

## IV. Paul's Glory and Joy

October 20/21, 2010

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

**Aim:** To see in Paul's description of the Thessalonian church and their Jewish adversaries that our response to the Word of God determines our eternal destiny: either in 'glory and joy,' or in uttermost wrath.

### A. Paul Remembers His First Visit to Thessalonica (1 Th. 2:13-16)

Paul's purpose in this part of his first letter to the Thessalonians is to encourage his readers to hold fast to their new faith. He knows that accepting the gospel has brought them stiff opposition. And he knows furthermore that although they have stood up to this well so far, they need encouragement to keep persevering. One way in which he has tried to encourage them has been through congratulating them on their progress (1:2-10). Another has been to refute slanders against himself, Silas, and Timothy by recalling the manner of their preaching and conduct while in Thessalonica (2:1-12). If that was not enough to persuade them, then perhaps a reminder of the way in which they had originally embraced the message would settle their minds. In 2:13-16 he says more about the way they welcomed the good news. In doing so he provides both a climax to his historical reminiscences and a final compelling reason for remaining true to the faith.

This second thanksgiving resumes several themes (word/gospel, suffering, imitators, and wrath) from the first thanksgiving passage (1:2-10). It does not merely continue or repeat the thanksgiving of 1:2-10; it amplifies it. Moreover, this second thanksgiving naturally flows out of the previous section, Paul's defense (2:1-12). In this passage, Paul stresses the Thessalonians' reception of the gospel.

Paul distinguishes sharply between a people to be glad for, the believing Thessalonians, and a people to be sad for, the unbelieving Jews. In just a few weeks, the Thessalonians readily chose the blessing of obedience to the gospel of God, whereas after centuries of revelation from God, the Jews stubbornly chose the cursing resulting from disobedience to the gospel. Such opposite responses to God's truth and grace prompted Paul to sort out the reasons he rejoiced for the Thessalonians and sorrowed for the Jews.

#### 1. A People to Be Glad For (2:13-14)

##### a) *Receivers (2:13a)*

*For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us...*

Paul introduces his theme in the form of a fresh thanksgiving ('give thanks,' *εὐχαριστοῦμεν, eucharistoumen*). Paul was always thankful for the privilege of ministry, and he ceaselessly ('without intermission,' *ἀδιαλείπτως, adialeoptōs*) acknowledged God as the one who empowered the truth through him. Paul, Silas, and Timothy were especially thankful that the Thessalonian believers had 'received' the gospel as the word of God. 'Received' (*παραλαβόντες, paralabontes*) refers to an objective reception of a particular message, in this case the gospel. This verb is especially used of receiving a message or body of instruction handed down by

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

tradition, to be delivered to others in turn (cp. the noun *παράδοσις*, *paradosis*, ‘tradition’ in 2 Th. 2:15).

The missionaries spoke the words, but those words came from God. Paul’s language is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets who would preface their messages by saying, ‘The Word of the Lord came to me,’ or ‘Thus says the Lord.’ He was a spokesman for the Almighty, a herald with the King’s message and the King’s commission.

### *b) Welcomers (2:13b)*

*...you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.*

The Thessalonians’ reception of God’s Word was subjective as well as objective. The Thessalonians had given Paul’s message an enthusiastic reception; they had ‘welcomed’ it, treating the gospel as an honored and well-loved friend. ‘Accepted’ (*ἐδέξασθε*, *edexasthe*) connotes an inward welcome of the message through their own initiative, a transference from the mind to the heart. Such an eager embracing of what the Thessalonians had heard indicated that God had granted them faith and regeneration.

What was it that led these people to regard the apostle’s teaching as a divine message? The explanation lies in something Paul already mentioned. He had told us that when he and his companions arrived in Thessalonica and began to preach, they were aware that their words were being accompanied ‘with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction’ (1:5). In other words, the Holy Spirit was attesting that their message was from God.

