

I Just Had to Know
I Thessalonians 2: 17-3:5

**First Presbyterian Church
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We're making our way through this short but mighty letter of Paul to the new believers in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Paul's deep concern is that he had to leave the city before he had finished training these new Christians in the faith. He worried that they would be sucked back into their old lives. Paul feared that the great tempter, Satan, would successfully tempt them to abandon the faith.

Earlier in the letter, Paul had compared himself to a nursing mother, caring tenderly for these believers he loved so much. Then, he compared himself to a loving father who encourages and exhorts his children toward excellence. In today's passage, Paul compares himself to an orphan. "We were torn away from you" he writes. Literally, we got orphaned from you. We had to leave the city under heavy persecution and have not been able to see you again. The feeling was like losing your family. Paul felt confused, dismayed and lonely for them. He was so desperate for news of the Thessalonians that finally he sent his protégé Timothy into danger. He sent Timothy to sneak into the city to meet with the Thessalonians and bring back a report. As we consider this driving passion of Paul, we want to lift up three questions today's passage raises. 1) How have I accounted for the evil one? 2) What do I plan to offer before the Throne? 3) How real are my expectations?

1) How Have I accounted for the Evil One? Paul tells them, "We wanted to come to you...again and again, but Satan hindered us." He wanted to get back to Thessalonica, but kept getting blocked. That was due to an attack from the evil one. We don't often think in those terms. In fact, it's hard to tell whether an obstacle is a) God's Providence, b) just the way the world is, c) a result of my own mess, or d) a hindrance from the force of evil.

So, we don't want to be those people that think anything that thwarts their plans is a spiritual attack. They blame everything on the devil. At the same time, and perhaps more urgently for us, we don't want to be the people that disbelieve in a personal, malevolent opposition to Christ and his mission. We have an enemy. Every author of the New Testament mentions the devil, Satan, the one who accuses, tempts, deceives and thwarts God's people in their efforts for Christ. He is the king of confusion. The master of discouragement. The purveyor of shame in all

its varieties. His favorite words are “You are not. You are not...strong enough, good enough, faithful enough, brave enough, loving enough, smart enough.” It goes on and on.

Twenty years ago, I was selected to be a commissioner to the General Assembly of our old denomination. A crucial debate would occur about our clarity that Jesus and Jesus alone is Lord. And some weird things happened on the way there. In my life before and since, I’ve never had a case of poison ivy. But the week before I got covered in it—itchy, ugly red streaks. In my life, I’ve never forgotten my wallet for so long that I couldn’t go back for it. But that trip I had to get Rhonda to wire me money to a drug store in rural Tennessee just so I could get gas. I got placed in the farthest hotel from the Convention Center. One early morning as I walked, as I walked the seven blocks through a dodgy section, I saw a teenage girl with a couple of friends get out of the car and head towards a building. She was crying and they had to pull her along. I had a teenage daughter and my father’s heart went out to her. “Darling,” I thought, “Whatever is the matter?” Then I saw the sign for the abortion clinic. In that moment, it was as if a great dark mouth opened wide before me, to reveal only a deeper darkness inside me. “Give it up,” it said, “I own it all. There’s no point in fighting.” That same day, the assembly voted No to a clear affirmation of Christ’s singular, saving Lordship. Weirdly, right after the vote the thunderclap of a summer storm was so loud we could feel it and hear it inside the cavernous hall. The devil was at work. This, unveiled, was spiritual warfare. And I could not stop crying. His words seemed true. It appeared that evil owned the church, the youth, even the whole world.

But one of Satan’s weaknesses is overplaying his hand. He lies. He lies big. And he gets caught. He discourages. Just knocks the stuffing out of you. But the Holy Spirit of God dwells within believers. And he is mightier than any evil. We take the blow. We go down. But then we get up. Not in our strength but in the truth of the gospel and the energy of the Spirit. A fire got lit in me that day, indeed among many elders and pastors, that has never gone out.

I remember one Easter a few years ago when the spiritual pressure of that Holy Week seemed to be mashing me down. All kinds of hard things were happening in the church and the family. Discouragement made me wonder how to proclaim resurrection hope amidst all this darkness. On Good Friday I was getting ready for a shower and as I turned, I felt my back go out. It hurt. But I started laughing. The devil had overplayed his hand. “Really?” I said. “Really? You think this is going to stop me from declaring that Jesus is risen? Oh, I may have to crawl

on hands and knees into the pulpit but I'll say it. Jesus is risen. And by the way, you lost."

Most days, the evil one is not so apparently involved. But we know, as Paul told the Ephesians, that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. There is a malevolent spiritual power at work in the world. It coalesces through groups of people that make us want to just cave in and give up trying. It could be the incessant drumbeat that taking the lives of the unborn is a form of justice. It could be the way we are so busy living for experiences that we have no time, energy or money to care for the least and the lost. It could be the double-speak and double-think that denies biology, looks the other way for crimes, or convinces us that good is bad, up is down and nothing can be done about it. Or it could be the way we curse and hate people who've fallen under the power of evil and so make no effort to save them. We all get affected by the devil's schemes.

