

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Code: 52-9

Will you take your Bible now and look with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. Verses 17 through 20 is our text for this morning, a brief, simple, concise, clear text, one that will not shock or surprise us by what it says, but will remind us of some very important aspects of our own ministry. First Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 17 through 20. I've entitled this section, "Out of sight, not out of mind."

Life in the fellowship of Christians is built on in and around relationships...personal, intimate, life-sharing communion between persons. That's what our lives are all about. And in this simple and direct text we get some deep insight into Paul's relationship to the Thessalonians...how much he cared, how much he loved them, how much they controlled his heart, his feelings, his emotions and his desires. That's really the theme of these few brief verses...Paul's deep concern for the Thessalonians.

But as he moves through to describe that, it becomes apparent that he has some other relationships as well. Three of them will flow out of this text, three key relationships. Let's read the text, beginning at verse 17.

"But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while--in person not in spirit--were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you--I, Paul--more than once and yet Satan thwarted us. For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy."

These verses begin a new section in the epistle. You'll remember that starting in chapter 2 the Apostle Paul after commending the Thessalonian church in chapter 1 begins to defend himself as to the nature of his integrity. Obviously after Paul's very brief few weeks in Thessalonica, after he had left some detractors and some accusers had come against the church and tried to get them to believe that Paul was a fake, a charlatan, a fraud like so many other self-aggrandizing prophets and speakers and philosophers and religious teachers. He was simply in it for the money, the sexual favors, the power, the prominence, the popularity, and the fact was he was really indifferent to their personal concerns and needs, all he wanted was to take them for everything he could, get out of town and forever forget them.

Because it is obvious that that kind of talk was going on, he starts chapter 2 by reminding the Thessalonians of the character of his ministry, that it was, in fact, unselfish, that it was, in fact, sacrificial, that it was not self-aggrandizing, that is he made no great profit out of it or any profit for that matter. He had sought no money. He had sought no sexual favors. He had sought no power. And so he reminds them of that.

Then as he begins these last few verses of chapter 2, he turns to a little bit different criticism. Apparently some of these critics were saying, "The proof that he doesn't care is that he's never come back. He's never come back to show himself again. He may have said he cared, that was to get what he wanted. He doesn't care. He has willfully and dispassionately deserted you." And so he writes these verses to tell them why he hasn't been back.

You have to remember that while he was there he was gracious, he was generous. He only left because he was forced out. Back in Acts chapter 17, just by way of reminder, it says, "The Jews becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. And coming upon the house of Jason where he was meeting with the believers, they were seeking to bring them out to the people and when they didn't find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authority shouted, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also and Jason has welcomed them and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar saying there is another King, Jesus.' And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them."

They actually took them captive. They were going to do harm to them. But Jason gave his own life as a surety, a bond, a guarantee and they let them go on that basis. What it probably means was Jason promised that Paul would not return...Paul being the one they were most concerned about. And Jason said, to prove that if he does come back I'll give my life to you and you can put me in prison. Jason acted as surety. Jason put himself up, or something of his possessions up as a bond against Paul's coming back. And on that basis they let them go.

So it wasn't that they wanted to leave at all. If you look at chapter 3 you will note Paul's attitude. Verse 1, "Therefore when we could endure it no longer, that is the separation from you and not knowing how you were doing, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone and we sent Timothy. When I couldn't stand it any longer not knowing your spiritual condition, we sent Timothy our brethren, God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this."

Down in verse 5 he says, "For this reason when I could endure it no longer I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you and our labor should be in vain."

He could not stand being separated from them. He had great difficulty in that separation because he deeply cared about them.

So whoever was saying that he was indifferent to them was lying. It wasn't true. And in these few verses which I just read to you, he deals with his heart relationship to them. He shows us his concern. William Hendrickson writes, "At this point, Paul's style comes intensely emotional, the very words seem to tremble," end quote. You're really feeling his heart.