Unlike the ‘word of men,’ the Word of God is not empty, inert, or powerless. The preached word from God was not only truthful and accurate (counting the claims of Paul’s opponents), but it was also *dynamic* because it ‘works’ in the Thessalonians. The verb rendered ‘performs its work’ (*ἐνεργεῖται*, *energeitai*) means to work effectively, efficiently, and productively on a supernatural (divine) level. God uses human words to change people. God was the one who gave the Thessalonians the ability to accept the preaching in the appropriate manner.

The gospel shows itself to be the word of God by the way it transforms people. The expression ‘which is at work in you’ is probably better translated ‘which is being made operative in you.’ This highlights that it was not the preaching in itself that was accomplishing the work. Rather, the message was being made effective by the Holy Spirit and in this way was becoming the means of renewal.

God’s Word was working in this way in those who believe; it is believers who experience spiritual change and growth. The Holy Spirit works in our lives firstly by helping us to understand God’s Word, then by enabling us to believe it, and finally, by stirring us to act upon it.

Scripture works on behalf of believers in a multitude of ways: it saves them (James 1:18; 1 Pe. 1:23); it sanctifies them (John 17:17); it matures them (1 Pe. 2:2); it frees them (John 8:31-32); it perfects them (2 Tim. 3:16-17); it counsels them (Ps. 119:24); it builds them up (Acts 20:32); it ensures their spiritual success (Josh. 1:8-9; Ps. 1:2-3); and it gives them hope (Ps. 119:147; Acts 20:32). In spite of its claims to the contrary, human wisdom cannot produce any of these results.

We must always keep in mind the close tie between spiritual growth and God’s Word. We cannot hope to make progress in our Christian lives if we ignore the Bible or treat it superficially.

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

God works through His word. And His Word must be heard, pondered, welcomed, and received before it exercises its life-transforming power in us.

This fact reminds us of the importance of preaching the gospel. The gospel is God's Word that was entrusted first to the apostles and then through them to the church in all ages. Because it is God's Word, it is also 'the power of God to salvation' (Rom. 1:16). God's powerful Word accomplishes its work only as His sovereign Spirit makes it effective. Recovering belief in the Bible as God's Word and confidence in its power to influence people through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is the key to renewed effectiveness in evangelism today.

### *c) Imitators (2:14a)*

*For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus.*

Welcoming the gospel as the word of God had proved costly for the Thessalonians. It had brought upon them the hostility of their countrymen (2:14b), presumably their families and neighbors. Far from regarding this kind of persecution as unusual, Paul looked upon it as evidence of true faith. He well knew that when the gospel took root in lives it inevitably transformed them and brought them into collision with the unbelieving world in which they lived. That this had happened in Thessalonica was a good sign, as was the apparent joy and steadfastness with which the converts there bore their sufferings (1:6).

What was happening in Thessalonica was happening elsewhere, too. In suffering at the hands of their countrymen, the Thessalonians had become 'imitators' (*μιμηται, mimetai*) of God's churches in Judea who had suffered from the Jews. Judea was a Roman province in Palestine. It was the home of the first local Christian assembly, the Jerusalem church, which began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

In 1:6 the Thessalonians are commended for imitating the missionaries, not least by becoming missionaries in their turn; this was a token of the genuineness of their faith. Now a further token of the genuineness of their faith is said to be their imitation of the Judean churches. But this was not a deliberate imitation—they knew of the Judean churches mostly by hearsay—rather, the experience of the Judean churches were reproduced in the Thessalonian church. This was no merely external resemblance. Persecution, according to the NT, is a natural concomitant of Christian faith. Perhaps they also imitated them in the way they bore their afflictions.

Just why Paul should mention the churches in Judea rather than other churches closer at hand is uncertain. Perhaps he wanted his readers to understand that what they were encountering had been the lot of the church from the very beginning. The apostle himself had been a persecutor of the church in Judea in the early days of Christianity and knew all about what it had gone through at that time. The fact that the Thessalonians were now suffering in the same way confirmed that they belonged to the one brotherhood of believers that had its roots in Judea.

