



## **OUR JOY & CROWN- GOD'S PEOPLE**

Text: 1 Thessalonians 3

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

Date: 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2016

As many of you know I have five children. When you have that number of little children with you, you are always counting, making sure everyone is there. I remember years ago taking my children to a kid's playground. They took off in different directions and I spent the whole hour just counting 'One, two three ...yep they're still all there'. At one point while counting I came up one short. I had this jolt of fear. Who was missing? Where were they? Where had I seen them last? That moment is every parent's worst nightmare. Nothing clutches at our heart like one of our precious children suddenly gone. It may surprise you, but it is precisely this that the Apostle Paul expresses here in our text. Last Sunday we said that Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians to explain himself to that church. Paul, and his missionary team of Silas and Timothy, only had a short stay in Thessalonica because they were chased out of town. Once gone, his persecutors set up a smear campaign telling this church that Paul was just a religious huckster. That he had behaved in a deceptive way. That he used flattery to get into their good books, wanting to take their money. Paul in chapter 2 defends himself against those accusations. He reminds the Thessalonians that he had behaved with openness and integrity. That he had been like a mother caring for the children she loves. The second thing Paul's persecutors accused him of was that he had simply abandoned this church. They said, not only had he been nothing more than a religious salesman while in town, his intentions were clear now that he was gone and out of town. He obviously couldn't care less about them because nothing had been seen or heard of him since he took off.

Now in our text Paul sets out to answer this. He starts to talk about this in 2:17 and here we see him talking like a mother whose child is suddenly gone. "*But brothers and sisters, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought) out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you again.*" The language Paul

uses here is one of desperation. Note how he says "torn away...intense longing...every effort." The Greek word we translate 'torn away' is 'orphanos'. It can refer to parents being torn away, deprived of their children so they are 'orphans'. It's language of a very deep loss. That's how Paul sees his departure from Thessalonica. It was forced on him and very painful. It cut into him very deeply. Paul was hopeful it would not be for too long. In fact it was five years later that Paul managed to get back there. But even if Paul was away from them in person, they were constantly on his mind. Now the fact that he hadn't returned yet was not because he hadn't tried. He says (:17) he had "*...made every effort...(:18) For we wanted to come to you...again and again, but Satan stopped us.*" It's not clear what stopped them. But some clues are that his persecutors in Thessalonica had threatened to harm him. Also Acts 17 makes it clear that the city counselors had put a legal ban on Jason, one of the believers. They had taken a bond, a guarantee from Jason before they let him go. Should Paul return Jason would have been penalized very heavily. Most likely thrown into prison. So you can see the precarious position Paul would have put Jason and others in if he showed up again in Thessalonica.

In verses 19&20 we get an idea as to why the Thessalonians were so precious to Paul, why he was so desperate to come and see them again. "*For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*" Paul refers here to Jesus' return on the Day of Judgment. He refers to it again in the last verse of our text (3:13) "*May God strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*" In that verse Paul is praying that they keep growing in the faith, ready for Christ's return. Why? Because they are his crown. They are his display to Christ of what Paul has done in Jesus' name. They are his achievement, his joy and glory. You see, this is what life's striving should be for. Ultimately not the dollar. Not more possessions. Not fame and fortune. People! How we invest ourselves in others, in people. In people who also come to know Jesus as Lord. The day of Christ's return will grant us the opportunity to stand before Jesus and have him discuss with us what has been important in our lives. Our lives will come under his scrutiny and we will receive from him his analysis of the kind of people we have been. And what will count on that day? People! God made people in his own image. People are precious to him. God sent his own son to save people, to have them spend eternity with him. So on the final day what is going to be looked at is

what God has been able to do in your life for the sake of the salvation and spiritual growth of other people. Our joy will be when we see what God has done in other people's lives through us. We will see the way in which our obedience and service to God has produced spiritual growth and maturity in others. That's what Paul is saying in these two verses. Paul says to the Thessalonians: you yourselves are it for me. You are my joy. You are my crown. Nothing else counts. It's what I achieve in you that is my glory. One commentator wrote 'Every soul we lead to Christ goes to make up our crown of rejoicing'. How big is your crown? Can you imagine the utter joy it will be to stand before God next to all the people you have led to Christ? That is kingdom achievement. That's what it's all about. That is Paul's passion. As he says to the Thessalonians: *"Indeed, you are our glory and joy"*.

