for His holy word.

I. Here, Paul shows us what a faithful minister yearns for in his congregants:

- **It is to see them in the presence of Christ when He comes at the last day**
- He tells us what his great desire is for the Thessalonian congregation in vv. 19-20.
 - **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? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.**

A. As he explains later in chapter 4 of this same letter, Jesus is going to come back to this world in His glory...

1. And when He does, those who are in the graves will arise from their graves to meet Him and those who are still alive will join them to meet Him in the air.
 - The word that is used for meeting him is a special word that refers to meeting a king or a royal person as they enter a city or a country...
 - The people would go out to meet him and escort him into town—and Paul says in 1 Thess 4:17 that we will meet Jesus in the clouds when He returns and that we will be with Him forever!
2. In John 5, Jesus tells us that the wicked will be raised too, and they too will be summoned to Him in that day,
 - but for them His coming will be a day of extreme terror and destruction,
 - for as Mt 25 says, He will separate the sheep from the goats and will cast the goats into the place of everlasting punishment, away from His presence.
 - Paul is anticipating seeing the saints at Thessalonica as those who are welcomed into His glorious presence.
3. How stirring it is to think of this event!
 - Doesn't it make you shiver just to think of it?
 - Can you imagine how glorious it will be to be there and to see those that you love in the presence of our Lord?
 - and to know that they will be with Him forever and ever?

B. Paul says that seeing these Thessalonian Christians in the presence of Jesus at His coming is his hope, joy, and crown of rejoicing!

1. It was this hope of seeing them there that kept him pouring out his life for them.
 - He continually envisioned them before Christ—and it is this that made him so indefatigable in his ministry—so unstoppable.
 - He knew that God was true to His promise and that if these Thessalonians truly did repent and believe and persevere to the end,
 - that they would definitely be in the presence of Christ.
 - That was not just a hope-so hope (as when people say “I hope to see you there”), but it was a certain expectation...
 - A Biblical hope founded on the faithful word of God who cannot lie.
2. The hope of them, in the presence of Jesus, was what filled him with joy.
 - To see precious souls, human beings who were once lost in sin, now welcomed before of the face of the risen Christ...
 - welcomed into His Father’s house forever!
 - Presented by Him as a bride adorned for her husband.
 - Now completely free of sin, delivered from death, vindicated and confirmed as His own bride to live with Him forever.
 - Paul could already taste the gladness of that day...
 - We will see just how glorious Jesus really is—we will see His beauty!
 - We will see how powerful He is and how majestic and how loved of His Father.
 - But above all, we will see how great His love is for us!
 - The cross that shows us His love *now* will be much better understood and will fill our hearts with love for Him.
 - Paul’s heart was flooded with joy to think of seeing them in His presence.
3. And he adds that they will also be his *crown of rejoicing* when Jesus comes.
 - The crown of rejoicing was the laurel wreath that was given to those who won an athletic competition or some other prize.
 - Paul says that the Thessalonian church before Christ would be his reward for all his work—his trophy of what he had accomplished by his toil.
 - They themselves before Christ would be the final testimony that he had not laboured in vain.

II. Just look at how passionate Paul is about ministering to them.

- A. He describes how unacceptable it was for him to be separated from them.
 - In verse 17 he says: **But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart...**
1. The word translated *taken away* here is a very emotional word—
 - It is a word that was used to refer to children being taken away from their parents—or parents from their children.
 - A heart wrenching event!
 - That is how Paul felt about his separation from the Thessalonians.
 - It was entirely against his will.
 - He says that though he was taken away in presence, he was not taken away in heart.

2. You can read about how Paul was taken away from them in Acts 17.
 - After only three Sabbaths of preaching at the synagogue, the Jews drove him and his companions out.
 - This is what it says in Acts 17:2-5: **Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. ⁵ But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.**
3. This was very distressing to Paul because these Thessalonians had just come to believe in the Messiah—
 - Think about it—there were no New Testament scriptures yet...
 - They had just come to the Lord.
 - Though some were Jews who could understand the scriptures of the Old Testament that told of Christ, they were just getting started,
 - And many of these Thessalonians were straight from idol worship.
 - Paul was distressed because they needed more time to be rooted and grounded in the gospel.
 - It was no time to leave them!
 - He felt that he had to go back to them!