Paul refers to the believers in Judea as God's churches, that is, churches that belonged to God, assemblies of His covenant people. He also referred to 'churches' in the plural, rather than singular. By this time there were a number of local churches scattered around Judea. Paul clearly recognizes that the one church of God is the same in essence wherever it expresses itself, making it proper to speak of local congregations as churches of God. (In Acts 9:31, they are referred to comprehensively in the singular as 'the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.) Further, these churches in Judea are in Christ Jesus. Being in Christ Jesus is what makes a group of people a distinctly Christian church, and is true of all genuine churches.

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

### *d) Sufferers (2:14b)*

*For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans...*

The antagonism that early Christians faced was proof of the power of the gospel in their lives. Christianity had made enough of a difference to leave their contemporaries thoroughly rattled. The believers in Thessalonica, who were mostly Gentiles, seem to have been troubled for the most part by their ‘own countrymen,’ though these people probably took their cue from the Jews (Acts 17:5). In Judea, however, believers were persecuted by their Jewish neighbors.

After the stoning of Stephen, the Judean Christians suffered a period of persecution that was mainly led by Saul of Tarsus (Acts 7:54-8:4). When the risen Christ saved Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-19), the persecution waned somewhat. But it was not long before the persecution—which this time included the first murder of an apostle, James, by the sword—flared up again under Herod. At that time also, the Jewish leaders imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:1-4). Thus the Judean churches had a history of dealing with severe harassment, and had persevered in suffering—an experience the Thessalonian church was imitating.

Paul is not necessarily saying that the persecution in Thessalonica came entirely from the Gentile section of the community. Paul probably had locality rather than ethnic group in mind when he speaks of ‘countrymen.’ ‘Fellow-countrymen’ (*συμφυλέτης*, *symphuletēs*) is a Hellenistic compound conveying the sense which in Attic Greek was conveyed by the simple *φυλέτης* (*phuletēs*), ‘member of the same *φυλή* (*phulē*, tribe).’ The Thessalonian church was being persecuted by fellow Thessalonians. It is highly likely that the Jews in Thessalonica responsible for the first wave of hostility (cp. Acts 17:5) continued to stir up trouble for the new community of believers after Paul, Silas, and Timothy left. But they would almost certainly have soon been joined in this by the relatives and spouses of Gentile converts, intensified during the subsequent weeks before Paul sent this epistle from Corinth.

### **2. A People to Be Sad For (2:15-16)**

Mention of the Jews (v. 14) diverts Paul with an unusually abrupt transition into what some regard as an outburst of personal anger and frustration against his countrymen. It is wrong, however, to think of these words as an outburst of vindictive passion. In context, Paul is not speaking of all ethnic Jews: he himself was Jewish; the churches in Judea were primarily Jewish; and there were some Jews in the Thessalonian church. Moreover, elsewhere Paul speaks positively of the future of some ethnic Jews (Rom. 11:1, 25-32).

Retaliation is not his motive for mentioning his own people here. He had other reasons for wanting to tell the Thessalonians more about the Jew’s history of persecuting faithful believers. The Gentile section of the church must often have wondered why the Jews were so bitterly opposed to the gospel and why, relatively speaking, so few became believers. The unbelieving Jews were the tragic antithesis of the believers in Thessalonica.

### *a) Persecutors (2:15a)*

*...who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us;*

Amazingly, in clear contrast to the Thessalonian believers’ immediate love of the truth, throughout their long history the Jews rejected the message and messengers God sent them. The Thessalonians needed to know that the Jews had a history of opposing God and attacking His

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

servants. What happened in Judea was not an isolated event, but one of a series. This is the only place in the Pauline corpus where ‘the Jews’ (*Ἰουδαῖοι, Ioudaioi*) are made responsible for the death of Jesus.

