OUR GLORY AND JOY

1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13

Key Verse: 2:20

“Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”

What’s your goal in life? Some people aim for a great achievement; some are looking for love; some, for big money. Noble people pour themselves into raising their children well. It’s good to have goals; otherwise life can get monotonous. But most goals in life are at best temporal, and even after attaining them we feel meaningless. In today’s passage Apostle Paul shares with the Thessalonians that his goal in life is helping people become Christians. He says he considers new believers his glory and joy. It’s more than just the joy of mentoring and seeing someone grow in some way. It’s related to a much greater hope, the hope to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes again. So this glory and joy are eternal. Today we want to learn what Apostle Paul’s life goal really means, and how and why we should make it our very own. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

As we’ve seen thus far, this letter was written soon after the apostles Paul, Silas and Timothy had left Thessalonica, and it was shaped by their experience there. Through their sharing the good news about Jesus, many were led to Christ, especially non-Jewish people. In chapter 1 Paul praises them for welcoming the message, repenting of their idolatry. Their new faith, love and hope in Jesus changed their lives powerfully and the message spread through them to so many others. But after spending just several weeks with them, Paul and the others had to flee due to persecution. After they left, some jealous Jews came and started criticizing Apostle Paul. They tried to say he was like a traveling philosopher who talked well but didn’t care about them and was only using them for his own enrichment. So in chapter 2 Paul defends his ministry, reminding them of his self-support, hard work, and especially of his tender, nurturing care, like a nursing mother. He also reminded them of how accepting the word of God had enabled them to join with all God’s people in suffering for Jesus’ sake. Now Paul addresses what was probably the hardest issue—that he left and never came back.

Read verse 17. Here Paul uses the word “orphaned.” He’s continuing his theme that he was like a mother or father to them, and they were like his own children. Their separation was like the pain of family members being separated. Usually when family members are separated, they cry a lot. They certainly can’t forget. They long to see each other again and do their best to make it happen somehow. Paul writes that they couldn’t stop thinking about them and had “intense longing” to see them again. Why did the apostles feel that way about the new believers in Thessalonica? It wasn’t just peculiar human affection or partiality. It was because their hearts and lives were changed by the gospel of Jesus. Because they witnessed firsthand their transformation by the work of the Holy Spirit, they could not but love these people so much. When we share the gospel with someone and they accept it, we become like their spiritual parent (1Co4:15). There are many reasons to love people. But there’s a very special love that grows out of seeing people accept Jesus personally.

Read verse 18. Here Paul shares personally. 1:1 states that this letter is from all three of them: Paul, Silas and Timothy. But here Paul singles himself out—not because the others didn’t want to go back to Thessalonica, but because they actually *did* go. We’ll learn about that later in chapter 3. Paul seems to be the only one of the three who didn’t go back to see them. And why not? He says he wanted to, again and again, but “Satan blocked our way.” He doesn’t give any further details, and we don’t know specifically what events he’s talking about. But generally Paul is saying that the devil is real, and that he tries to hinder the ministry of the gospel, especially among new believers, planting doubt, mistrust and suspicion. Paul was in a spiritual battle against him. If we’re going to be effective in leading people to Christ, we too need to be fighting against Satan.

Read verse 19. Here Paul is making a powerful statement. Just because he couldn’t return to them didn’t mean he lost interest in them. There’s the saying, “Out of sight, out of mind.” So often that’s true. When we don’t see people we easily forget about them. But Paul didn’t forget about them at all. He saw these people as his hope, joy and crown. And his focus on them is related to a great future event. What is it? It’s when the Lord Jesus comes again, and believers get to be in his presence. At that time, all those who believe in Jesus and long to see him will receive “the crown of righteousness” (cf. 2Ti4:8). The Bible also calls it “the crown of life” (Jas1:12). In the ancient world athletes who won competitions would receive a crown of leaves. But this crown, the Bible says, will last forever (1Co9:25; 1Pe5:4). In this world, those who love Jesus are slandered and shamed, but when he comes again, they’ll receive a glorious, eternal crown. Here Paul says this crown is actually people that we led to Christ.

