

## Godly Affection

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

“Age Compression” is a phenomenon that has been wreaking havoc on the toy industry. It means that children are “getting older younger” in that they are outgrowing their toys at an increasingly younger age. There was a time when the prime market for *Barbie Dolls* was girls, ages 6-10, but give a nine-year-old a *Barbie* today and you may wound her terribly. She thinks Barbie is for babies. She wants something electronic. Today, *Barbie* is only big with the 3-5 year-old crowd.

How many *Barbies* should be produced? What should be marketed to fill the void? That’s Mattel’s dilemma. Sociologists are more concerned that children are losing their childhood, but what should we expect when three-year-olds are in pre-school and six-year-olds are sitting at computers. I reflected on all this, sighed deeply and may have even shed a tear as I slipped my *GI Joe* action figure back into my desk drawer.

The western church needs to look long and hard at what we might call “Faith Compression.” How many believers see themselves as beyond a need for yesterday-type ministries like Bible School or Fellowship Dinners? They hunger for the new, the hip, the relevant, and, tomorrow, they will demand newer and hipper. Staying ahead of the latest trend is exhausting. The church slides into entertainment mode. Sound teaching is sacrificed for slick marketing. Shepherds are devalued while promoters are prized. The preacher is deemed less useful than the administrator.

This manic pursuit of “the latest” is largely what gave birth to this series I call “*An Ancient Faith*.” As we look back to Paul’s earliest letter and, perhaps, the earliest New Testament book, let’s keep our eyes peeled for things that have always rested at the core of healthy churches, things like godly affection. Paul’s feelings for the saints in Thessalonica pulse throughout this letter, but they seem to reach a zenith in our text, which drips of the apostle’s affection for these people. He knew them only briefly, but he fell in love with them before circumstances ripped him away from them. In these four verses, he describes his yearning to be reunited with them.

### I. Overwhelmed by the Emotions of Godly Affection (17)

<sup>17</sup>But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.

#### A. Paul Was Grieved over being “Abruptly Orphaned”

Earlier Paul likened himself to “a mother caring for her little children” as he described his sacrificial care for the believers in Thessalonica. As a shepherd over their souls, he had a right to expect monetary support, but any fixation on such rights gave way to his yearning to nurture these people where he had found them. He worked, probably as a tentmaker or canvass-weaver, so that the new believers would not be prone to skepticism about his motives or weighed down by a burden they were not yet ready to shoulder. Moms have been known to sacrifice personally so as to cut children a little slack. But, then, in his next thought, Paul likens himself to a father, who ...

“... deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup>encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” - 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 12

Now, in terms of the angst of being separated from friends that he loves, he likens himself to a grieving child that has suddenly been “orphaned away”. That is the literal meaning of the single compound word translated “torn away from”. The word is *aporphanistentes*. One does not have to be a Greek scholar to see a connection. This word conveys not only separation but also the anguish that attends separation. Paul likens the degree of grief that he is enduring over having been abruptly torn away from his friends to that of a child who has prematurely lost his parents.

### **B. Paul’s Longing Was Fueled by Time and Separation**

It had been only a few months, but to Paul it seemed longer. He could not get his friends out of His mind. He wanted them to know that he had done all he could to return to them. Why was his longing so intense? He was accustomed to coming and going in his line of work. His ministry required that he meet new friends only to bid them farewell before moving on to the next town.

Remember that Paul’s own strategy to evangelize Asia Minor was twice thwarted by the Spirit before he received a vision of a man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). I don’t know that Christ’s leading had ever been quite so clear to Paul since the day Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, knocked him off his mount, blinded him and told him exactly what to do and where to go. The proof that God was in this Macedonian effort seemed so clear. These Thessalonians embraced the Gospel. They also embraced Paul, and he embraced them. So, it must have been confusing and painful that his time with them was cut so short.

The Jews in Thessalonica allied themselves with the local city officials to harass the believers there. Paul himself was sneaked out of the city at night to avoid being harmed. Between the lines of the letter, we detect some sort of a doubt on the part of the believers at Thessalonica that Paul cared anything about returning to their city. Perhaps, this was because his enemies, who had no qualms about misrepresenting the Gospel, were also quite comfortable misrepresenting Paul’s motives. “He bailed out on you folks. He was here to dupe you, but when the heat was on, he left town under the cover of darkness. He doesn’t care about you. Paul only cares about Paul.”