The Jews had also killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets (*προφήτας, prophetas*), and, Paul adds, they drove us (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) out. Throughout their history they had repeatedly placed themselves in direct opposition to God, all the time thinking they were serving Him.

Other than Zechariah’s murder (2 Chr. 24:20-22), the Old Testament spokesmen’s murders are not detailed in Scripture. However, they became the heroes of martyrologies which related, for example, how Isaiah was sawn in two under Manasseh (*Mart Isa* 5:1-14) and Jeremiah was stoned to death by his fellow-Jews who compelled him to go down to Egypt with them. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews provides a general indication of what occurred (Heb. 11:37).

The Jews’ long-established rejection of anyone who brought God’s Word to them (cp. 2 Chr. 24:19) extended to Paul and the other New Testament apostles. The verb rendered ‘drove us out’ (*ἐκδιωξάντων, exdiōxantōn*) refers to the hunting down of an animal with the intention of killing it. Paul was referring to the recent expulsion of himself and his friends from Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10), followed by their forced departure from Berea (Acts 17:13-14).

### *b) Displeasers (2:15b)*

*...and they do not please God and are contrary to all men...*

In their opposition, the Jews were out of step with both God and man. They displease God and are hostile to all men. By using the present tense, Paul denoted that the Jews’ antagonistic attitude was habitual. Convinced that they were honoring God, they were in fact displeasing Him. In Romans 8:8, Paul says that ‘those who are in the flesh cannot please God.’ From this, it is evident in Paul’s eyes that the charge of displeasing God was one that could be leveled impartially against unbelieving Jews and Gentiles alike.

In their efforts to keep Paul and his helpers from speaking to the Gentiles (v. 16), they were also proving themselves the enemies of all men. Their hostility was not so much a racial prejudice as it was a religious prejudice. They resented, even hated, any religion but their own—and especially the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### *c) Hinderers (2:16a)*

*...forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved...*

Whereas the Thessalonians honored the messengers of God, the Jews hindered the gospel preachers by trying to prevent them from preaching their message. Paul was well aware that many Jews were trying to prevent the gospel from being made known. In fact, he himself had previously tried to stop the spread of the gospel.

The purpose of the missionaries’ approach to the Gentiles was that they come to salvation through believing the message; the purpose of the opposition was that Gentiles might pay no heed to the message. The apostles were custodians of the gospel, the power of God to salvation (cp. Rom. 1:16). Apart from their message, there was no way for men and women to be saved. By hindering its preachers, the Jews were in reality committing a terrible crime against humanity.

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

### d) Sin-Fillers (2:16b)

...so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

The Thessalonians had demonstrated perseverance in suffering and emerged triumphant in the hope of eternal glory. However, the Jews faced an entirely different situation. They would not be able to endure their fearful, deadly, final punishment.

Literally, the phrase ‘so as always to fill up their sins’ means, ‘they always heap up their sins to the limit.’ Does this phrase express the *result* or the *divine purpose* of the Jews’ actions? The key phrase in Greek is ‘so as to fill up’ (*εις τό ἀναπληρώσαι, eis to anaplērōsai*). The prefix *ἀνα* (*ana*) may be intensive; their cup of guilt was already well on the way to being filled, and their present conduct was filling it up to the brim. The word ‘measure’ or ‘continually’ (*πάντοτε, pantote*) emphasizes the continuousness of their persecution of the servants of God. Although both options are possible in general Greek grammar, Paul nowhere else uses this type of construction to indicate a result. Hence, he is evidently referring to the providential divine purpose.

There is a point in sinful behavior beyond which chastisement or judgment is inevitable. This is the principle behind the statement in Genesis 15:16 that ‘the sins of the Amorites are not yet filled up.’ Paul applies this concept here to the Jews. In their various acts of rebellion and resistance they had been accumulating their sins up to this appointed limit. They have reached the point of no return in their opposition to the gospel and final, irremediable retribution is inevitable.

