

1 Thess. 2:17-20 - The Hope of Fellowship

Written by Tim Black
Sunday, 30 August 2009 20:00 -

1.

Introduction

1.

At Covenant College I gained some very dear friends, especially among the young men who lived on my hall, who were exceptionally mature, and godly. After graduation I remained at the college, but most of my hallmates left town. It was painful to know that they were gone, because in this life many of them I will never see again. Have you experienced a painful parting of fellowship? Why does it hurt? And what should we do about it?

2.

In the past 2 weeks I've begun to plan my 10 year high school class reunion, and have begun to reconnect with several long-lost friends from college who live in this area. Why do we seek to reconnect with old friends?

3.

Well, the reason it hurts to lose the fellowship you once had, and the reason we seek to restore it, is because we were made for fellowship with God and with one another. In our sin we broke fellowship with God and one another, and now in our salvation God has made it His delight to restore us to fellowship with Him and with one another. It is this **hope of fellowship** toward which the church's gospel-labor of love aims, and to this one **hope of fellowship** toward which she must press on, to the end.

4.

The Hope of Fellowship (17-20)

1. Context

1.

Remember what Paul has taught us in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 so far—Paul taught us first that God has given you His love, and second, that you have most certainly received it. In today's passage he teaches us that because you have received God's love, you have fellowship

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with God and one another. You see, it is this hope of fellowship to which the giving and receiving of God's love in the church's ministry aims. Paul was not content merely to let God's church believe God's word preached, to have us follow his loving example in being willing to suffer persecution, or to have us expect not wrath but glory. No, if he left us with these things, his ministry of the gospel would not be complete! The goal which completes Paul's ministry is the hope of fellowship. Paul wants us to receive the *fruit* of his ministry, and that fruit is just this—that we will be restored to fellowship with God and with one another.

1.

And so Paul teaches us this by directing our hope to the three stages of this fellowship which God has given us. These stages are--

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first, fellowship begun,

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second, fellowship continued,

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and third, fellowship perfected.

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His first point, fellowship begun, is in v. 17. (taken away)

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His second point, fellowship continued, is in v. 18. (prevented from return)

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His third point, fellowship perfected, is in vv. 19-20. (joy, glory, crown)

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Fellowship Begun (17)

1.

What then is the hope, the goal, the fruit, of the church's ministry and of our salvation? It is fellowship, and its first stage is **fellowship begun**. Paul says in v. 17,

1.

"17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while-- in person, not in spirit-- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. "

2.

Paul says here that he and his associated ministers had been taken away from the Thessalonians. The word here for "taken away" is in fact the word "orphaned." *ap-orphan-izo* in Greek. Paul felt like his *children*

had been taken away from him, because he had been forced to leave Thessalonica before he could finish his work of training them up in the way they should go. He was worried that when they became old they might depart from it; as he says in

3:5

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1.

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"5 For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. "

2.

Paul had poured his heart and soul into his gospel-labor of love, just like "a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children,

" as he says in

2:7

, and exhorting them just "

as a father would his own children,

" as he says in

2:11

. In

2:8

he tells us why he poured himself into this task of preaching the gospel to them--"

8 Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

"

3.

You see, Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians and to us was a *loving* ministry, just as all of our ministry in the church should be. You can see that his ministry was loving because it aimed at this one goal—to raise up the Thessalonians, and to raise you up, to Christian maturity as the children of God, but not a Christian maturity that is

alone—

no

, rather, he wanted to raise us up to a Christian maturity

in the family of God

, maturity that delights in fellowship with God, and with Paul, and with one another. He

wanted to share God's love

with

us. This hope of fellowship was the goal toward which God aimed when He

gave

us His love through the loving labor of preaching. It's why we must preach the gospel. And this hope of fellowship is the great goal, and the great blessing, which we now

receive

when we believe God's word which He speaks to us through that preaching. It's why you must believe the gospel! God calls you into His kingdom and glory, into fellowship with Him. And so turn from your sins, receive the salvation God offers you in Christ, and then you will have peace with God, reconciliation, joy in your newfound Lord and Savior. Then you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has

given

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you His love, and you have most certainly
received

it, and so therefore now you will have fellowship with God and one another. As

Romans 5:1

says, "

Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

"

4.