He hadn't known these people very long. He was only there a few months. He had been gone a few months. He didn't know them long and he hadn't been away very long. Still there was a compelling in his heart to be with them. It was not that he was indifferent as he will point out. They surely were being told that he would never come back "As proven by his continued absence, he had no concern for them. And so he writes these few verses to let them know how deeply he...he cares and how much he wants to see them.

As he unfolds this, and basically these verses are just about his concern for them, but as it unfolds there's sort of a super structure underneath and there are three dimensions of relationships that he deals with. The first one, the servant of the Lord must be characterized as one who loves his people. So we could say principle number one is...love your people. That's the first relationship.

For someone who is going to have an effective ministry, it starts there with loving your people. Paul writing some strong rebuke to the Corinthians might have been accused of not loving them. Quite the contrary. Second Corinthians 2:4 he says, "For our of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not that you should be made sorrowful but that you might know the love which I have especially for you." Paul loved the Thessalonians. The first few verses of Philippians he says, "You're on my mind constantly." He loved the Philippians. When he wrote to the Roman church in chapter 16, for 16 verses he lists name after name after name after name after name of people that worked along side of him that he loved. He so deeply loved the Ephesian church and the Ephesian elders and they so deeply loved him that, according to Acts 20:36 to 38 when he was leaving, they fell on his neck and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him just over the thought of not seeing him again.

No, the man was marked as one who loved his people and I think effective ministry starts at that point. Look at verse 17. "But we," boy, that is a strong contrast, "But we," compared to whom? We're going back to the prior passage. He talks about the Jews in verse 14 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out, the Jews who are hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. Contrary to the Jews who don't care that you get the gospel, contrary to the Jews who don't care that you know Christ, contrary to the Jews who don't care about your spiritual condition, we do...that's the contrast. "But we, in contrast to the Jews who resented Christianity, Christians and Christ, we do, brethren." Brethren is an endearing term

introducing a fresh section here of Paul's discussion of his relationship to the church with regard to this particular criticism that he was never going to come back because he didn't care. So he says, "But we, brethren," follow this one, "having been bereft of you." He doesn't say "having been gone from you" in just sort of generic terms. The verb here, "having been bereft of you" is used only here in the New Testament, but we know its meaning from other uses. It means "to be orphaned, to be bereaved." It literally means "to be torn away from." And that's what he felt.

"But we, brethren, having been ripped away from you." We didn't want to go in the first place. The work was not done. He stayed in Ephesus three years, and, Ephesus, it's questionable whether they had the quality of Thessalonica. He stayed in Corinth 18 months and the Corinthian church certainly didn't have the quality of Thessalonica. There's no way he wanted to stay only a few weeks in Thessalonica. He was ripped out of there, torn out of there. He experienced a forced, sudden separation and he felt orphaned. Remember back in verse 7 he talked about himself as a nursing mother who cares for his children, and back in verse 11 as a father who encourages and exhorts and implores his children...he had that parental heart and now he feels like a parent who has been torn away from his beloved children.

We've all seen that in the media. We live in a world where holocausts, natural disasters, wars, even drive-by shootings in the city of Los Angeles cause mothers' and fathers' faces to be on the screens of our homes in anguish and horror and fear and terror as they have been ripped apart from their children through death and disaster and dispossession. We understand that, that's the feeling Paul has. I'm not gone because I choose to be gone, I'm gone because I was ripped out of there. I am dispossessed, I am bereaved, I am orphaned.

He hadn't known them very long, only a few weeks. But they were in his heart deeply. Was it sentiment? No. Was it that he wanted some social time with them, some fun and games and so forth? No. Chapter 3 verse 6, he sent Timothy and, "Timothy came back to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you." He wanted to know about their faith. He wanted to know where they were spiritually.