The natural meaning of Paul’s words is that God’s decision to pour out His wrath upon the Jews had already been made. The point of no return had been reached. ‘Has come’ (*ἐφθασεν, ephthasen*) is in the aorist tense, which affirms that Paul was so certain that divine ‘wrath’ would come that he expressed the notion as if it had already occurred. The consequences of having exceeded the limit might yet be to fall, but the outcome was inescapable. Furthermore it was ‘in full’ or ‘to the uttermost’ (*εις τέλος, eis telos*).

Paul does not say what the present manifestation of ‘wrath’ (*οργή, orgē*) might be upon unbelieving Jews. Options include the coming destruction of Jerusalem (then nearly 20 years off), the current turmoil of internal Jewish politics, and the rejection of Christ by many Jews. All of these, however, are merely a foretaste of the eschatological ‘wrath’ to be revealed at the Second Coming. But primarily the expression points to the damnation of people who reject God (cp. John 3:36). That, too, was so certain that Paul could write of it as if it had already happened.

It is impossible to read these solemn words without feeling a sense of dread. Forbearing as the Lord is, there is a limit to His long-suffering. And when that limit is reached, nothing awaits the impenitent but abandonment to His wrath.

Today, as in Paul’s day, the choice between God’s blessing and His cursing (cp. Dt. 28:1, 15) remains. Those who believe and obey the Word and honor other believers by imitating their lives will persevere to eternal glory, which is good reason to be glad for them. But those who reject the Word and hinder those who preach it will ultimately suffer eternal condemnation, which is good reason to be sad for them.

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

### B. Paul Desires a Second Visit to Thessalonica (1 Th. 2:17-20)

Paul's foes apparently told the Thessalonians that he really had no affection for them and had willfully and callously deserted them. Thus he concludes 1 Thessalonians 2 by telling his people why he had not been back and how he truly cared for them. Even though he had known the Thessalonians for only a few months and had been away from them just a short while, he struggled to endure the separation from them. In this paragraph, the apostle focuses on how deeply he cared for the Thessalonians.

#### 1. Paul's Past Plans (2:17-18)

##### a) Paul's Eager Desire (2:17)

*But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.*

The words 'but we' (*ἡμεῖς δέ, ἑμεῖς δε*) contrast again the love that he, Silas, and Timothy had with the strong hostility the Jews had for the Thessalonians. Contrary to the Jews, who did not want the Thessalonians to know Christ and did not care about their spiritual health, Paul and his colleagues sincerely did care.

Addressing them intimately and endearingly, Paul assures his readers of his longing to see them. The piling up of words expressing eager longing emphasizes his ardent desire. Paul in particular, having no children of his own, found his unbounded capacity for paternal affection amply employed in his relationship with his converts. The apostle Paul repeatedly wrote of his strong love for fellow believers (cp. Rom. 1:7-12; Eph. 6:21-24; Phil. 1:3-8; 4:1; Col. 1:3-12; 2 Th. 1:3-5; 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Titus 1:4; Phm. 1-7). His terminology reminds us that he, Silas, and Timothy had not deserted them in a stealthy or secretive way. On the contrary, they had been wrenched away from them. Their separation had been unnatural and forced, one that had left them with a sense of desolation and deprivation.

Paul had been 'taken away' from his friends. This expression translates a very strong verb (*ἀπορφανισθέντες, aporphanizō*), which could be translated as 'torn away.' Because the etymology of *aporphanizō* includes 'orphan,' it includes the metaphor of being orphaned. He had been torn from them, wrenched away like an orphan suddenly bereaved of his parents.

Paul's lengthier stays with his other churches illustrate that he likely would have stayed much longer at Thessalonica had his unbelieving opponents allowed him to. He lived and ministered in Ephesus for three years, and it is doubtful that the church there equaled the quality of the one in Thessalonica (cp. 1 Tim. 1:3-7; Rev. 2:1-7). He stayed in Corinth eighteen months and, on a human level, certainly would not have loved the problem-plagued Corinthian church more than the spiritually growing one in Thessalonica. Because he was forced to leave Thessalonica after a relatively short stay, he felt like a parent whose children had been torn away from him.