For many people, their main life goal is human recognition. They want people to recognize and praise them. Some even do it in ministry. They want people to respect and honor them for what they consider their spiritual fruit. It comes out when they gather together with other believers and in various ways try to show off how fruitful they think they’ve been. But our real goal has to be pleasing God, and God’s recognition. It’s invisible. And our spiritual fruit, our crown, is also invisible right now. It’s not bringing people to a certain church or conference; it’s leading people to know Christ himself. And we may not even know or remember how we did that. But God knows, and God remembers. We also learn here that we should be praying and ministering to people not to talk about it to others or get them to do some visible activity, but with the real goal in mind: when Jesus comes again. At that time, Paul writes elsewhere, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward” (1Co3:11–14). We can’t use clever manipulation, or money, or human pushing. Only patient Bible study and prayer helps people have a personal foundation in Christ. With the glorious day of Jesus’ second coming in mind, Paul struggled constantly to help people until they were firmly rooted in knowing Christ personally (Gal4:19).

Read verse 20. As we know, some people try to live vicariously through others. It’s unhealthy. But that’s not what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking about the beautiful changed lives of new believers. It affirms that the gospel is true. It also affirms who is a real servant of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus taught us, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt7:15–20). Paul wrote to those he led to Christ in a different city, “Even if I am not an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1Co9:2; cf. 2Co3:2,3).

Read verse 20 again. It tells us how much these new believers meant to Paul. It was not a numbers game; each one was so precious. Each one was like a precious jewel. This is why Paul longed so intensely to see them, and why they were constantly in his mind. It was based not on self-glory, but on the healthy desire to see them standing firm in faith and love in Jesus (3:8,12). He wanted to see them strong in heart, and blameless and holy in God’s presence (3:13). In the 1980s the millionaire Malcolm Forbes coined the popular saying, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” It touched a nerve with people pursuing wealth and affluence, and it still motivates so many today. People dedicate their entire lives to building up wealth in property, investments, and bank accounts. But it makes people selfish and cruel, and it ends up being so meaningless. We learn from Paul a far more beautiful life goal: leading people to Christ and building them up. In the words of an old hymn, we’ll all receive a crown, but some will have stars in theirs, the stars of people they led to Jesus.

So how can we have such a healthy desire, such a life goal? It’s possible when we long to see our Lord Jesus himself in person and are really seeking his honor and glory through our lives. It’s possible when his love fills our souls and we truly love others with his love (3:12b).

Read 3:1–3. We notice that Paul uses the phrase “we could stand it no longer.” What does it mean? He uses it again in verse 5. It tells us how worried he was about these new believers. He knew he was like a lightning rod for persecution, so he wanted to protect God’s people from that. But he was willing to be left all by himself in Athens and send Timothy back to Thessalonica to take care of them. Timothy was not a nobody; Paul calls him “our brother” and “co-worker in God’s service.” Timothy was spiritually equipped to strengthen and encourage these new believers in faith.

Read verses 3–5. In this letter Paul has already mentioned persecution several times before (1:6; 2:2,14,15). At first it may seem a bit random, but it’s not. Our Lord Jesus warned us that when trouble or persecution comes because of the word of God, many fall away (Mt13:21; 24:9,10; Mk4:17). The devil, also known as “the tempter,” tempts people to escape the suffering of persecution. Many people want to hear that in following Jesus, everything will be happy and blessed. But in fact, real believers in Jesus always encounter various kinds of persecution. It may be through verbal abuse, or slander and accusations, or loss of friendships, or even betrayal from loved ones. In helping people spiritually, we shouldn’t just shelter them; we need to encourage them to have faith strong enough to endure persecution for Jesus’ sake.

Read verse 6. When he heard Timothy’s report, Paul must have been so relieved, and so encouraged. These believers had not swayed in their faith in Jesus and love and thanks for Paul. How encouraged was he? Read verses 7–9. He says in the midst of their own ongoing persecution they were “encouraged,” they “really live,” and are full of joy in the presence of God. When we persevere in faith in the midst of persecution, we bring such encouragement to all God’s people. Read verse 10. Paul was not complacent; he knew that these new believers were so good, but he also knew they needed to have complete faith, and for that to happen, they needed further gospel teaching. How could he know what was lacking in their faith? Only through the discernment given by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, we shouldn’t sit back and relax; we need to pray and ask the Holy Spirit’s help to build people up until they are mature in Christ. So how did Paul pray for them? It was very simple. Read verses 11–13. His first prayer topic was to go and see them again. His second prayer topic was that their love would increase and overflow. This may have been what was lacking in their faith. His third prayer topic was that they would be holy and blameless when Jesus comes again. We need to learn how to pray for people the way Paul did.

Read 2:20 again. May God grant us the living hope that Jesus is coming again, and the glorious and joyful personal life goal of leading people to him.