Down in verse 10 chapter 3, "We, night and day, keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face and may complete what is lacking in your faith." He was concerned about their spiritual welfare. It wasn't socialization that he wanted. It wasn't sentiment that he missed. The man was concerned about their spiritual condition, and that's why in verse 11 of chapter 3 he says, "May our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you." We want to come back. It is imperative that we come back. By the way, in God's providence things cooled down and apparently he was able to get back on his third missionary journey. You can read Acts 20 and take note of that.

But he says, "We've been ripped away from you," note this, please, "for a short while." It indicates that though it had only been a brief separation so far, and though it might be only a temporary one as he on his third journey may have gone back to them, he still had a great longing in his heart for them. Even though Timothy had brought word back and said they're progressing, they love you, Paul, they love you, their faith is solid, their faith is growing, he still wanted to be with them. That's the heart of the shepherd, you can't rip him away from his sheep. That's the heart of a spiritual mother, you can't tear her away from her children. That's the heart of a spiritual father, you can't rip him away from his children.

I, while not comparing myself in any measure to Paul, understand this to some degree. People always ask me, "When I'm gone why I call back to the church every day?" For the days that I'm gone, there's a very few days that I would not call back and the reason is not because I have something to do or some question to ask, but because I must know the state of the congregation. I need to know how it is with the sheep. I find it very difficult to think about leaving this church, as many offers as I might have to do that, I find it difficult to consider any of them because I feel I would spend the rest of my life wondering about your spiritual condition. That's just how it is.

It isn't that the leader seeks the socialization and the sentiment of fellowship, but he seeks the responsibility of fellowship which is to see the spiritual condition of the people, to be sure that all is well. In Colossians 4, one of the most wonderful commendations of any person is the commendation of Epaphras of whom it is said in verse 13, "I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you." That is what marks out the noble servant, he cares about his people. And though they are separated here, Paul cares.

There are people in ministry, I fear, who care very little, who care a lot about their sermons, who care a lot about how they come across, who care a lot about their popularity, who care a lot about drawing a crowd, who care a lot about traveling around and being well known, who care about their preeminence, who care a lot about satisfaction, who care a lot about success...who care very little about their people. There are, on the other hand, many faithful servants of God who care much about their people, who in continuous prayer and concern hold up their people before God, who are very uncomfortable when being dispossessed from their people, who long to be in the place of responsibility, the place of accountability, so they know the condition of their flock. That's Paul. These people were new to him. It wasn't that there was some lifelong sentimentality, it wasn't that there was some bonding, as they say today, it was deep and profound over a long period of time...not at all. These were strangers in a sense. And yet because they had become his charge and he was now their spiritual mother and father, his heart was there. That's how it must be in ministry. You cannot effectively serve whom you cannot love and be concerned about.

Notice back in verse 17 again, he says, "We, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while--in person, not in spirit." Out of sight, not out of mind. Though they are physically separated, they are

still in his thoughts. "I have you in my heart." His inward affection for them was strong, even though the physical separation existed. They had his heart, if not his face. I'm reminded of Colossians 2:5 where Paul says to the Colossians, "Even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit." Why? "I want to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith." I want to see how you live, how you walk, you're on my heart.

That's why in so many of his letters he said to his church to whom he wrote, "I have continual prayer for you, I pray for you night and day, I remember you always in my prayers." Why? Their spiritual needs were in his heart. That's why in 2 Corinthians he says, "The major suffering in my life is the care of all the churches," and he didn't mean having to go to a lot of committee meetings. He had nothing to do with that. It had to do with the weight that was laid on the man's emotion, on his heart because of the immense capacity he had to care about people. And because he cared so deeply and widely, he bore this immense burden of care.

You know how it is with you, don't you? You carry the burden of care for the ones you love. You carry the burden of care for your children, continually concerned about their spiritual welfare, their safety, their well being. And if something is out of the ordinary, if something is out of control, if there's...if they're not around where they're supposed to be and you don't know where they are, or if they're is some diagnosis of serious disease, the burden is heavy...multiply it by the thousands and you understand the burden of the heart of the Apostle Paul. It was the care of the churches that weighed him down.