The literal translation of 'in presence' is 'in face' (*προσώπω, prosōpō*) and it is connected to the phrase 'see your face' (*πρόσωπον ὑμῶν ἰδεῖν, prosōpon umōn idein*) at the end of the verse. Modern English translations usually use 'in person,' because the literal 'in face' is not an expression we normally use in English today. In its truest biblical context, 'seeing one's face' means to come into intimate communication with him or her (cp. Ex. 33:17-23). Although his body was elsewhere, his heart remained in Thessalonica.

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

Paul had a great longing in his heart to be with the Thessalonians—a longing that did not derive simply from the sentiment of friendship and socialization but from his sense of responsibility for their spiritual welfare. It was as though the apostle were short of breath with eagerness and anticipation as he expressed his desire to see the Thessalonians. ‘Great desire’ translates *pollē epithumia* (πολλή ἐπιθυμία), a general expression for any kind of dominant passion or compelling, controlling desire.

What an example Paul provides for Christian workers in every age. Paul loved the Thessalonians, felt for them, and agonized over them. The Christian church needs pastors, elders, leaders, and members who care deeply for people.

### *b) Paul’s Thwarted Plans (2:18)*

*Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.*

Paul’s care for his spiritual children went further than his feelings. Paul had tried more than once to make the journey to Thessalonica in person. So deep was his personal concern for them that he makes special mention of it. More than once he found himself want to come to them and attempting to do so. In the event, his efforts met with failure. At any rate, Paul’s repeated attempts to see them in the flesh were a proof of his concern for the Thessalonian believers.

Contrary to the critics’ charges that they were glad to leave Thessalonica and had no desire ever to return, Paul and his companions ‘wanted to come’ back, see the faces of their newly beloved Thessalonian brethren, and renew their fellowship with them at the earliest opportunity.

As if to underscore his strong feelings, Paul abruptly shifts from the plural ‘we’ to the emphatic singular, ‘even I, Paul’ (ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος, *egō men Paulos*). Throughout the two Thessalonian epistles the plural is used more than in most of Paul’s letters. This makes the singular the more significant when it does occur. Here the intense personal feeling breaks through, and we have the emphatic singular reinforced by the personal name. We may envisage Paul as interposing with these words, either orally while the letter was being dictated to a colleague or in writing when it was read over to him at completion.

Those of us with the spiritual care of others need to learn from Paul’s determination. Do we persist in our efforts to help people when we meet with obstacles, or do we greet them as welcome excuses for not pursuing difficult tasks?

Paul does not tell us what stood in his way. It may have been a continuing official embargo against his presence in the city. It may have been ill health of some kind (cp. 2 Cor. 12:7). It may have been persistent opposition from Jews in Thessalonica. Or again, and perhaps more probably, it might have been the local circumstances he found himself facing in Corinth.

Apparently, evil men had purposely made Paul change his plans. Calvin rightly states, ‘Whenever the ungodly cause us trouble, they are fighting under the banner of Satan, and are his instruments for harassing us.’ Whatever the immediate cause, Paul saw the sinister hand of Satan behind this hindrance. Paul understood that he was caught up in a fierce spiritual struggle.

We may ask how it could be known when a check to apostolic planning was due to the overruling direction of the Holy Spirit (as in Acts 16:6-7, where Paul and others were prevented from evangelizing proconsular Asia and Bithynia) and when it was due to satanic intervention (as on this occasion). It was probably evident—in retrospect, if not immediately—that the one checked worked out for the advance of the gospel and the other for its hindrance.



## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

He firmly believed that ‘Satan’ (*σατανάς, satanas*) was the leader of a horde of malignant spiritual powers set on resisting the purposes of God (Eph. 6:12). In the New Testament, Satan is the adversary *par excellence*; his main activity is putting obstacles in the path of the people of God, to prevent the will of God from being accomplished in and through them. Although under the ultimate control of God, this powerful evil spirit nevertheless exercises formidable influence over sinful men and the creation in general—so much so that Paul referred to him as ‘the god of this age’ and ‘the prince of this world’ (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2). Paul knew him to be the persistent opponent of every attempt to spread the gospel. Paul acknowledges elsewhere that ultimately it is God who controls his travel plans (Rom. 1:10-13; 15:22-24; 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:5-7; Acts 16:6-10; 18:21).

Satan wants to thwart the progress of God’s kingdom much as an army seeks to disrupt the advance of an opposing army. The word translated ‘hindered’ (*ἐνέκοψεν, enekopsen*) is a military term referring to doffing a trench or breaking up a road. One of the countermeasures an ancient army would take against the opposition was to dig a massive trench that would prevent enemy troops from reaching its men. Another way to frustrate the enemies’ progress would be to tear up a brick or stone road so that he could not traverse it. Thus Paul depicted the powerful devil as supernaturally obstructing the apostle’s strong desire to revisit Thessalonica.

Christians often fall into one of two opposite errors in their attitude toward Satan. They either treat him as though he does not exist or at least is not a serious threat to the church, or else they become over-absorbed with him and his activities. Paul avoided both extremes. He recognized his power and had a serious regard for his wicked cunning (cp. Eph. 6:11-16; 2 Cor. 2:11), but at the same time he refused to be fascinated by him. He resisted Satan in the power of Christ and urged others to do so, too.

We can take the warning that the spiritual warfare that Paul spoke of elsewhere (cp. Eph. 6:10-20) is real. Although his movements are circumscribed by the sovereign purposes of God, Satan has an objective reality and is permitted, in measure, to hamper the servants of God.

### 2. Paul’s Future Certainty (2:19-20)

#### a) Paul’s Question (2:19a)

*For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?*

First Paul asked who was the object of his ‘hope’ in the promised future reward and eternal blessing. Then he asked who was the source of his ‘joy,’ or eternal happiness and satisfaction. Finally he inquired concerning the identity of his ‘crown of exultation.’

‘Hope’ (*ἐλπις, elpis*), ‘joy’ (*χαρά, chara*), ‘crown’ (*στέφανος, stephanos*), and ‘glory’ (v. 20; *δόξα, doxa*) all have both a present and a future aspect in these verses. Explicitly, these four are related to Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians at Christ’s return (future). However, Paul is so convinced of the Second Coming that he states that *now* (present) the Thessalonians are his ‘hope,’ ‘joy,’ ‘crown,’ and ‘glory.’

These Thessalonian Christians fill the hearts of Paul and his companions with hope and joy and exultation—hope that the divine work so well begun in them will increase to maturity, joy in the evident genuineness of their faith, exultation as they look forward to pointing to such converts as the fruit of their service before the tribunal of Christ. But nothing can disguise the pride and delight which they take in their converts themselves, who have become so dear to them (v. 8).

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

As parents rejoice in their children and cherish high hopes for them, so it is with the writers and their converts.

*Stephanos* is the word for a ‘wreath consisting either of foliage or of precious metals formed to resemble foliage and worn as a symbol of honor, victory or as a badge of high office. Paul is alluding to a Greco-Roman crown that was awarded for victories in war and athletics, the equivalent of a gold medal in the modern Olympics. In the same way as in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 and Philippians 4:1, Paul is referring here to the victory ‘crown’ that will be awarded to him at the Second Coming for his faithfulness to his calling (cp. Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pe. 5:4; James 1:12).

Paul further describes this ‘crown’ by adding ‘of boasting’ (*καύχησις, kauchēsis*). Because of the bad connotations that the word ‘boasting’ usually has in English, a number of Bible versions have opted for a different translation (e.g., rejoicing, exultation, glory). Paul’s use of *kauchēsis* (‘boasting’) and its cognates (*kauchaomai, kauchēma, enkauchomai*) is fascinating because he employs these terms both positively and negatively.