So in their conversion, and in their faith, the fellowship between the Thessalonians and Paul had **begun**. Because it truly had begun, when Paul had to be separated from them, he tells us that he desired very strongly to be *with* them again, to impart to them not only the gospel of God, but also his own life. He says he was taken away from them " in person, not in spirit.

" In Greek the words here are "in face, but not in heart." He could no longer see them face to face, but in his heart he was still with them. And so he tells the Thessalonians that he, Silas and Timothy "

were

all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

"

5.

This is what happens to you when you receive God's saving love in Christ; you begin to love God and one another. You desire to be with God's people, to delight in sharing with them every blessing of the salvation God has given you. You want to worship God with them, to share the gospel with them, to glorify God and enjoy Him with them. It is your delight to be with God and His people, and so if you must be separate from God's people for a time you will work and labor just as Paul did so that you may join together with them again, so that both you and they may be built up in the bonds of friendship and love. And so we must not neglect the gathering of the saints, but endeavor to speak the truth in love to one another, for the building up of the body of Christ. If you have a working faith, then you will have a laboring love. And this love for God and one another is already the firstfruits of the hope God is giving you in this life and the next. Your fellowship has begun.

6.

Fellowship Continued (18)

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1.

But the beginning of fellowship is only the first stage. There is a second stage that will certainly follow, fellowship continued. Fellowship begun in your faith must now continue in your love. Paul tells us of this stage in v. 18, saying

1.

"18 For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan hindered us."

2.

Now what makes v. 18 different from v. 17? In both verses Paul says he wanted to come to the Thessalonians, and even made an effort to do so. But in v. 17, Paul says that he *began* to be separated from them, while in v. 18 he says he

continued

to be prevented from returning. So v. 17 speaks of Paul's desire to return in regard to the love and fellowship which they enjoyed before Paul was forced to leave town by the Jews. And v. 18 speaks of that same desire to return, but in regard to his present and continuing hope of seeing them again, face to face. In v. 17, Paul says, our fellowship has began back when I first ministered to you and you became Christians, and oh, what a painful thing it was to be torn away from you for a time. But in v. 18, Paul says, our fellowship now still continues in the face of opposition, and so we continually seek to be reunited with you to rejoice in your growth, and your salvation. The fellowship begun in your faith now continues in your love. And this continuing love which causes our fellowship to grow and abound is a laboring love, a love that labors even under affliction.

3.

What affliction does Paul speak of here? He says that "Satan hindered us."

1.

Some people speculate that the way in which Satan hindered Paul was by bringing an illness on him. But this explanation ignores the context in which Paul is writing, and draws your focus away from Paul's point. Paul has just mentioned that the Jews drove him out of Thessalonica in v. 15, and now in v. 17 he says that he had been separated from the Thessalonians because of the Jews' persecution. And so now here Paul says that Satan hindered his return to the Thessalonians, by cutting off Paul's ability to freely return to them along the road to

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Thessalonica. Paul wants you to recognize not that Satan can make you sick, but that Satan is the evil genius behind the Jews' persecution.

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Paul focuses your attention not on a sickness in himself, but on the road to Thessalonica, in the word "hindered." The word for "hindered" here is often used in military contexts for the tactic of cutting into a roadway, digging a trench across it so that military convoys cannot travel freely along the road. The word is *enkopto*, "kopto" means "cut," and "en" means "in," so it has the sense of "cutting in," cutting into a road. The word focuses on the road, the path along which you would have traveled except that someone has put up a roadblock, has cut you off at the pass, has hindered your travel. [1](#)

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How was Paul's travel hindered? It was hindered by the Jews' persecution. First, the Jews drove Paul out of Thessalonica. Acts 17:5ff says that they set the city in an uproar, they attacked the house of Jason. Then when they couldn't find Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the Jews made Jason and the rest of the believers pay some money as a pledge, as a means of guaranteeing that Paul would not return. You see, the unbelieving world is engaged in an anti-gospel labor of unlove, and they will make you pay to keep you from sharing this salvation with your fellow believers, or with those who have not yet been saved. If Paul returned to Thessalonica again to delight in Christian fellowship, perhaps Jason would have to pay.