B. You can see in our text how strong his desire was to return and minister to them!

1. Look at the rest of verse 17—
 - **We 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.**
 - The fact that they had been torn away made them all the more eager.
 - Notice what strong language is used...
 - They *endeavoured more eagerly*—they applied themselves with urgent diligence...
 - And he says that they did this with *great desire*, using the word that is normally translated by the word *lust* or *covet*.
 - He just had to minister to them to ensure that he would see them in the presence of Christ at His appearing.
2. Paul goes on in the next verse to explain that he had personally tried to come to them on more than one occasion.
 - a. The only thing that had kept him away was Satan himself!
 - Verse 18 says: **Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.**
 - The word *hinder* was used to refer to blowing up a bridge to prevent an army from advancing—you would block his way.
 - b. Know, my brothers and sisters, that Satan does not want ministers to minister to God’s people.

- He works to prevent it.
- Paul does not tell us *how* Satan hindered him, and that is probably just as well because it leaves us to consider all the ways that he may.
 - It may be that the Jews were lying in wait for him so that he could not return without being killed.
 - It may be that the security they took from Jason who had lodged him would be forfeited if he were to return.
 - It may be that he was hindered by pressing concerns or arrest in Athens.
 - It may be that he was suffering from sickness or from the infirmity that he calls his thorn in the flesh...
 - We do not know.
- But we do know that Satan does many things to keep ministers from being able to minister to their congregations.
 - He will try to discourage those who minister so that they lose heart...so that they give up in despair...
 - He will throw temptations at them to lead them into sin—it is no excuse for a minister—but why do you think so many fall?
 - He will raise up persecution, as he did initially at Thessalonica—imprisoning and even murdering those who minister the gospel.
 - He will stir up strife among the congregation so that some of them will reject a faithful minister and turn him out...
 - He will cause members to lose heart so that they will forsake the assembling of themselves together...
 - Or he will distract them with the cares of the world—so often things go wrong on Saturday night or Sunday morning—
 - you get into a fight with your spouse and turn from church...
 - or you feel exhausted and have no desire to get up...even when it is not because you sinfully stayed up to late...or you even get sick on Saturday.
 - or someone calls you and dissuades you from going.
 - Honestly, it never ceases to amaze me at all the hindrances from sin and circumstances that keep ministers from ministering to the congregation.
 - It is very distressing to me when this happens, and it was very distressing to Paul.
 - You are eager to minister God’s word, you have been praying for the members, and then they are hindered...

TRANS> Paul says repeatedly that he could not endure this separation...

- He mentions this in 3:1 and again in 3:5...and so you see what he did.

III. When he could no longer endure it he found a way to minister to them!

- That is what love does—it is creative—it perseveres—
 - When there is not a way it makes a way (or at least does all that it can!).

- A. Paul shows that he sent Timothy to them to minister to them in his place...
- even though it meant that Paul had to be left alone at Athens when he very much needed Timothy...
 - Look from chapter 3:1 and you can see this:
 - **Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, ² and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, ³ that no one should be shaken by these afflictions;**
1. Timothy's task was to establish them and to encourage them concerning their faith.
 - We will be looking at what this entailed more fully next week—
 - but he was establishing them in the gospel so that they would be able to continue in Christ and His gospel without falling away.
 2. Paul explains that Timothy was perfectly qualified for this work.
 - He reminds them that Timothy is a brother to him and a minister of God and a fellow labourer with him in the gospel.
 - He had been recognised as a minister and the presbytery had laid hands on him.
 - They could receive Timothy as if Paul himself had come.
 - He would do what Paul would have done if he had been able to come.
 3. The object of this ministry is clear—it was to keep them from falling away from Christ!
 - To put it plainly, Paul was concerned that if they were not adequately grounded in the gospel, they would not be in the presence of Jesus at His coming but cast away into the abyss!
 - He refers to this in verse 3 when he says, that no one should be *shaken by these afflictions*...
 - But look at verse 5 where he makes it very clear that he is talking about apostasy...**For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.**
- B. No wonder Paul was so intent on getting ministry to them!
- He saw this as a matter of eternal life and eternal death for them.
1. Don't let shallow theology cause you to think this cannot happen.
 - Now of course that is true that once someone is truly in Christ, they cannot fall away.
 - But the New Testament is full of examples about people who receive the gospel and then fall away, and of warnings about this.
 - We saw that just last week with Jesus' parable of the sower—where of the four soils, three received the word—even with joy and were said to have believed.
 - but only one of these soils ended up bearing fruit—only one of them truly welcomed the word as the word of God.