So he says, "We were all the more eager with great desire to see your face." Now that little phrase is just a sort of an emotional stack, just a piling of words with intense significance. He starts out, "We were all the more," that means abundantly, excessively, fervently and it's a comparative, we were more abundantly, more excessively, more fervently...then he adds the word "eager" which means haste, you're in a hurry. It's sort of a compelling thing, short of breath, anticipation. He's saying we were more abundantly, more excessively, more fervently eager.

And then he adds, if that isn't enough, "With great desire." And he throws in the word epithumia which most often is used of sexual desire, sexual passion. It is a neutral word, it can be used of any kind of passion, any kind of compelling, any kind of driving desire, any kind of desire that dominates. And so he is saying we have a fierce passion driving us greatly into an abundant, excessive, fervent eagerness. Boy, that's pretty strong stuff.

"To see your face." I love that phrase..."to see your face." That's a...if we had time, we'd find that that's a rich biblical statement...to see your face. It means to come into intimacy with you. That's why God says you can see My back parts, Exodus 33, you can't see My face, you'd die. Seeing the face is the full expression of the person. And that's true...I mean, a person is the face, right? I mean, we...we don't talk to the back of someone's head, if we want a conversation we want to see your face.

Very often I've said to my children when I'm having a conversation, "Look at me, look at me," because I want to see how they react to what I'm saying. They need to see how I'm saying it. That's why the telephone is only marginal. Sometimes we'll say, "Ah, this is too important to talk on the telephone, I want to see you face to face," right? Because there's an interchange of life, not just words. And so he says, "I want to be intimate with you, I want to make contact with your eyes, I want to look in your face. I want to be there." That was his strong, compelling, fierce passionate, abundant, successive, fervent desire. Boy, that's strong language.

Because of all of that, in verse 18, "For we wanted to come to you." The feeling made us want to come. It isn't that we didn't want to come. I'll tell you, when you love people and you're concerned about their spiritual condition, you want to be with them...you want to be with them. That's a compelling thing. The faithful pastor, the faithful servant of the Lord can't just dump his message on his people and then split...come back to dump the next message and then go on about his merry way. He's concerned about individuals. He's not only concerned about what he says, he's concerned about how they respond to what he says. So far from being glad to leave Thessalonica, they were not looking for an out, the truth is, they were looking for an in. They wanted to get back. They wanted again the fellowship. They wanted to know what condition spiritually they were in.

Paul said, using the same phrase by the way, that the Philippians had such a great concern for him, but they were hindered in expressing it because they were separated. Well that's exactly the way he feels. I have a great concern for these Thessalonians but I...I just can't get there. And notice how he personalizes it. He's "we" in verse 17 and "we" in verse 18, embracing Timothy and Silas...and now, all of a sudden, he says, "I, Paul, more than once." And he says, "I'm not just talking about the group here, I, Paul." "More than once" means repeatedly, it's the same term used in Philippians 4:16, the Philippians gave money to Paul repeatedly. And here he says, "Repeatedly, I, Paul, personally want to see your face." Can't delegate compassion, can't delegate concern, can't delegate love, can't leave it to someone else to be concerned about the condition of your flock while you're only concerned about the expansion of your ministry.

Paul did send Timothy back, but Paul as much as he wanted to go couldn't go. It wasn't from a lack of concern, it wasn't from a lack of effort. He loved his people. He desired to be with them. He didn't want to drop a load of information on them and then get out of there. He wanted to find out their spiritual condition, nurture that spiritual condition.

You know, depersonalization is one of the common curses of our time. It is said, I was reading this week, that 90 percent of the people who fail in their life's vocation fail because they can't get along properly with people. It has very little to do, usually, with job performance. It has to do with an ability to get along with people. It has to do with an ability to defer and be unselfish and to understand and to care. You may be trained with a university degree, a college degree, you may have a Master's degree, you may be skilled in your technical field but if you can't get along with people, you are a

liability.

