

YOU ARE OUR GLORY AND JOY!

Ben Janssen | 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 | October 18, 2020

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.

It has now been 31 weeks since we've all been assembled together in corporate worship, due to the coronavirus pandemic. Thirty-one weeks, and still no end in sight. But we believe God is great, so he is in control. And we believe God is good, so will satisfy and sustain us during these extraordinary days. God is not reeling from these challenges. He is up to something.

One of the things he may well be doing is helping us reform our ecclesiology, our understanding of the church. What is the church when it is unable to gather? The danger, of course, is that some will begin to think of the church as optional, as non-essential. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and we must guard our minds and our actions from entertaining such a thought.

My aim today is to do just that. In the letter of 1 Thessalonians, we find the Apostle Paul forced to separate from the believers in Thessalonica, unable to get back to in-person fellowship with them. And he's not okay with that. He believes that the Christian community is absolutely essential, for it is in the community that he sees most clearly the sustaining hope of Christ's glory. I want us to see that, too. So let's follow along in these verses and notice the importance of Christian community, the obstacles to it, and the rewards to be found in it.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The letter of 1 Thessalonians is among the most personal of Paul's letters. Eighteen times in this letter, he refers to his audience as his brothers and sisters. Only 1 Corinthians has more occurrences of this term of endearment, and it is more than three times longer than 1 Thessalonians.¹ One cannot miss how deeply he cared about these believers.

Paul's Pride

His deep love for them may be seen not only in the way he refers to them as his siblings, but also in the way he speaks of them using parent-child terminology. Already in chapter two we've seen him make reference to a mother nursing her children (v. 7) and to a father exhorting his children (v. 11-12). Verses 17-20 especially take on this tone.

Verses 19-20 remind me of a proud parent boasting about his child. He even tells his audience that they are his pride (glory) and joy. This is entirely natural, as any parent should understand. When Caleb hit a grand slam his senior year of high school with two strikes and two outs and his team down by two in the last inning, I did some gloating. When my daughter is in a play and the curtain call comes, I beam with pride when she takes her bow. I also felt so proud of her when she passed her driving test just a couple of weeks ago! And this pride doesn't depend on what my kids do. I

told Quentin that as long as he is my son I'll be proud of him. He understood the meaning of that statement.

Paul's Family

And we can understand the relational tone of this letter when we understand that Paul's pride in the Thessalonians was owing simply to this, that they truly were his family. They were not *like* family to him. They *were* family. They were *his* family.

They were his family because of their conversion to Christianity. Recall that in chapter one Paul gave thanks to God for the Thessalonians because they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). And this was a very big deal.

You see, the idea of conversion was well-known in Paul's day, and no one ever converted, to Christianity or to some other religion or philosophy, without taking on significant risk. It would often mean social and intellectual displacement in society which could bring the convert to despair, especially if the displacement included a break with family, friends, and associates.²

To convert to Christianity was a very big deal, and it came at quite a big cost. In a world like that, Christians needed one another. If someone genuinely converted to Christianity, there was a genuine need for Christian community. It could well be a matter of life and death.

Paul's Pain

One of the strongest words Paul uses to describe his relationship with the Thessalonians comes in verse 17. When he says, "we were torn away from" the Thessalonians, he uses a word that means to "make an orphan of" someone.³ The NIV translates it like that. In classical Greek, the word refers not only to a child who has lost his parents, but also to a parent who has lost his child.⁴ And that's the way it works here, since it is the Apostle speaking of being separated from his spiritual children. We can understand the pain of a child who has been suddenly orphaned by the death of her parents, but we can equally understand the great pain of a parent who has lost a child. It is this pain that Paul is highlighting in verse 17.

We can imagine that the Thessalonians felt orphaned by Paul and his team being run out of town. But Paul is highlighting his own pain in the separation. Spiritual maturity does not make us less in need of Christian community. If Paul is any example, the more mature we are in the faith the more we will find ourselves eager for Christian community, for our brothers and sisters in the church.

THE OBSTACLES TO CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

So this is why we find such emotion, such a relational character to the letter of 1 Thessalonians. For Paul, it was no small thing to be separated from the church. It is instructive for us that more than doctrinal or theological instruction, the letter of 1 Thessalonians puts the greatest emphasis on the relationships among the Christian community.⁵ Christian community matters.

But Christian community is a struggle, and here are two reasons why.

We Don't Value It

One reason is that we do not value it. We give a head-nod to it. We say it is important. But we don't really mean it.

Evaluate your own heart, if you can. In verses 17-18, Paul doesn't just say how important the believers in Thessalonica are to him, he demonstrates it. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses.

Do you have any idea how very homesick we became for you, dear friends? Even though it hadn't been that long and it was only our bodies that were separated from you, not our hearts, we tried our very best to get back to see you. You can't imagine how much we missed you! I, Paul, tried over and over to get back, but Satan stymied us each time. (*The Message*)

You can see how much Paul valued community with the believers because he did everything he could to get back together with them. Face to face. In person. Because it matters.

Maybe it would do some of us good to just admit we don't really value the community, we don't think it matters, because we don't try all that hard to be together.