Negatively, Paul presents boasting as a horrible evil when it conveys the idea that one earns everlasting life by being good. A person trusting in his good works and thinks he does not need God’s redemptive acts to save him (e.g., Rom. 3:27; 4:2; 1 Cor. 1:29; Eph. 2:9; Phil. 3:3; Gal. 6:14). On the other hand, Paul speaks of boasting in a positive sense. In several places, he boasts about himself or others, but this boasting is always in the context of God giving the ability to believers to do good (e.g., Rom. 15:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 1:12; 7:4, 14; 10:8, 15-17; Phil. 1:26; 2 Th. 1:4). Hence, boasting about a Christian in the right way is ultimately boasting about God and His work in the believer. Paul is influenced by the great passage in Jeremiah 9:23-24, and from it he develops both a positive and negative sense of boasting (1 Cor. 1:29-31; 2 Cor. 10:15-17).

Given these nuances within his use of the term ‘boasting,’ Paul is certainly not saying that his good works merit or earn his ‘crown.’ Paul’s crown, in association with the Thessalonian church, ‘boasts’ of his faithfulness to his calling, which in turn ‘boasts’ of God’s great deeds accomplished in the lives of the Thessalonians and in Paul’s own life.

### *b) Paul’s Rhetorical Answer (2:19b)*

*Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?*

Paul immediately answered the question of what brought him joy with a rhetorical question that is somewhat surprising. One might think that the answer should be the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul’s anticipation for the future was the assurance that he would be ‘in the presence of’ his Savior, but a crucial element of the joy of that experience is that ‘at His coming’ he would see all the believers to whom he had ministered, including the Thessalonians.

Paul gives an explanation as to why he strongly wanted to come to the Thessalonians. He loves the Thessalonians so much that at Christ’s Second Coming *they* will be part of his exultation on that day. ‘Coming’ or ‘advent’ is the important New Testament word *parousia* (*παρουσία*), ‘presence,’ which in the majority of its occurrences has an eschatological meaning. This is the earliest occurrence in literature of *parousia* in its distinctive Christian sense of the advent of Christ in glory.

There were two contemporary uses of *parousia* which might have served as analogies for its distinctive Christian use. One denoted the manifestation of a hidden divinity by some evidence

## Thessalonians – Lesson 4

of his power or in cultic action. The other denoted the official visit of a high-ranking personage to a province or city, when he was met on his approach by a deputation of leading citizens who escorted him formally for the remainder of his journey. When Christians spoke of the *parousia* of their Lord, they probably thought of the pomp and circumstance attending those imperial visits as parodies of the true glory to be revealed on the day of Christ. This Christian sense of *parousia* occurs six times in the Thessalonian letters (here and in 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Th. 2:1, 8) and eleven times elsewhere in the New Testament.

### *c) Paul's Direct Answer (2:20)*

*For you are our glory and joy.*

Paul understood that when believers reach heaven, they do not receive literal crowns to place on their glorified heads. Instead, the Lord will crown all believers with life, righteousness, glory, perfection, and joy. A great deal of heaven's bliss for the redeemed will be the joyful presence of those whom they have been used to reach.

In Paul's view of heaven, the Thessalonians would be central to his eternal 'joy' (*χαρά, chara*). They were also his 'glory' (*δόξα, doxa*), which is the true honor bestowed on him by God, who used him to reach them. When Paul used language of this kind, we are not to suppose that, in his eyes, his converts were but the means to enhance his prestige. Rather, he and they were so completely bound in love together that their wellbeing was his great joy, as his, indeed, was theirs.

It was, then, the writers' longing to revisit Thessalonica and their inability to do so that moved them to send this letter. Like most of the Pauline letters, this letter is a substitute for the personal presence and the word spoken face to face.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-10.