2. So Paul knew that there was real danger that they might fall away.
 - a. For all Paul knew, some of the Thessalonians who had professed to believe were not yet really rooted in the gospel and might fall away.
 - That had happened with Judas among the twelve...
 - That had happened with some of the professing believers at Galatia...
 - It is something that is always a concern.
 - It may be that some of you have never yet really believed on Christ with saving faith that endures...
 - b. Don't get me wrong here...
 - It is possible and very desirable for you to have assurance of your salvation—you can know that you are saved...
 - If you welcome the word and you walk with the Lord, you have the basis you need for the assurance of your salvation.
 - But you cannot have such assurance if you are only half-heartedly following Christ...
 - You don't have any solid basis for saying that you have been born again because you don't have the fruit that accompanies true conversion.
 - And other people may not see that you are only half-heartedly following Him—though chances are they do see it and are concerned about you.
 - And there is a real danger that you will fall away.
- And besides that, there is another reason for Paul's eagerness to minister to them.
3. He knew that God uses faithful ministry to preserve true believers.
 - If you are a true believer, He provides ministry to preserve you in the gospel.
 - He does not preserve you by depriving you of ministry—by having Satan separate you from ministry—
 - but by keeping you under faithful ministry.
 - That is why He brought it about that Paul cared for them and that Paul sent Timothy to them...as Paul says to them...(v. 5)...
 - **lest they by some means the tempter had tempted you and our labour might be in vain!**
 - Because they were elect, God *did* provide the ministry they needed.
 - If you intend to preserve milk, you don't do it by leaving it out...
 - You put it in the refrigerator—you provide what it needs for preservation.
 - God provides what we need—the necessary encouragement and ministry of the word so that we will not fall away to ruin.

TRANS> So you see how Paul shows us about a faithful minister of the gospel.

- First, that he is one who yearns to see people in the presence of Christ when He comes.
- Second, that he is therefore very eager to minister to them.
- Third, that when he is hindered from ministering to them, he finds a way!
- **And now I want you to consider that:**

IV. Paul's passion for ministry is a reflection of our dear Saviour's passion for ministry.

A. Indeed, He came to see and to save that which was lost.

1. He was so earnest about this that He left His place in glory,
 - where He, being the Son of God, was fully honoured as God...
 - and He came here, made of the substance of a woman (taking a full human nature for Himself) and born of her, yet without sin.
 - He came as God in full human form, dwelling among us, to seek and to save that which was lost.
- He had to come to minister to us if we were going to be with Him in glory!
2. And it was required of Him, in representing us, not only to live a life of perfect obedience but also to give His life as a sacrifice for our sins.
 - And He was so passionate about His desire to see us in glory with Him that He endured the cross...
 - Hebrews 12:2 says that He, **for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**
 - The *joy that was set before Him* was the same joy that Paul speaks about—the joy of seeing us in His presence when He comes again to judge the world—
 - It filled Him with joy to think of us, ruined by the fall, redeemed and raised up to be His own bride—
 - His bride that He would present in that day as fully pardoned by His blood, as now made perfect by His Spirit.
 - What a loving Saviour He is!
 - What passion He has for us to pour out His life as the very Son of God that we might be with Him forever in glory!
 - That is what kept Him going through the sufferings He endured for us.

B. And look at Him now—He is personally ministering to you from glory to prepare you for the great day.

- Yes, He completed the work of redemption when He was here and God has fully accepted Him.
 - He has been exalted to sit at God's right hand until all of His enemies are made His footstool...but consider what He is doing there...
- 1. First, that He is gathering us in to His kingdom of salvation...
 - He is the one who sends ministers to preach the gospel to the nations.
 - He is the one who sends His Spirit to enable them to preach.
 - He is the one who sends His Spirit to convict us of our sin when the word is preached and to open our hearts to receive the gospel.
 - The reason there are ministers like Paul is because Christ has sent them.
 - Paul's heart is a reflection of his master's heart.

