

This morning, I am in the fourth week of a sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul had not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends this letter. In the passage we are going to read this morning, we will see Paul addressing his inability to visit, and as we consider his words, we will see that we have a lot to learn about what we need to make it through difficult times.

*1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 - But, brothers, 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. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you-- certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-- but Satan stopped us. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> Indeed, you are **our glory and joy.** <sup>NIV</sup> **1 Thessalonians 3:1** So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. <sup>2</sup> We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. <sup>4</sup> In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that **we would be persecuted.** And it turned out that way, as you well know. <sup>5</sup> For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. <sup>6</sup> But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also **long to see you.** <sup>7</sup> Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. <sup>8</sup> For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. <sup>9</sup> How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? <sup>10</sup> Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what **is lacking in your faith.** <sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. <sup>12</sup> May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. <sup>13</sup> May he 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 this passage, we see how torn up Paul is about not being able to travel back to Thessalonica to see the people of the church that he had started. He is concerned

for their faith, whether or not they are hanging on to Jesus in the midst of the trials and opposition they are facing. But every attempt he has made to travel to see them has been thwarted. Finally, he and his fellow workers send Timothy to check on them, and Timothy brings back good news about their faith and love. Paul ends this section by expressing his encouragement, gratitude, and shares what he is praying for them.

I see four currents flowing through this passage that I think are very relevant to us today:

1) **Life is hard**

I don't want to gloss over all of the references to struggle and hardship in this passage:

*But, brothers, 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. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you-- certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-- but Satan stopped us.*

*<sup>2</sup> We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. <sup>4</sup> In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.*

*<sup>7</sup> Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.*

In this short passage, Paul talks about relational heartache and unfulfilled longings, how he longed to see them and to know that they were okay but he was not able to see them. He talks about the spiritual opposition that he experienced. He talks about how they faced trials, distress and persecution. And he shares about his deep concern for their faith and safety.

Life is hard, and especially, it seemed, for Paul. In fact, there is one place where Paul details just what he is talking about when he references his suffering and persecution:

**2 Corinthians 11:23-29** - *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. <sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was **shipwrecked**, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. <sup>27</sup> I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup> Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. <sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

Paul's mission was to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Jesus alone was Lord, and that the only way to be right with God was to trust in Him for the forgiveness of your sins, which he achieved for us by his death on the cross. But the problem was that this message was offensive to everyone. It offended the Greeks and Romans, who were opposed to the idea of one God and to the notion of a bodily resurrection. And it offended the Jews even more, who saw the message of Jesus as God as blasphemy. And so, everywhere Paul went, some believed, but others mocked him, attacked him, and wanted him dead. And even when churches were started, he felt acutely the burden of their welfare and growth.

Life is hard. It does not go according to plan. Like Paul, we all deal with unfulfilled longings, with broken dreams, with opposition. We may find ourselves longing to be married, or for a better marriage, or for our children and grandchildren to know the Lord, or for better health, or to be doing a different job. We may be experiencing relational heartache and health troubles. And on top of that, we are all growing older, and soon enough, everyone you love will be parted from you by death. And if we believe in Jesus and try to share the gospel and walk with the Lord, we will also face opposition.

And we have it easy compared to many others around the world or throughout history. We at least have health care and access to food and clean drinking water and sanitation. Life is hard. And if we are reading the Bible carefully, this should not surprise us. As Jesus said:

**John 16:33** - *"I have told **you** these things, so that **in me you** may have peace. **In this world you** will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the **world**."*

**John 15:19-20** - *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.*

## 2) Evil is real

*But, brothers, 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. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you-- certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-- but Satan stopped us.*

Life is hard, but there is more to life than just relational challenges and aging and health issues. There is a level of evil and wickedness that is beyond our ability to contain and fix. There are holocausts and genocides and school shooters and serial killers that seem to immune to any laws or education or therapy. This is because there is an enemy, the devil and his demons, that are working against the plans and people of God.

**Ephesians 6:10-12** - *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Our American culture tells us that everything has a natural cause, and that all we need to fix it is better laws and leaders, more education or therapy. But the Bible tells us that there is evil. And it isn't just pain and evil out there. It is also evil within. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it, *"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"*

Evil is not just out there, but the devil can have influence over even our own hearts, minds and actions. As Paul said:

*Ephesians 4:26-27 - "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold.*

It is frightening but sadly accurate to realize that we can give the devil a foothold through our own thoughts and actions.

The Bible calls this evil sin. There is sin, a brokenness in our relationship with God, our relationship with others, with nature, and with ourselves. And even though in our pride we might think that we can fix it all, we can't do it on our own

And so, in 1 Thessalonians 2-3, we see these two currents flowing through Paul's words – life is hard, and evil is real. He is concerned, and hurting, and with good reason. So what are we to do about it?

### 3) Prayer is essential

Paul can't visit them, but he prays for them.

*<sup>10</sup> Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. <sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. <sup>12</sup> May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. <sup>13</sup> May he 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.*

Now I know that people in the world ridicule the whole notion of "Thoughts and prayers." And I get it – if you don't believe there is a God, then prayer is meaningless. And if there is a God, sometimes people need tangible help, not just thoughts and prayers. But prayer is not meaningless; it is essential. In this passage, Paul prays that God would make a way for them to see them again. He prays that God would make their love increase and overflow, and that God would strengthen their hearts, that they might be blameless and holy before God.

**If life is hard, and evil is real, and if we are not going to be able to solve our own problems or the problems of this world by better education and therapy and laws alone, then we need God.** We need to be connected with Him. We will need His strength in order to stand and persevere through the challenges of life and the evil we face. And we will desperately need His hand and His help.

In that great passage about spiritual warfare, Paul continues by saying this:

**Ephesians 6:17-20** - Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. <sup>19</sup> Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Since there are limitations and unfulfilled longings, we need the Lord. And we need to pray. Prayer is the ultimate act of faith.

**Hebrews 11:6** - And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Read the masters on prayer. Take advantage of opportunities to pray at our church. What holds you back from asking for prayer? Is it not pride? A foolish and sinful self-sufficiency that says “I need to do this on my own?” Life is hard, and evil is real, and prayer is essential.

#### 4) People matter eternally

<sup>19</sup> For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

In the midst of the suffering, Paul declares that Jesus will return. Evil will be destroyed. Love will reign. And more than that, he declares to the Thessalonians that you will be our glory and joy when we are in His presence. Paul declares, “My glory will be the people who are there because of me, the people whose lives I influenced by my faith.” That is what matters eternally.

Jesus reminded us that some things matter eternally:

**Matthew 6:19-21** – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Do not live for the treasures that this earth has to offer, but live for treasure in heaven. Your car, your house, your earthly reputation, your worldly comforts, will not matter in the long run. What will last forever? People. People are what will last. Why was Paul able to persevere through all of the suffering and evil? Because he stayed connected to God through prayer, and because he was living for that which mattered eternally. You can have all this world. You can beat me, whip me, imprison me, but I will keep going, because I am not living for the things of this world. My desire is to make heaven crowded, to see more people come to Jesus.

As John MacArthur put it, “Invest your money in the souls of men and women who will some day greet you in heaven with thanksgiving when you arrive.”

Yes, life is hard. Yes, evil is real. We need prayer to reorient ourselves to what really matters and to depend upon Him. And we need to know that love will have the final say. This world is passing away, but people will live forever.

As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Weight of Glory*: “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 interesting person you can talk to may one day **be a creature which**, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that **we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics**. 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 – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”

Life is hard, evil is real, but God is good. Pray hard, and love people well, because they are eternal. Let’s spend time in prayer for each other.