
Our Glory and Joy

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Russ Kennedy

Introduction

Here is a missionary named Dave (Dernlan). In much personal sacrifice, Dave has cared for the souls and ministries of men in Eastern Europe. He loves them, plain and simple. It is evident when he is with them. It is evident when he writes or talks about them. In all our planning for our upcoming trip together, their good is at the heart of everything we plan. His love for them and joy over them is manifest as you saw in his presentation several weeks ago.

Here is a missionary named Paul, who has seen the gospel bear fruit in the salvation of people in a town called Thessalonica. He has spent time teaching them a wide range of theology. He has organized them into a functioning, gathered assembly, a local church. Across a wide range of sin and cultural issues, he has carefully applied the gospel in their lives. Then, terrible persecution arose that forced him to flee for his life. Now, several months later and during enormous personal suffering, he writes to them concerned about the struggles and opposition they are facing. Listen to the top and tail of what he says:

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.

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

See how this section opens and closes with the coming of the Lord Jesus. This is why I have grouped these verses together even though there is a chapter break. These bookend the text and highlight the theme. At Jesus' coming, our boasting will be in beloved people who are blameless before Him.

Loving and longing for people in the best of ways for the best of things becomes our glory and joy.

A Glorious Passion**(2:17-20)**

Listen to Paul's glorious passion as he eagerly desires to be with people.

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.

Its Desire**(v.17)**

Ah, listen to how he describes his flight. He was “torn away from them.” Now he has tried over and over again to return to them. He has tried to return because he has a great desire to see them once again.

Its Opposition**(v.18)**

Returning to them has been hindered by Satan. He sees behind the afflictions and persecutions the active agency of the enemy of souls. Satan is most interested in keeping beloved people apart and difficult people together. He wants Christian fellowship and relationships to be strained and volatile. In Paul's absence, the relationship was being undermined by people who wanted the church's ear in order to teach them error.

Its Attitude**(v.19-20)**

How does Paul regard them? Athletes often have display cases with their trophies proudly put on display. The word for crown here was most often used of the laurels handed to winners of Roman athletes. He holds these Christians up in his heart as the crowning achievement of his ministry. The prize he seeks is people loving and living for Christ.

So here is a glorious passion – to love people in the church so much that separation is painful and reunion is joyful.

A Threatening Problem

(3:1-5)

Paul longs to return to his beloved congregation because of a danger that is threatening them. He is deeply concerned that suffering and affliction challenges faith.

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Its Measure

(v.1-2)

How important is this to Paul? It is so important that when he could not come himself, he sent Timothy in his place. Timothy's coming is a sign, not that he cared for them so little, but that he cared for them so much. He sends his brother in the faith and coworker in the gospel.

He sends Timothy to do what he himself would have done. He wants them to be established in their faith and to this end will exhort them about their faith. Running all through this text and others like is the centrality of faith and maturity in Paul's care and concern for others.

Its Cause

(v.3-4)

What is it then that has caused such concern for them that he would send Timothy to them? He understands how often people are shaken in their faith in the midst of deep afflictions and sufferings. Some of the troubles were shared by them both. Paul's were greater because of his ministry. Nevertheless, he is bearing them as a mature Christian. But he is deeply concerned that these troubles will trouble them. Let's think about this together:

They were faced with livelihood taking and life threatening persecution. Frankly, we know little of this. Yet sadly, we often complain as we magnify our small oppositions: the little snubs at work, the inconveniences of neighbors, the sarcasm of family and now we are suffering for the Lord.

They were experiencing great afflictions. The Bible tends to use this word to indicate physical pains and troubles. These are more familiar friends to us. Some of you are suffering long-term and chronic pain and illness. Some of you are struggling with baffling clusters of feelings, symptoms and experiences named with psychological labels. Some have been assaulted by the unexpected and sudden onset of an illness, cancer, heart troubles and so on.

As people we interpret these events. We are made by God to seek to understand them and to assign meaning to them. It is right here where afflictions can become spiritually dangerous. We are reminded then that we ought to expect the afflictions and difficulties that come because of living in a fallen world and because of living among fallen people.

Its Danger**(v.5)**

What is our danger? There are two spiritual dangers we face.

We are weakened so that we are more susceptible to the temptations of Satan. All through the Bible and through Christian experience, people relate how much more powerful many temptations seem to be during afflictions. Then, there are all the temptations that accompany afflictions: complaining, short temper, irritability, self-indulgence. These are too often excused as being acceptable and understandable.

We are tempted in our souls to question God and misunderstand His purposes in our troubles. Our bafflement at the unexpected setbacks weakens our faith and strengthens our doubts. We lose our spiritual stability and balance. We have all experienced this in our lives. Many Christians falter and fail in the midst of affliction and trouble.

Do you see it? A love for people and an understanding of what is truly at stake is being modeled for us.