Are we accounting for the reality of the evil one? The fact that we have an enemy doesn't mean we look for demons around every corner. But it is a radical call to constant prayer. To vigorous praise of Christ Jesus. To learning the truth from God's Word. To being watchful, sober, vigilant and proactive for the good.

2) What do I plan to offer before the Throne? This second question rises from Paul's passion for the Thessalonians. He longs to see them, and writes, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy." Paul's lifework has been to make disciples of Jesus. He knows he was sent to bring the gospel to the nations. People he once despised became the joy of his life. So he just can't stand to be cut off from them. He can't stand to think of their falling away while he was absent. For Paul wanted to offer these new believers to Christ Jesus. He wanted to appear before the throne of the Lord and say, "This is my offering of praise to you. These who were lost have been found. These who were entrapped in evil have grown in your goodness and grace. I present them to adorn your glory Lord Jesus."

So what will be our praise and joy before the throne of Christ? How will we answer when the King asks "What have you done with the salvation I gave you?" Some years back there was a commercial that showed a scruffy young man sitting across the desk from a man in a suit. The boss interviewing the young man reviewed his one page resume. "Hmmm, I see that recently you destroyed 33,000 aliens from the Planet Mogo in a video game. Quite an accomplishment, I'm sure." Is that what I'll have to offer? Well, Lord, here are the 5300 hours I watched

college football. Here are the 82,000 moments I thought about how I could make myself more comfortable. Here are the 2700 people I avoided because they annoy me. And the 3300 people I avoided because they scare me. None of that will play very well.

What will make your life feel worthwhile as an offering of thanks to the God who saved you? Paul says it's the people we build into. The ones we love. The ones we give our time and energy. Of course. Our children are our pride and joy. But not just biological children. Our students. Our coworkers. Our neighbors. The kids we mentor. The elderly we visit. The employees we look after. I want to present Jesus with the people I have loved in his name and with his compassion. I want to present him as well with every way I have tried to bring light into a dark world. To strive for excellence amidst mediocrity. To render beauty amidst so much ugliness. To pit kindness against rudeness. To speak truth amidst lies. To do more for others than myself.

This passion of Paul reminds me to ask the diagnostic question about the use of my time and energy. What do I plan to offer before the Throne as my gift of praise to the Savior?

3) How real are my expectations? One of Paul's deepest concerns was that his beloved Thessalonians would be too discouraged by his own suffering. A mob had come for Paul and Timothy. When they couldn't find Paul, they stormed the house of Jason, a believer who had hosted the Christians. It was a campaign of intimidation. Paul had to be snuck out of the city. He felt terrible leaving the Thessalonians to fend for themselves. So Paul desperately wanted to remind them that his suffering for Christ was not a surprise. It was expected. In fact, Paul wrote that "we were destined for this." Years before, Jesus had said to the man who would baptize Paul, "I will show him how much Paul must suffer for my name" (Acts 9: 16). Resistance and persecution were promised from the outset.

Isn't it amazing how much having accurate expectations enables us to have peace about our circumstances? We talk in baseball about how a batter learns to read the pitches coming at him. Once he knows the signs of what kind of pitch he's getting, it's like the pitches slow down. He knows what to expect and so it gets easier to hit. The same is true for us. We learn what reactions people have to the gospel. We know that the number of questions people have are actually very few. Once you know the categories of things people raise, it powers down your anxiety about objections to your faith. I'm ready for you to ask me questions about God and suffering. I anticipate that you will call my views hateful and so without

having a panic attack I can say how Christians love. I expect hard questions and I don't let them surprise me. We were destined for this.

But there's more. Somehow I came to think that if I follow Jesus and do what he says, my life should be blessed. I should get most of what I want. And I get genuinely surprised at downturns. Now this does make some Biblical sense. Following God's will and laws make us hard working people of integrity who get along with others and seek their good. We're clear-eyed and eager, interested and motivated. Those traits generally lead you upwards. They make you valued in your work and relationships and you get rewarded. That's really good.

But that's not the only factor. We have an enemy. Jesus promised that if they persecuted him they will persecute us. Paul told Timothy that everyone, everyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. As I mentioned last week, we've been insulated from much opposition over the last decades. But that is the anomaly, not the norm for most Christians. Too many of us have spent a lot of our days just being mad that it's not easy to be a Christian in a post-Christian culture. We're tired of losing. Tired of losing what is good and beautiful and true. And we sit in our anger. We complain and we get stymied. We wonder if our faith is even true since most people aren't believing anymore.

Wait a minute, Paul would tell us. This is normal. We are destined for this. The gospel creates resistance. Expect that. Expect that it will be hard. Expect that you are different from many other people. Let the pitches slow down. Plan to love the people who make you angry. Plan to be a beauty creator, a joy maker and a grace bringer no matter how ugly things get. Authentic Christianity has always been and always will be hard. But also, still full of joy.

Paul's passion for his Thessalonians has raised some important questions for us. Have we accounted for the reality of the Evil One as we conduct our lives? What are we planning to offer before the Throne of Christ? And are we living with real gospel expectations of what life in the world for Christ's people will be like? Right answers to these questions directly open us to abundant joy, a vivid life, full of love and hope that does not disappoint.