

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Christian Community 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Introduction

In the weeks and months following March 2020, we received an unforgettable demonstration of the vital importance and priceless value of Christian community. Pandemic or not, why is Christian community so important, essential to genuine Christianity thriving in a hostile world?

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

1. Eager Desire (17-18a)
2. Satanic Opposition (18b)
3. Joyful Anticipation (19-20)

1. Eager Desire (17-18a)

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and

with great desire to see you face to face,
18 because we wanted to come to you—I,
Paul, again and again—

Paul's words convey the desperate pain he and the other missionaries felt when they were driven from the newborn believers in Thessalonica. "We were torn away from you"—like orphaned children being forcibly separated from their parents.

He was determined that the separation must be short. These brothers and sisters meant too much to Paul and his companions for them to let the distance remain for long.

And to be clear, the distance was in body (face), not in heart. As with the believers in Philippi, Paul could say of these believers, "I hold you in my heart" (Philippians 1:7).

For these reasons Paul made multiple attempts to get back to see them face to face.

Eagerly—to make haste

With great desire—when used of sinful impulses, translated lust; here the word points to the intensity of Paul's desire

We wanted to come to you—it was our wish and will to come

Sometimes those who travel as much as Paul did never develop solid relationships with

anyone. They like the sense of having responsibility toward no one. They like the freedom of detachment from any meaningful relationships. But no one thrives spiritually that way. History is full of their tragic falls from grace and departures from the faith.

We were created for community. It is not good for human beings to live life alone. We start off in families. Widows and orphans are by definition vulnerable. Young or old, married or unmarried, we need other people in our lives, and they need us. The Church is the body of Christ. His love directs and pervades the entire congregation. The Holy Spirit binds us together in unity and grants the individual members gifts to be used for the good of the rest of the body. God the Father energizes each person with the power to benefit every believer connected with him or her.

For that reason the eager desire for reunion with the Thessalonian believers expresses the norm for how a healthy Christian feels toward other brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot be happy cut off from them. We deeply desire face-to-face connection with them, and for that we reason, we make it a high priority and actively pursue it.

Hebrews underscores the importance of doing so this way:

Hebrews 10:24-25

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

To be healthy, we need time alone. Time to meditate on God's Word. Time to pray. Time to align our hearts with God's. To be healthy, we also need time with other believers. The opportunity to invest in them and they in us.

Further, there are traumatic experiences in life when we need extra time alone to heal, but we must be careful not to let that become our standing pattern. We are especially vulnerable in those seasons, and those who pull away from interaction with other believers will find their hearts at risk.

Over the years I've observed that those who withdraw do so to their spiritual harm. Either there is already some prized sin undermining their sense of connection with those who love God, or they become increasingly vulnerable to Satanic temptation and attack.

Proverbs 18:1-2

¹ Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment. ² A fool takes no pleasure in

understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

Application

- In what practical ways are you making it a high priority to spend time with other believers?
- What interferes with your showing up when they gather?
- Who are the believers with whom you have eager desire to spend time face to face?
- When you cannot spend time with your Christian brothers and sisters in person, in what ways do you express that you still hold them in your heart?

2. Satanic Opposition (18b)

But Satan hindered us.

Paul is not so naïve as to think there can be gospel advance in the lives of people and Satan take no notice. As a veteran soldier of Christ, he knows the evil one will make countermeasures. Before Paul was converted he engaged in such sabotage himself.

Nor is he one of those self-promoting persons who claims the devil is after him whenever anyone disagrees with him. Sometimes people give Satan too much credit. Like the comedian year's ago with the famous line, "The devil made me do it."

That said, there is in fact an enemy of God and of human souls on the field. We are not playing religious games or merely engaging in gospel drills. We are at war, tearing down Satanic strongholds as we expand the kingship of Jesus to every heart that turns from sin to rely on the Savior from sin.

Ephesians 6:10-12

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. **12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

On occasion we sense the evil one's sinister forces at work. But much of the time it is easy for us to pass through life unaware of the spiritual dangers around us.

Peter warns us in 1 Peter 5:8-9

8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. **9** Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

Knowing that Satan is on the prowl is not a reason to go through life fearful.

1 John 4:4

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them [the spirits that deny Jesus is from God], for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

In our text this morning Paul says "Satan hindered us." Like an opposing army blowing up bridges and cutting off roads to disrupt troop movement, Satan made strategic moves to sabotage Paul's efforts to reunite with the Thessalonians.

We don't know specifically Satan did to hinder Paul. We know, however, about the jealous Jewish opponents in the Thessalonian synagogue. We know about the riots and the legal charges that required posting bond. We also know from Jesus in John 8:44 that the devil is a murderer and a liar from the beginning. He likes to use lies and violence to harm Christians and to undermine gospel victories. We see those tactics in the gospels from the enemies of Jesus, and we see them throughout the book of Acts. They continue to this day.

The name *Satan* means "adversary." *Devil* (*diabolos*) means "slanderer." At times he uses even professing believers to do his dirty

work of slander to tear down the servants of Christ and the gospel work they are doing.

We may choose to do nothing for the cause of the gospel, but we can be sure that Satan will not stop his campaign to destroy human beings and to sabotage their path to finding hope in Jesus. When we do engage our efforts to strengthen our bonds with our brothers and sisters in Christ the way the gospel deserves, we should not be shocked when there's disruption. The prince of the power of the air who energizes the children of disobedience does not take lightly our invasion of his dark domain. He will push back. But his doing so amounts to a mark of authenticity on our efforts to live in line with the gospel.