That same inability to get along with people which is being cultivated by a self-centered, selfish Hedonistic society is showing up even in the church. Once in the church pastors were known as loving, caring people who nurtured relationships and the pastor was one you could go to because he cared and he was Christ to you. I was reading a book this week, Revitalizing the Twentieth-Century Church, written by Perry Ensawchuck(???), I quote, "The number one problem facing pastors today is they do not know how to get along with people," end quote. You know why they don't know how to get along with people? Because they don't care about getting along with people, they care more about themselves. That's the difficulty. Or, because they've come out of a dysfunctional society. But I have to believe that even if you came out of a dysfunctional society, if you walked in the Spirit the Spirit would enable you to get along with people. A man who can't get along with his people shows a lack of love for them, a lack of concern for them. And he can't get along with his people usually because his people don't do for him what he wants done, not because they won't let him do for them what they need done. It's a matter of perspective.

Paul loved his people. He would give his life for them. He said, "If it cost me my life to reach you, I'll reach you." He wanted to discern their spiritual condition. He wanted to evaluate their needs. He wanted to see if they were growing. He wanted to teach them more. He wanted to lead them, mother them, father them. All of that involves seeing their face.

You say, "Why didn't he go back?" It tells you at the end of verse 18. "And yet Satan thwarted us." Now this introduces to us a second relationship. Underlying this little passage here on his concern for them is this most interesting statement, "Yet Satan thwarted us." One who is effective in the Lord's service, one, must remember to love your people; two, to understand your enemy...to understand your enemy. That is a very crucial element.

Paul was very discerning. You know, in Acts chapter 16 verses 6 and 7 the Apostle Paul was moving on his missionary enterprise when he was stopped by the Holy Spirit. Acts 16:6, "They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word in Asia. When they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go to Bithynia and the Spirit of Jesus didn't permit them." Now here he is being stopped by the Holy Spirit. Over here he says, "I'm being stopped by Satan." Here was a man of discernment. I believe this man walked with God in such a way that he knew the Spirit of God from Satan. He understood when Satan invaded his territory. Satan thwarted us.

This is another relationship that any servant of the Lord has to take into account. If you're going to be an effective servant of the Lord, plan on satanic attack...that malignant, evil, spiritual, supernatural person, Satan, that fallen angel, is going to get in the way of effective ministry. Here was Paul separated from these believers, longing to be with them. His heart was there. His parental instincts

were there. He had been ripped apart from them. He wanted to go there. More than once he tried to go there. He could never get there. Why? Satan was thwarting him. Satan is very active in doing that. I'm not under any illusions about that. There are many times when I believe that I need to accomplish something for the Lord, to speak some place, to get a radio program on in a certain city, to accomplish some ministry here in the church and it just never happens. It's a good and noble effort and you make it several times, but it never happens. Satan thwarts it.

Sometimes I think people in a congregation forget that and expect the church to be everything imaginable to every person. And we may make a maximum effort, sometimes I believe the Holy Spirit doesn't allow things, but many times Satan doesn't allow them. We cannot blissfully and blithely carve out our niche for the kingdom in whatever way we want without satanic opposition. That's what Paul realized, Satan was hindering. He's active in doing that.

Let me give you a little input into that. How does he do it? Well, here are his methods...lying, he's the father of lies; tempting; snatching the Word away, Matthew 13; harassing, he harassed Job; imitating, disguising himself as an angel of light; accusing; sifting as he did to Peter, shaking him up, distressing his life; smiting with disease as in Luke 13 and 16; possessing as we see in the gospels. He even kills, he's the father of murderers. He's a murderer from the beginning. He devours. He deceives...and so it goes. He's got a myriad of strategies. Martin Luther was right when he wrote those great words, "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe. His craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal."

