



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 2:17–20

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Introduction

As we come to the end of chapter 2, you will notice that Paul's brief ministry among the Thessalonians had left some concerns on the part of the apostle. Paul had demonstrated his fatherly concern for their spiritual growth as a teacher of the gospel (v. 11), but his time was cut short after being forced to leave the city (Acts 17:10). This was not necessarily a bad thing, as it allowed Paul to have a fruitful ministry in many other cities that were in need of the gospel. However, it had left the apostle in emotional turmoil because he was forcibly torn away from the spiritual children whom he loved. The more time that passed, the more he yearned to go back and continue the work he began among them. In this study we will look at Paul's desire to visit. Then in chapter 3 we will examine the ministerial purpose for such a visit.

Paul's Conduct After Thessalonica (2:17 – 3:13)

Paul had previously established and defended his ministry among the Thessalonians (2:1–16). They themselves could bear witness to what he had done among them. But because his stay with them was so brief, a more poignant defense of his conduct *following* his departure was necessary.

The Problem Involving Paul's Continuing Absence (2:17–20)

One of the implications of the text is that Paul had promised to return to Thessalonica, but had been prevented from doing so. His opponents had seized upon this to raise questions regarding Paul's care and concern for the Thessalonians and to challenge his integrity in ministry. In these verses, Paul continues to defend his ministry but now focuses on his conduct after leaving the city.

The Explanation for Paul's Absence (vv. 17–18)

Paul's physical absence from the Thessalonians was understandable at first. But why had the apostle stayed away for so long? These verses provide some answers.

Paul's Desire to Return (v. 17)

Verse 17 establishes two facts: 1) Paul had a keen desire to visit them; and 2) Paul had tried to visit on more than one occasion. The verb “taken away” (ἀπορφανισθέντες *aporphanisthentes*) literally means “to make an orphan of someone.” When he was forced to leave the city, it was as though he were left as a childless father and his children — the Thessalonian believers — were forced to fend for themselves as orphans. This is not the kind of situation any parent would wish for.

But the physical separation did not sever Paul's emotional link with the Thessalonians. This was not an out of sight, out of mind kind of separation. Paul had this “heart” connection with them because he was motivated by love. He was continually thanking the Lord for them (1:2–3, 3:9) praying for them (1:2; 3:12–13), and looking for opportunities to return and visit them (2:17–18; 3:10–11). The word translated “eagerly” (NKJV, NASB, ESV) or “intense longing” (NIV) comes from the Greek word *spoudazō* (σπουδάζω) and has an interesting range of meanings. The same word is translated elsewhere as “study” (2 Tim 2:15) and “be diligent” (2 Peter 1:10). Paul's efforts to come and visit the Thessalonians had not been merely wishful thinking. He had put in a great deal of effort and planning to make a visit possible but was hindered from doing so.

Satan's Hinderer of Paul's Desire (v. 18)

This verse answers why Paul's continual efforts to visit them had failed. Satan had hindered his ability to return to the Thessalonians. There is no consensus among interpreters on how exactly this occurred. But two major theories have been suggested.

- 1) The city officials put up a financial bond in exchange for the believers not “causing” any more disturbances (cf. Acts 17:8). Paul's return would have possibly caused the believers to forfeit this money. Satan could have used this bond through secondary means to prevent Paul from returning to the city. The problem with this view is that Timothy was sent to visit them. Would that not also cause a disturbance?
- 2) Satan could have given Paul an illness that prevented him from traveling back to Thessalonica. The problem with this view is that Paul tried at least twice (“time and again”) to return. Was this a

recurring illness that Satan brought upon Paul every time he had a desire to go to Thessalonica?

The larger issue here is “How does Satan hinder?” From the larger context of Scripture, we see that Satan hinders through his demonic agents influencing humans. This is probably as close as we can come to understanding what was happening here.

Paul’s Desire Explained (vv. 19–20)

Paul gives additional reasons for his desire to return in these verses. He does so by asking two rhetorical questions.

The Use of Questions in Scripture

Every question asked by the writers of Scripture can be classified according to two categories. It is either *real* or *rhetorical*; and it is either a question of *fact* or *deliberation*.

Real — Asks and anticipates an answer.

—or—

Rhetorical — An affirmation or assertion. The assertion is the implied answer that is embedded in the question.

Fact — Asks what was, is, or will be.

—or—

Deliberation — Asks what ought, should, could, or must be. This involves the ideas of necessity, possibility, or obligation.

Paul is using a rhetorical question of fact to invite the Thessalonians to arrive at his assertion.

Q: What is the basis of our joy, hope, and crown of boasting?

A: It is you — the Thessalonians! This is a *fact*!

Paul can rejoice that the Thessalonian believers will be present with before the Lord at His coming. But he wanted to make sure of this so he desired to come to them and establish them in the faith (3:2). The Greek word *parousia* (παρουσία) is a technical term referring to the arrival of a dignitary as the first stage of his presence, i.e. his coming. This is used frequently of the Lord’s return and includes two events: 1) the rapture; and 2) the Lord’s return to the earth. In this case it refers to the rapture of the church (cf. 4:15).

The second question makes more specific the basis for Paul's future reward — "Is it not indeed you?" The joy of a minister of the gospel is to see that the Word is having its effect. Bringing someone to salvation is merely the first step in gospel work. Paul wanted to present every man perfect in Christ at His coming (Col 1:28; 1 Pet 5:10).

Paul answers his own rhetorical questions in verse 20 to make his assertions emphatic. This verse should end with fireworks, fanfare, and a whole row of exclamation points. Paul's deep desire to see the Thessalonians was not about a sentimental social visit. It was about making sure that these dearly beloved people would be present when the Lord returns at the rapture.

Conclusion

Paul clearly had great concern and care for the Thessalonians. Do we care about our fellow believers as much? Do we minister with the kind of "out of sight, out of mind" mentality when it comes to other believers? Or do we continually look out for the souls of other Christians whom God has placed into our lives? There is much more work to do than merely getting people saved. What role are you playing in the lives of others to aid in their spiritual development?

~AWB