Application

- What are you doing for the sake of the gospel that would generate Satanic pushback?
- Is there any behavior or talk you engage in that strengthens Satan's cause rather than Christ's?
- What practical evidence demonstrates you are living in a way that recognizes the spiritual war going on rather than living life purely for earthbound goals?

3. Joyful Anticipation (19-20)

19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? **20** For you are our glory and joy.

These statements give the reason for Paul's eager desire to spend time with the Thessalonian believers and Paul's repeated efforts to do so. His joy and purpose in life is tied up in them. His love for them rises from his love for Jesus. His labors on their behalf rise from his labors for Jesus.

They are not merely his casual acquaintance and circumstantial buddies. They are living proof of the power of the gospel Paul has given his life to spread everywhere. They are souls for whom Jesus died. They are alive with the divine life Christ has given to Paul and to every believer. The oneness Paul feels with these brothers and sisters in Christ is a union produced and energized by the Spirit of God Himself.

Look at the words Paul uses to describe his feelings for them:

Hope—certainty regarding the future

Joy

Crown of boasting—reward of accomplishment; reason for shouting, the way a sports team does when they score a goal or win an important game

Glory—shining splendor, reason for praise

Joy

This is what you are to us!

Paul's expressions are full of emotion. Is he exaggerating to make a point? I don't think so. He's talking the way parents feel when the children into whom they've poured their lives succeed and make good.

The apostle John uses similar language:

3 John 1:4

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

But did you note the words "before our Lord Jesus at his coming"? There is a future orientation to Paul's exuberance.

Coming is a first-century word for a royal visit. It literally means "presence."

Think of the times throngs of people gathered to meet Queen Elizabeth II before she died.

In the ancient world all kinds of preparation were made for a royal visit. The proverbial red carpet. Streets lined with onlookers. Special presentations. To see an important ruler in person was a special historic event.

How much more to see the King of kings and Lord of lords in person! He has promised to return. He has promised to reward His servants.

When that day arrives Paul's joy will reach full height, for around him will be a crowd of brothers and sisters in Christ he personally served in the gospel. Part of the reason they will be there trusting in Jesus as their Savior was his dogged labors on their behalf. He was the connection between them and Jesus. They will, in the words of Jesus, "welcome him into eternal habitations," for he used well the temporal opportunities he had to make them forever friends.

When Paul thinks of that day of unbridled joy and crowned purpose, it his heart happy even in the middle of the gospel battles he faces. It's going to be worth it all. He's fighting battles that matter. He's gaining victories by the power of the Spirit of God that will reverberate in eternity. His loving connection to these converts is a forever connection. And the love he feels for them and the joy he takes in their wellbeing will reach an infinite level at the consummation of the age. It will be a victory day parade beyond anything the world has ever seen. Death swallowed up by life. Sin gone. The rescue complete. The eternal inheritance gained. Eden restored and perfected. The King in His glory declaring, "Well done!"

There are days when your labors for the sake of your Christian community may seem thankless. Times of self-sacrifice. Times of

Satanic disruption. Times of grief. Times of longing for reunion. Times you pour out your soul.

But keep in the forefront of your mind that *Jesus Christ Himself is well aware of how you are spending your life. Your love for your brothers and sisters is not a waste of time. It is not a passing fad. It is tied to forever. It is tapping into the heavenly kingdom. It lays up eternal reward* from the Lord Jesus Himself, who laid down His life for these sheep and rose again to usher them beyond the bars of death. He is coming back in Person, and His reward is with Him.

Matthew 25:31-40

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you

came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

Application

- What motivates you and brings you great joy? Is it the people with whom you have gospel connection?
- As you set your priorities each day, what place have you given to those who will matter forever in the presence of your returning Savior and Lord?
- What ways do you need to redirect your heart and your efforts to make your Christian brothers and sisters your joy, and hope, and crown of rejoicing, your glory and your joy before Christ?

Conclusion

In these brief verses the apostle Paul has lifted the veil to reveal his heartbeat and the life truly worth living for any true servant of Jesus. May his words reverberate in our own hearts, and help us thrive in a hostile world.

1. Eager Desire (17-18a)
2. Satanic Opposition (18b)
3. Joyful Anticipation (19-20)

Look at these characteristics again and what you see is not just Paul. You see Jesus. That's why His people live this way.

He showed eager desire for His people:
John 13 Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.
Luke 22 "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

His life was one of Satanic opposition:
From Herod the Great slaughtering infants in Bethlehem to the temptations in the wilderness, casting out demons, religious and civil leaders who were of their father the devil, the powers of darkness at work in Gethsemane.

His sacrificial life was one of joyful anticipation:
"For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, counting the shame as small."

Closing Song: Benediction

Discussion Questions

1. Given Paul's lifestyle and situation at the time of writing this letter, what would have been some obstacles to his preserving close relationships with other brothers and sisters in Christ, and what are ways he overcame those obstacles?
2. What are some reasons it's impossible to thrive apart from meaningful relationships with other believers?
3. What are some ways you have found help you make spending time with other believers a high priority?
4. What are the most common obstacles you face to doing so?
5. Why would being unaware of Satan's opposition put a Christian community at risk?
6. What are some common tactics that are favorite weapons of the devil?
7. In what ways does the coming of the Lord Jesus make our Christian relationships even more valuable and even greater reasons for joy?
8. What is the connection between Christlikeness and treasuring Christian community?