Paul had not left Thessalonica on his own terms. He possibly felt that he had not planted the church adequately. He may have felt that he had not rooted these people sufficiently to withstand their harassers. This may actually have been a good learning experience for Paul himself about the power of the Gospel, for in the meantime, he learned from across the miles that they had embraced his message from the heart, receiving it “as it actually is, the word of God” (chapter 2:13). Their lives bore the evidence of faith, love and hope, even from the throes of persecution. I like to think that Paul was pleased to learn how expendable he was and how nonexpendable the Gospel was. Still, he could not let this spurious charge that he did not care about them stand.

### **C. Paul May Have Been Homesick for Friendly Faces**

Thessalonica and Philippi, both in the northern Grecian peninsula of Macedonia, were pleasant gigs. Persecution aside, the Gospel was at least received enthusiastically. But, when he left Thessalonica, Paul went to Athens. He found Athens a distressing place. It was steeped in superstitious religion on the one hand and bigheaded but empty philosophies on the other, He was there only briefly before moving on to Corinth, from which he penned this letter.

The Jews in Corinth once again acted out against the Gospel, but this time God told Paul, “Stay put. You will be safe.” Paul might not have minded being run out of Corinth. It was a decadent place. “Corinthian” actually became a word commonly used in Victorian England. It is still available if you want to enrich your vocabulary. *Webster* defines a “Corinthian” as: “a merry, profligate man.” Hmm? “Profligate” is defined as: “completely given up to dissipation and licentiousness.” That doesn’t help. It means drunken, sensual, reckless, whore-mongering...

I wonder if Paul ever thought to himself, while in Corinth, “Where’s a persecutor when you need one?” And, it wasn’t just a matter of “What’s a nice boy like Paul doing in a town like Corinth?” Even those who embraced the Gospel there were not the quickest studies in righteousness. Paul would later address the carnality of this church in two letters that bear the name, “*Corinthians*”.

“Perhaps, the jealousies, the dissensions, the sin which encompassed him there made him long all the more for the simple faith and love of his Macedonian friends.”

- B. C. Caffin, *Pulpit Commentary*

I cannot even imagine everything that might have been behind Paul’s expressed intent to visit and to be reunited with the Thessalonians: “In spite of rumors to the contrary, believe me when I write, ‘I’d really, really, really like to come for a visit!’”

## **II. Overruled by the Enemy of Godly Affection (18)**

... .<sup>18</sup>For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan stopped us.

### **A. Satan Thwarted Multiple Attempts to Visit**

Paul had actually sent Silas and Timothy back to Macedonia to check on the churches. Perhaps, this added fuel to the rumors that Paul could not be bothered. That would be why he singles out his own desire to return to Thessalonica. The Phrase “again and again” is literally “once and again.” Paul may have tried to return many times or only twice. Either translation is commendable given the fact that only a few months had transpired. In either case, the reason he never made it back was “Satan”, who literally “cut in the path,” or presented roadblocks to Paul’s good intentions.

“It was Satan, Satan the adversary – that awful being whose presence in God’s world is so great a mystery, but whose personality is so clearly taught in Holy Scripture ... The visit would have given him (Paul) great comfort. Satan envied him that comfort, that sweet communion with his Christian friends. – B. C. Caffin

Paul does not tell us how Satan blocked his return to Thessalonica. Was it the illness or malady that he called his “*thorn in the flesh*”? Did it have to do with the troublemakers in Corinth or the local officials in Thessalonica? Perhaps, this was about flare-ups of sin among the Corinthian believers? What he does tell us is that it was the work of Satan, and of this we can be sure. The minions of the devil are always at work to frustrate the sweetness of Christian fellowship, to strip believers of their faith and to accuse us and to cause us to doubt our standing before God.

### **B. Satan Is a Real Adversary of the Gospel**

Two boys were walking home after hearing a strong sermon on the devil. One asked the other, “What do you think about this Satan stuff?”

His friend replied, “Probably like Santa Claus turned out. It’s probably just your dad.”

Satan is not presented in the Bible as a concept or a personification of evil. He is a created being who rebelled against God. The problem that the modern church encounters with the devil has two fronts: Either, we dismiss him as myth or metaphor, thereby, minimizing his malice and the damage he can do. Or, we make too much of him, granting him attributes of virtual deity.

As a creature, Satan is exponentially more powerful and knowledgeable than you. He gets around better than you. But, he is not all-powerful, all-knowing or omnipresent. We have each battled temptation and lost, but I doubt that any of us have ever done battle with Hell's #1 guy. Satan rules a hierarchy of evil entities and demons. We may encounter them, or we may just sin because we are too captivated by the wisdom, values and enticements of our age. But, again, I doubt that the devil himself has ever caused any of us to do anything. It seems almost audacious to think of oneself as that much of a strategic threat to him. Of course, I could be wrong.