Now when he comes to attack, he desires to attack the church. No question about that. He desires to attack the church. He attacked the first church in Jerusalem. He moved right inside Ananias and Sapphira to make them lie to the Holy Spirit and God had to kill them before the whole church. He was attacking the integrity of the first church, the only church right after its birth in Acts 5. He attacks the church. That's one of his major ploys, to thwart the church, to prevent it from doing what it would otherwise do. Paul told the Corinthians, don't be taken advantage of by Satan. He's after the church. You read Revelation if you have any question about that. Just listen to this, Revelation 2:9, the church at Smyrna, "You have there...He says...blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan, an assembly of Satan." Pretty strong. You find in chapter 2 verse 13, the church at Pergamum, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." And He says there are some who died, even Antipas who was killed among you where Satan dwells. Satan always attacks the church. Chapter 2 verse 24, the church at Thyatira, He says, "The rest who are in Thyatira who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan." There were some in the church who were in to the deep things of Satan, wittingly or unwittingly. Chapter 3 verse 9, it says here about the Philadelphia church, "I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan who say they are Jews and are not but lie..." and so forth and so on. Satan's always in and around the church.

Let me go a step further. He particularly attacks the leaders. In 1 Timothy chapter 3 it tells us that when we choose elders and deacons, "They must have a good reputation with those outside the church so that they may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." The devil wants to snare leaders. Why do you think there are so many scandals among leaders? Money scandals, sex scandals, why? Because he wants to snare leadership in the church. He's after the church. He's after the church's leaders. He went to God one day and he said, "I want Job, I'll destroy him." God said, "Have at him." Couldn't destroy him. But he wanted the most righteous man who was the most faithful representative of the true God and he wanted to tear him down. He wanted to devour him. He didn't succeed.

You come in to the New Testament, who is the leading apostle? Who is it? Who is number one of the Twelve? Peter. Satan again comes to God and according to Luke 22:31 Satan says to God, "I want Peter..." God...Christ said, "Satan has asked for you, he wants you, Peter, to sift you like wheat." What does that mean? You know how they sifted wheat? They took a big basket, they threw it in the air like this...they sifted it that way. And then they would put it through a process where that which was heaviest would fall back down...obviously the wind would blow the chaff away. And there were other processes of turbulence. And so what is being said here is Satan wants to shake your life up. He wants to flip everything in the air and shake it all loose. He went after Peter. Why? Because Peter was the key guy. Peter said, "I'll go to prison and I'll die for You, I don't care what he does." Huh...the Lord said, "No you won't, you'll deny Me but you'll get restored." He'll get you temporarily but he won't get you permanently. So he tried Peter and didn't succeed.

Satan came back to God and he said, "There's another guy I want, I want Paul...I want Paul." And he gave to Paul, according to 2 Corinthians 12, a thorn...what?...in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to buffet me. Satan went to God because he can't go to any of God's servants without permission, he said, "I want Paul, You give me Paul, I'll destroy him...I'll destroy him." Couldn't do it. Paul prayed three times for that satanic thorn to be removed, God said no every time and then Paul said, "Fine, my weakness becomes God's...what?...strength." He's always after the leaders.

He got Judas. Satan entered into Judas and he betrayed Christ. But he was never God's to begin with. He can only get his own, he can't get God's. But he'll come after the church and he'll come after the Jobs and the Peters and the Pauls and anyone who is in spiritual leadership. He's not omnipresent, he can't be everywhere but he goes after certain leaders. I'm not under any illusions about the fact that I'm on his list, I am I'm sure somewhere...I don't know how much time he spends on me...but I'm on that list.

And what does he want to do? He wants to hinder the progress. That word "hinder" or "thwart," very interesting word, it's a military word, it means to dig a trench or to break up a road. If you've got your army sitting here and here comes the enemy, one of the ways that you would defeat the enemy is by making sure he can't get access to you. What you would do is send your soldiers out and dig a

massive trench. They can't cross the trench. Or you would go out and break up the road, tear up the road. Roads would be made of stone, you just tear it up so that they can't traverse. You hinder their progress.

Paul says...I want to come, Satan's breaking up the road. Satan's dug a bunch of trenches, I can't get there. I can't get it done. A warring tactic.