2. And the second thing He is doing is interceding for us.
 - He is praying for us—for our forgiveness—
 - His prayers are heard because He was crucified for us.
 3. And related to this, He is washing us with His word and Spirit to prepare us to live in His presence.
 - Ephesians 5:25-27 describes this ministry of Christ for us.
 - It says (Eph 5:25-27): **Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.**
 - You can see here that the day that Paul describes when the Thessalonians will be his hope and joy and crown of rejoicing is the same that Christ speaks of when Jesus will present us to Himself as a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle.
 - The same glorious day is in view for both of them—
 - and Jesus is working now through the ministry of the word to prepare us for that day—He uses the ministry of the word to wash us so that we will continue in His grace until the end!
- C. And of course Satan is still doing all he can to hinder the work of Christ—he does not want us to be in Christ’s presence when He comes.
1. When Christ was here, Satan threw up everything he could to stop Him.
 - He threw every temptation at Christ to dissuade Him from His ministry on earth—but not once did Christ sin.
 - It was by his agency that the Jewish leaders together with Judas and Pontius Pilate and Herod all worked together to crucify Him.
 - But the cross turned out to be the very altar on which He suffered to atone for our sin.
 2. Satan does all he can to hinder Christ and His work...
 - He is the one who came to us to tempt us in the beginning so that we would turn away from God.
 - He continues to entice us to rule our own lives and refuse to come to Christ or to keep on following after we have come.
 - He tries to make the gospel look foolish and he stirs up opposition to it.
 - And, in context to what we have seen today, he tries to keep us separated from those that Christ has sent to minister to us.
 - I already gave you that big list—how he tries to discourage ministers, to lead them into sin, to make congregations turn on them, to pull them away from their ministry by persecution or distraction, or to pull the congregation away from them...
 3. But Christ will not fail to bring His word to all those that the Father has given Him...
 - He will find a way to make it happen.

- In John 6:37-39, He says: **“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. ³⁹ This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. ⁴⁰ And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”**
- He describes this as something that He *must* do
 - **Joh 10:16** **“And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”**

TRANS> What a gracious merciful Saviour we have!

- He will not let anything stop Him from fulfilling His ministry to us.
- What a wonderful thing—what security there is—to have a Saviour like Him with such a passion to minister to us!
 - You are sure to be in glory, if you are truly His, because He will see to it!

V. It should also be your passion to do all that you can (on your part) to see people in the presence of Christ in glory.

A. First of all, you should do all you can to see that you are there!

1. Repent of your sins, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and continue diligently in the means of grace...
 - Welcome God’s word, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.
 - Treat it like the word of God because that is what it is.
 - It is God’s voice, God’s call—don’t dismiss it and leave your soul hanging on the brink of ruin.
2. Paul himself said that on that day, he wanted to be found in Christ, not having his own righteousness by the works of the law,
 - but the righteousness that is by faith in Jesus.
3. What a tragedy it would be for you to piddle around with a half-hearted profession of faith and be cut off when Jesus appears!
 - Jesus says that there will be many who will be in that dreadful way when He comes.
 - It is not something to be indifferent about—it is a real danger.
 - Just as the joy of being found in Him on that day is beyond imagination, so is the horror of being cut off and of hearing the words,
 - “Depart from me, for I never knew you.”

B. And parents, what of your children?

1. What matters more to you than that they are found in the presence of Christ on the day of His coming...
 - Is the thought of your children in the presence of Christ not your hope, your joy, and your crown of rejoicing?

- Is that not much more important than their career? than their success in sports? than their education? than their social life?
 - What will they profit if they gain the whole world and lose their own souls?
- 2. Teach them the word, bring them to church—you are responsible for them...
 - Satan will try every way he can to distract you, to discourage you, to get you to leave off family worship, to get you skip church.
 - If he cannot discourage you, he will use your wife to discourage you.
 - Some of you have been slack about attending—why is that?
 - Do you have something more important to do? What might that be?
 - Do you remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy?
- 3. And also see that you engage your children about their souls.
 - Talk to them about their relationship with God and find out how they are getting on.
 - Satan will do all he can to keep these conversations from happening.
 - Too often, even parents who are faithful to minister the word in family worship do not talk to their children about their walk with Christ.
 - Be sure that you do—do not let the opportunity to engage them before they grow cold and hard slip away—do it while they are young and tender.
 - Be a passionate minister to your children

C. And what of your friends and your relations?

1. Do you not yearn to see them in the presence of the Lord on the day of His coming?
 - Do you want them to be cut off and you have never made any effort to lead them to Christ?
2. You will say, “I am no minister.”
 - That may well be, but do you know Jesus Christ?
 - Have you told them of Him?
 - Have you urged them to come and hear His word?
 - Have you ever talked with them about their souls?
3. Satan will do all he can to hinder you—to discourage you from trying.
 - But be like Paul—do not let him stop you—be like Jesus!
 - It is too important not to find a way.

TRANS> So you too should be a passionate minister for Christ, doing all that you can because you yearn to see people in the presence of Christ on the day that He comes.

Conclusion: What a glorious thing it will be to know that you have had a part in it...

- Through your prayers, through your conversation, through your warnings, through your example, through your invitation people are there in the presence of our Lord!
- What a marvellous thing it will be to Him in all His glory, taking us as His bride!
 - Keep that day before you always!
 - Oh that you all might be there!