But, I don't hesitate to accept that Paul had Satan's full attention. Much was at stake. What could be more strategic for the dark side than to rob Jesus' chosen apostle to the Gentile world of his joy, his confidence, his peace, his trust in God and, ultimately, of his witness and credibility?

### **C. Does It Matter Who We Blame for our Interrupted Plans?**

Where the work of the devil intersects with the will of God is one of the most intriguing and confounding topics we can tackle. When is an interrupted plan the devil's mischief and when is it God's will? For that matter, when is anything ultimately *NOT* God's will, at least in terms of Him working all things together to accomplish His purposes? Think of Paul's "thorn in the flesh." He describes it as something God gave him *AND* as a messenger of Satan. Should it not be an either-or? Consider the trials of Job. They are merciless and gut-wrenching. They are designed to make Job curse God. They are the devil's handiwork, and yet, the reader is given a frame of reference that Job never has. God tells Satan, "Go ahead, give Job your best shot."

Finally, consider the death of Christ. Spiritual blindness, religious envy, political cowardice, lies, hatred, betrayal, denial and fear all converge to hang a sinless man on a cross. If anything ever smacked of a satanic work, it was the cross. Yet, we know that it is actually the epitome of God working things together for the good. But, in this case it wasn't just a matter of God taking something Satan was up to, giving it a little cosmic judo move and turning the momentum against Satan. In the mind of God, Jesus was the Lamb slain before the foundations of the world were ever laid.

So, does it ultimately matter if your plan or my plan or our plan gone awry is attributed to the work of the devil or the sovereignty of God? Perhaps, on some level, far above our heads, it does not. But, for us, now, it does. When whatever gets in the way of our plans seems to be just a thing that happens; a door doesn't open, a circumstance thwarts us - in such instances it is probably best, not to mention the more joyful course, to trust that God has something else in mind.

In the presence of something that evil unleashed on this creation, such as sickness, death or natural disaster, it is probably okay to acknowledge the devil's role even though we trust God to work things out for the good and have seen Him do so many times over.

But, in the presence of sin, we must be candid about the devil's work, lest we lose our ability to identify sin. Even though we know God will have His way in the end, if fellowship is sidetracked by that which is divisive, mean, disobedient, merciless, immoral or the like, it is irresponsible to dismiss it as God's will. That minimizes evil. The devil is at work against God's people. It is the difference in walking by the Spirit or grieving the Spirit. God will win, but if we compel Him to do so *IN SPITE* of us rather than *THROUGH* us, then, it is reckless to call that God's will.

### **III. Overjoyed by the Expectations of Godly Affection (19, 20)**

... <sup>19</sup>For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup>Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

#### **A. Paul Looked Forward to Seeing His Friends at Christ's Return**

When Paul refers to his friends as his "hope," obviously, he does not mean his "Big H" Hope that is to see Christ, but, that Hope has many extensions; eternal life, the absence of sickness, tears and death, and a confidence that we will once again see those we have touched for Christ.

When Paul speaks of his "joy," he does not mean his "Big J" Joy, which is Christ. Still, fused to that Joy are the extended joys of being done with sin as well as knowing that Jesus' kingdom is victorious and Satan's work is shattered. And, don't overlook the joy of seeing others who are saved, especially those we have known, have shared Christ with, have prayed over or have otherwise helped along the way.

When Paul calls his friends his "crown" he is speaking of a reward, but not his "Big R" Reward, Who Is Christ. This crown is not a jeweled crown of royalty, but a garland of victory and celebration. Such a crown rested on the head of the victor in an athletic competition. It was placed on the head of a bridegroom at his wedding celebration. This crown is all about jubilation. Paul would reach many people with the Gospel, but few had brought him more immediate joy than these Thessalonians. It seems natural that he would uniquely anticipate prizing them at Christ's return.

#### **B. Ushering Others to Jesus Is the World's Most Rewarding Work**

Many believers tend to equate the size of our reward in heaven with the number of souls we win. We mercenary westerners can turn anything into a competition, but I'm not sure that I buy that. After all, if some saints are gifted for this and others are gifted for that, it seems that those called as evangelists would have a leg up in this whole crown-receiving enterprise. All saints are gifted, in whatever way, to build up the people of God. The criteria for reward will be faithfulness.

"A man's greatest glory is those whom he has set *OR HELPED* on the path to glory. – William Barclay (emphasis mine)

There are many ways that we assist others on their journey to God. I suspect that little acts will factor in to our hope, our joy and our crown even though we never thought of them as any big deal. We will all be elated, not with ourselves, but with what our God has accomplished through us, and in many instances, through acts of kindness forgotten by us, but not by God.

So, let us enjoy the fellowship God has provided to us. And, let us repent of any obstacles that keep us from nurturing Godly affection for one another.