And it shows that the servant of God must understand not only loving his people but he has to understand his enemy. He's got to recognize satanic opposition. Now remember this, though Satan is opposing us, he is controlled by the overruling providence and sovereignty of God. He can only do what he can do within the limits that God allows. God allowed him to go after Job. God allowed him to sift Peter. God allowed him to deal with Paul. Why? Because in Job's weakness he was made strong. In Peter's weakness he was made strong. In Paul's weakness he was made strong. And the end product benefits God's Word. So within the limits that God allows, Satan hinders, prevents God's servant from doing what he desires to do.

As I was reading this, I thought to myself..."My, why didn't Paul just bind Satan? How long has this been going on, once and again, why doesn't he just say, 'Satan, I bind you!'" And then I realized there was no Christian TV so how would he know to do that. (Laughter)

Lenski writes, "This by no means excludes divine providence which rules in the midst of our enemies. Satan entered the heart of Judas so that he made plans to betray Jesus and God permitted the betrayal for His own divine and blessed ends. So Satan succeeded in frustrating Paul's plans to return to Thessalonica, but only because this accorded with God's own plans regarding the work Paul was to do. Satan has brought many a martyr to his death and God permitted it. The death of these martyrs was more blessed for them and for the cause of the gospel than their life would have been. It is ever so with Satan's successes. No thanks to Satan, his guilt is the greater," end quote.

Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He must be resisted steadfast and he will flee, James 4:7. We must have on the armor. But we understand. We have a very intimate enemy and he's not a long ways away, we wrestle him, we don't wrestled flesh and blood, we wrestle intimate close contact with principalities and powers and the rulers of darkness and spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies.

Paul was a deeply insightful man. He loved his people, he understood his enemy. Thirdly, there's another relationship here that flows out of this that is sort of hidden under the surface. If you are to be a good servant, you must love your people, you must understand your enemy, thirdly, you must anticipate your Lord...you must anticipate your Lord.

Paul lived in the light of the return of Christ. He says in verse 19 that very thing. "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming, for you are our glory and joy." The great motivation of the Apostle Paul was that the Lord was coming, the return of the Lord. This is a marvelous statement. Listen very carefully to what he's saying here, very rich. He says this, "Who is our hope? Who is it that we are hoping to see? Who is that which is all bound up with our future hope?" He's talking about his hope of future reward, his hope of eternal blessing. Who will be that hope? Who will fulfill that anticipation? And he secondly says, "Who is our joy? Who is the source of our eternal happiness? Who is the source of our eternal bliss? Who is the source of our eternal satisfaction?"

Then he adds this, "Who is our crown of boasting?" that's what exultation means. "Who is our crown to boast about?" He's using crown, festive wreath, victor's crown. "Who is my hope in? Who is my source of joy? Who will be my eternal reward? Who will cause the burst of joy coming out of my heart when Jesus comes? Who?" Well, you'd think it would be Christ and surely it is, but that's not his point here. Look what he says, verse 19, "Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus?" It's the whole thing, it's the presence of the Lord Jesus but it's you in His presence. That's my joy. That's my hope. Paul is saying, "Can you imagine that the critics are right that I don't care about you when you are my hope and you are my joy and you are my eternal reward?" You're it. What a statement...what a marvelous statement.

And it wasn't just them. To the Corinthians he wrote, 2 Corinthians 1:14, "We are your reason to be proud as you also are ours in the day of our Lord Jesus." Paul said, "I'm going to boast about you in the day of the Lord Jesus. When I see the Lord Jesus you're going to be my boast, you're going to be my joy, you're going to be the fulfillment of my hope." Oh did he understand ministry. What he understood was, when you get to glory you're not going to get a crown for your glorified head. Your crown is going to be the presence of the people that you were responsible to lead to the knowledge of Christ, the people with whom you planted the seed or watered or harvested, the people whose lives were influenced by your teaching and your living and your praying. That's your eternal reward. It isn't something you stick on your head and parade around saying, "I've got more of these than you." It isn't something like that. It is the accumulated impact of your life on the lives of others. That's why in Luke 16 Jesus says, "Use your money to purchase friends for eternity." Spend your money as well as your time and effort to bring people to the knowledge of Christ so that you can know them forever as your friends and the source of your eternal joy.