A Shaping Purpose**(v.6-10)**

What is at the center of Paul's concerns for people? Is he just a sympathetic person who tries to make people feel better, as important as that may be? No, he shows us a relationship shaping goal for people to stand fast, strong in faith for maturity and stability.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Its Report**(v.6)**

Ah, how refreshing is good news from afar. Timothy has come with a good report. But note what it is that Paul is pleased over. They are still thinking fondly of him and hope also to see him again? Why mention that? Well, earlier in letter Paul talks about those who are trying to undermine his relationship and his impact on these dear people. They are using Paul's leaving, his absence and the present afflictions all to say that Paul does not care about them.

You know, this is sometimes the way it is today as well. People can so easily be persuaded to misunderstand and misinterpret others. Small oversights, unintentional slights, a passing remark, an unreturned phone call or unanswered email, an unnoticed special day – how often these are interpreted to say, “Well, they just don't care.” Satan makes sure that we see them. Others point to supposed motivations, providing unhelpful and unedifying interpretations.

Its Result**(v.7)**

How sweet it is when people love so well and so righteously that they give the benefit of the doubt. They don't allow these relational frictions to dull their brotherly affections. The result is that even when a person is suffering, there is sweet comfort.

Now Paul sees this as an expression of faith. That the Thessalonians continued to hold him in honor and desire his ministry flows from their faith. That relationship sustaining faith then comforts him when so much around pains him.

Its Reason

(v.8)

Why should we respond like this? What does it take for us to say, “Now that’s really living!” I sometimes ask counselees, “If you could have or change anything right now and life would be fine, what would it be?” When you think about people you really love, what jazzes you the most about them? A promotion? A new baby? A new car? A super vacation?

You know what makes Paul’s day? You know what gives him new life and energy? To hear how dear friends and beloved Christians are standing fast in the Lord. They are standing fast when it isn’t easy to. They are standing fast when some of what is happening to them doesn’t make ordinary sense. And this is the sweet life for Paul.

Is this true of us? Is stability and strong faith the most important thing we long to see in people’s lives?

Its Rejoicing

(v.9-10)

We all should be really challenged just by the words of these two verses:

Here is gratefulness fueled by gladness for others before the face of God. This is real emotions welling up from real affections.

Here is prayer for opportunity to minister to others, bringing their faith to completion. His praying is about their good and growth even in the face of great danger for himself.

Again, are we this kind of people in our relationships? Do we prize mature faith in others so much that it brings exquisite pleasure when we see it and when we can foster it in the midst of troubles?

A Foundational Petition

(v.11-13)

In all of Paul’s prayers we find what Paul prizes. For them, he is praying for an abounding love and hearts settled in holiness.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Its Theology

(v.11)

Why point out the theology of Paul’s prayer?

We often in praying forget who we are talking to. Yes, we are talking to God. But who is the God we are talking to? What is He like? What will He do? And if we are praying in the presence of others, for whose ears are our words shaped?

We often in praying forget that God is sovereign. Now this means two things for our prayers. It means that God has the power to do what we ask of Him. It also means that God has the right to chooses whether He does it or not.

Where do I get this? Notice the emphasis on “our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus.” All these titles and the reflexive pronoun, “Himself”, point to God in both His power to do and His freedom to choose. Then it affects what he prays for.

Its Content

(v.11b-12)

For our instruction, note then what Paul recognizes in his praying.

His praying recognizes the providence of God to direct (or not) so that Paul may come see them. There is no moral issue here. There is no promise to claim. There is simply a God who is able to make a way for Paul to come to them.

His praying recognizes the purposes of God to bring people to Christian maturity. In other words, now he asks that God effectively causes to come to pass what God has declared to be one of His purposes for Christians.

Here is the content of what he prays for – here is his petition. He prays that God will cause their love for one another to become greater and to abound. Is this what you pray for, particularly for people who are distant from you and going through difficulties? Would knowing that someone was asking this be encouraging for you? Here is a note to send them when things are really hard, they are struggling with understanding what is going on and are being tempted to really bad thinking. Write them and say”

I know you are going through a really hard time and I am too. I would love to be there to talk with you, to share with you and to help you through this time. But since I can't, then I am praying for you. With gladness, I am telling God how grateful I am for you. And I am praying that you will love others more.

Its Aim

(v.13)

We pray things like this because of God's agenda and aim. We pray for abounding and reciprocal love so that people's inner beings will be blameless in holiness when Jesus comes. Here Paul brings together faith, love and hope. Faith needs to grow and be established. Love needs to grow and abound. Hope needs to stay focused on the Lord and His coming.

Reflect and Respond

What then is our glory and joy?

It is people we love greatly.

It is recognizing threats to that relationship.

It is shaping our relationships by God's aims.

It is aligning our prayers with God's providences and purposes.

May God then cause us to increase in love for one another and abound so that we will be established in faith and holiness, blameless when Jesus comes.



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