Since the Thessalonians are so important to Paul, he tells us he was just beside himself with anxiety to know how things were with the Thessalonians: (3:1) *"So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy...(3:5) For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith."* Paul couldn't go to Thessalonica. He was not getting any news of how they were going. Something had to be done to relieve the tension. So he sent Timothy, while Paul stayed alone in Athens. You need to understand that was a huge sacrifice for Paul. Isolated in that pagan city, with little Christian fellowship, was very difficult for Paul. But he would rather suffer a bout of loneliness than have another period of suspense over how the Thessalonians were doing in their faith. Now Paul sent Timothy not just on a fact finding mission. He sent him (:2) to *"...strengthen and encourage them"*. He had Timothy point out to the church when he got there, that being persecuted, suffering various trials, is actually par for the course for Christians. (:3) *"You know quite well that you were destined for them"*. It seems the best way to protect Christians from being upset by persecution is to remind them its part of our Christian calling. Jesus made that clear in his teachings. It happened to him. What do you expect if we live in a sinful and broken world and we are actually trying to follow God's ways? Added to that, Satan is making every attempt to weaken our faith. As Paul writes in verse 5 *"I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."* Be careful of how Satan tempts you. If you are not standing up and being consciously Christ-like in what you say and do, then you are actually drifting away. As one commentator said 'It is important to realize that there is no natural drift towards Christian commitment. The natural drift is away from Christian commitment.' If we don't

experience any subtle hassles, being singled out for our Christian lifestyle, then we are probably not so Christian in what we do, or we are keeping quiet. If you say you just want a hassle free life as a Christian, Paul would say 'Get real. Persecution is part of the deal'.

Now in verse 6-8 we see that Timothy has just come back to Paul to report on what was happening in Thessalonica. The news is delightful music in Paul's ears. *"But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we long to see you. Therefore brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."* The information Paul gets from Timothy almost overwhelms him. All his stress is released and he can breathe again. Notice again verse 8 *"For now we really live..."* Many people get quite excited when their football club wins the Grand Final. There is that ecstasy: Yes, yes, yes as the winning goal is scored. Then there's the ongoing celebration, a wishing that life could always be like this. You feel good, you feel alive. Says Paul that's how he is feeling. He is ecstatic, really alive! *"...now we really live!"* And of course the reason for Paul's joy is, as we said, that the Thessalonians were his life and crown. And when he hears about their faith, about their *"...standing firm in the Lord"*, he knows he has a winning team! Things are good!

What is interesting as we read about Timothy's report to Paul is the constant reference to their *"faith"*; five times in fact. When people ask a Christian how their church is going, they often want to know how many people belong. Has the church grown in numbers? What's the size of the budget? What about plans for a bigger building, all the programs you have. But Paul's prime concern is about none of that. The key issue is their *"faith"*. It's better to have a 50 people really striving for their faith in Christ, than 500 who occasionally warm a pew. The greatest encouragement for any leader of God's church is to see deeply committed faithful Christians. Paul here is so relieved. He is so encouraged by what he hears. He bursts into prayer; into thanksgiving (:9) *"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you?"*

He goes on to pray (:10) that God will clear the way *"...that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith"*. Paul well knows that a Christian is someone who

must be growing. Children don't stay children. They grow up and mature. Christians are not meant to stay as they were when converted. There has to be growth in understanding of the Bible. And growth in how we live as Christians. So Paul is dead keen to get back to Thessalonica. He wants to see his joy and crown. He wants them to grow and he knows that happens best when he is personally with them. Letters, (emails, books, DVDs) can encourage and help us. But there is no substitute for the stimulus of face-to-face fellowship. Christian growth is not just about head knowledge. It's about love. It's about how we relate with God and each other. As Paul emphasizes in :12 "*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*" That's why we need to be regular in church and in our small groups. Whatever opportunity there is to be together under God's Word. And caring and praying for each other. You cannot grow in faith on your own. Besides we are each other's joy and crown. We are precious to each other and will rejoice together before Christ.

What we see here in this chapter is the passion of a Christian who gets it. He gets the astonishing wonder of what God has done through Jesus. He gets how important it is for people to have faith in Jesus. He gets the life implications. One commentator makes the remark 'Paul's style here is intensely emotional. The very words he writes seem to tremble. We can really feel his heart.' In Paul we see a church leader who bares his soul and openly expresses his love for his church. He is like a mother in deep anguish because he has been torn away. While desperately waiting for news, he finds the suspense unbearable and sacrifices greatly to send Timothy to encourage his church family. When he hears the good news, he is over the moon with joy because that group is his joy and crown. They are what he will present before Jesus on the last day and say: 'Here is what I present as I stand before you, my Lord Jesus. Here is my life. It is seen in this group, the love of my life.' That's the commitment and love we need to see in all of us. And especially in those who are church leaders.

When we put chapters 2&3 together we see a double commitment. First, to the Word of God. As good stewards we are "*entrusted*" with the awesome message of what God has done and said in Christ. Second, to each other as the people of God. We are to be as mothers who take utter delight in their children and their faith. The two characteristics of ministry are truth and love. It is these two that build up the church, the one together with the other. Paul says "*Imitate me as I imitate Christ*". May God

grant us that in this church we show our love for Jesus by imitating him and Paul! May God grant that this congregation is like the Thessalonians whose faith "*rang out everywhere*" and who were a '*model*' to all believers!

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- As Paul bares his soul & passion for the church, what strikes you most about his attitude? What do you long for in your life, in the life of our church?
- What do you live for? What is your joy and crown? What will you present to Christ in the day of judgement as your achievement?
- If being together is important for spiritual growth how can we improve on our time together?