Paul isn't looking at glory and saying, "My...my joy and glory is going to be that I will get a crown for what I've done. My...my great boast in glory is going to be that I was faithful. My great hope is that some day I will reign with Christ and everyone will know how loyal I was." No. "This is my joy and my hope and my glory and my boast is you in the presence of our Lord Jesus." That's it. See how committed to people he was. This was Paul's eternal joy...some day in the presence of the Lord Jesus would be the people whose lives he touched.

Hey, there are going to be a lot of folks, right? It's questionable whether anyone in human history who has become a Christian since the life of Paul doesn't owe something to him. True? After all, he wrote thirteen books of the New Testament. He is going to have some great time when we all arrive.

You say, "Well, hasn't he already received his reward?" No. "No?" No. Oh, he's in the presence of the Lord and some redeemed saints are there, but the time of rewards is still future. When? Verse 19, "At His coming." Jesus said, "Behold, I have come quickly and My reward is...what?...with Me." The bemaseat, the time of rewards is future...future. That's the time of official rewards. In an unofficial sense he's enjoying it now, in an official sense it's going to take place, I believe, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, at that same time period. The bemaseat and then the marriage supper...and when? At His coming, at His parousia...that's a key word used 24 times in the New Testament, 16 of those 24 or two out of three it is eschatological, referring to the Second Coming. Sometimes it refers to the end of the Tribulation when the Lord returns to set up His Kingdom, such as its use in Matthew 24. But here in 1 Thessalonians it refers to the Rapture. Why? Because he's talking to the church. He's saying to the Thessalonians, this is going to take place at His coming...His coming for you which is the Rapture. They were waiting for that. Chapter 1 verse 10 says they were waiting for His Son from heaven. Chapter 3 verse 13 again indicates that He was coming with His saints. Chapter 4 describes the Rapture, verses 13 to 18, how that the trump will sound and the dead in Christ will rise first. So he'll get in to more detail about it, but he introduces His coming here and he has in mind the Rapture.

So, at the time of the Rapture when Jesus comes and we receive our rewards at the great time of rewards, at what is called the bemajudgment, then he says, "You're going to be my crown...you're going to be my joy...you're going to be the fulfillment of my hope." Then in verse 20, as if it wasn't enough, he repeats it emphatically, the emphasis on the word "you," "YOU are our glory and joy," with a strong exclamation point. You're it, you're what we live for...you in the presence of our Lord. That whole scene, He's there and you're there...that's our hope, that's our joy, that's our crown. The parousia of a dignitary in ancient times, the word was used in secular terms, indicated that some great monarch, some great king, some great leader had arrived. There were even coins minted in the Roman Empire and on it it said, "Adventis Augusti--Adventis Augusti," the advent of Augustus, his arrival commemorated. And there was pomp and circumstance attending to all those imperial visits and that's what would be conjured up in the word parousia...at the time when He arrives with all His glory, you will be my hope, my joy, my crown.

What did Paul use as motivation? He was motivated by the anticipation of his Lord. No wonder he was successful. He loved his people, he understood his enemy, he anticipated his Lord...there it is. You put those things into play in your own life and you will be a successful and effective servant of the Lord. You give your life to your people, you're very alert to the enemy, you walk in the Spirit of God, you know when it's the enemy, and you anticipate the Lord...you live in the light of eternity. Paul

said, "Don't question my love, don't question it at all because you're everything to me, you're my crown." That's how the servant of God must feel.

Father, thank You for our time this morning. Be with us to strengthen us through Your Word, confirm these things to our hearts in Christ's name. Amen.

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