I remember a Southwest Airlines commercial years ago where a grandfather is on the phone with his grandson, who is celebrating his birthday. After telling his grandpa about what he's been doing on his special day, the grandfather says, "Wish I could be there." To which the boy replies, "That's what you said last year, and the year before that, and the year before that, and when my baby sister was born!"

When Paul says how much he missed the believers, these are not empty words. He did all he could to gather with them.

Satan Opposes It

But another reason why Christian community is a struggle is because we have an enemy—the devil—who staunchly opposes it. Isn't it interesting that Paul knows the real reason why he had been unable to get back to Thessalonica. It was because, he says, "Satan hindered us."

We do not know how the satanic opposition came. Was it because of travel difficulties? Was it because of sickness? Was it because Paul could not return to Thessalonica legally after being run out of town?

We are not told how, but it is more important for us to consider why. Why would Satan care about this? In the Bible, Satan is portrayed as a personal evil power that opposes God and the interests of the church in many ways.⁶ Even if we do not see the importance of being together, Satan appears to see it, and does what he can to prevent it.

Of course we should not be so quick to blame Satan for our own human failure.⁷ But it is interesting, isn't it, that Satan is more interested in keeping us apart than we are in staying

together? Just as the devil believes in God more than many of us do, we should perhaps strive to see in community what Satan sees.

THE REWARDS OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

To me, the most surprising thing about these four verses is what Paul says in the last two. If I were to ask you, “Who or what is your hope? Who or what is your joy? Who or what is your glory?” Would you not eagerly say, “*Solus Christus!* Christ alone!”? Would you not correct another believer who makes anyone else the answer to that question? But hear again what Paul says:

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy?

I love surprising texts like these, because it corrects my theology, makes me think more deeply about realities that are not so obvious. These are the rewards of Christian community that we tend to miss.

Hope

When Paul calls the Thessalonians his “hope,” he does not compromise his hope in Christ alone.⁸ In Colossians 1:27 he says “Christ in you” is “the hope of glory,” and he does nothing here to take away from that truth. In fact, in the very next verse in Colossians, Paul tells us that it is because Christ is “the hope of glory” that he is driven to gospel ministry. He says, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” It is precisely because of the astonishing plan of God to reveal all of his glory, all of his treasure if you will, that Paul is driven to the very hard work of ministry, proclaiming Christ and building Christian community. Why? Because God intends to manifest his glory in his people. When all God’s people are presented fully mature in Christ, we will see God’s glory like we’ve never seen it before.

Joy

Similarly, Paul knows that the joy he seeks—full and eternal joy—will not come apart from his fellow Christians. Again, there is no compromise here with the fact that our rejoicing is fundamentally a rejoicing in Christ himself. The picture given to us of everlasting bliss makes it plain that we will “rejoice and exult” and give glory to Christ, but we will do so because we will see his Bride—the church, the people of God—ready for that day: beautiful, spotless, clothed “with fine linen, bright and pure,” the most beautiful bride you could ever imagine (Rev 19:7-8). Oh the joy we will feel as we see the people that God has loved with an everlasting love and chosen to be his bride forever! Oh that we would have the grace to see her even now, for his bride is in fact seated all around you on this Lord’s Day.

Crown of Boasting

This is how Paul thought of the believers in Thessalonica; indeed, this is what he thought of his brothers and sisters in Christ in other places, too (Phil 4:1). He calls them his hope, his joy, and his

“crown of boasting.” The “crown” was the symbol of honor or the award for victory. So Paul is saying that the prize he seeks, the reward he pursues in his daily life, is bound up with the spiritual well-being of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He wants them to “stand firm” in Christ (Phil 4:1), to grow in holiness, to mature in the faith, because in so doing they will be the reward he seeks at the return of Christ. Their perfection in Jesus will be the grounds of his boasting, the pillar of his pride.

Yes, his *pride*. We may need a better word, since we Christians think of pride only as a very serious sin. This word *boasting*, is not a sinful word. It is only sinful if you boast in the wrong object. You’re going to boast in something. Better be sure it is something legitimate.

Yes, Christ alone is our boast. But throughout Paul’s letters we find the Apostle making this boast in Christ more concrete. He writes, “In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God,” because this work is “what Christ has accomplished through me” in making disciples everywhere he went (Rom 15:17-18).

What will be your boast, your reward, when Christ returns? It must not be in ourselves, for all such boasting is evil (Jas 4:16) and leads to hell. So where will you boast? Where will your pride be found? If not in yourself, then where?

And if you say, “only in Christ,” that is well and good, so long as you do not thereby excuse yourself from taking pride in what Christ himself takes pride in, namely, his Bride, his people, his church. Your neighbor. To boast in your brothers and sisters, to work for their holiness, is not sinful pride but true humility, a humility that pleases Christ.

I close with these powerful words, from C.S. Lewis:

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit. . . . This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ vere latitat—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.⁹

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1987), 48.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), [119-20](#).

⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (LSJ), rev. Sir Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), [216](#).

⁵ Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 60.

⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [122](#).

⁷ *Ibid.*, [123](#).

⁸ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [153](#).

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), [45-46](#).