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And so the Thessalonians whisked Paul and Silas off by night to Berea, which was 50 miles off, out of the way, in the foothills of the Olympian mountains, perhaps to hide for a while. But the Jews followed Paul there, stirring up the crowds, so the brethren sent Paul away immediately. Paul didn't flee from persecution, but the Berean Christians must have urged him to flee for the sake of the gospel.

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And so we see that Satan hindered Paul's ministry to, and fellowship with, the Thessalonians, by being the evil genius, the mastermind behind the Jews' desire to persecute the Thessalonian Christians, and to stamp out the gospel wherever it sprang up. You see, God has given you such an incredible blessing in your fellowship with Him, and with His people. What a joy it is to

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know God our Father and Christ our Savior! To have Christ call us His friend and His brother, to have fellowship with the Holy Spirit our Comforter, our Encourager, who helps us pray and fills us with the joy of our salvation. And we get to share this with one another! But just as Jesus said in **Matt. 13** in the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils, when the gospel has been preached, just like a bird along the path, the evil one will come and seek to snatch away the word that is implanted in your heart. He will seek to steal away your joy, by bringing on you affliction or persecution because of that word, to try to cause you to fall away. He'll make sure you get between a rock and a hard place, he'll make sure that your labor and toil is in the midst of painful thorns that seek to choke you out, in order to steal away this blessing of Christian fellowship. Because of how great this blessing of fellowship with God and one another is, because of how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity, Satan will seek to take this fellowship away from you. To break it down. To turn you against one another. To cast you out of the garden, out of fellowship in this life, and out of the fellowship of the life to come.

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But, Paul tells us, Satan may try, but in the end he will not succeed. For you are the good soil. God's word has worked effectively in you, giving you faith in Christ, and true Christian love for one another. The result is that your fellowship is growing, and will continue to grow, despite whatever separation and loneliness you may face in this life. You may be separated from your beloved brothers and sisters in Christ by miles, by time, by circumstance, or even by persecution; but while you may be separated in face, you need never be separated in heart. You are part of the church, who loves you, and cares for you. And just as Paul hoped to meet again with the Thessalonians, so you too know that God will allow you to meet some of your Christian friends again, even in this life! The gates of Hell will not prevail against Christ's church. And therefore, Satan's hindrances will not defeat Christ's fellowship.

. God has given you the wonderful hope of restored fellowship in this life.

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It is this hope of fellowship which drives our loving ministry of the gospel. We give God's love to those around us by setting a loving example in word and deed, and by being willing even to suffer persecution in order to tell men how they may be saved. The reason we do this is that we know God will bring even the most vile sinner to repentance and faith when they hear the gospel. We know that God will bring those who are not pleasing to God and are hostile to all men, back into fellowship with God, and with His people. They will love God, and their neighbor. And so my friends you must reach out to your neighbor, to tell him of God's saving love in Christ, and seek to share it with him, for God is in the business of restoring men to fellowship. So offer your Christian kindness and friendship to the unbelievers around you in this life, but even more so to the believers with whom you share this great blessing of salvation. "Let us do good to all, but especially to those who are of the household of faith."

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" Make it your hope, your expectation, and your eager endeavor to find restored fellowship with one another in this life, and even increasing and abounding fellowship, just as Paul asked the Lord to do for you in

1 Thess. 3:11-12

, saying,

1.

"11 Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; 12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you.... "

2.

When the troubles of this life drive you to feel that all hope of fellowship in this life is lost, remember what a friend of mine loves to say: "God loves you, and so do I." If you feel the pain of separation from God, or from your fellow believers, then my friends, come, and receive again His great love to you, and our love as well. God will restore you to fellowship, and we will too. And now share this continued fellowship you have, share it with those who are outside, who do not know God, who for whatever reason have become separated from the family of God. Invite them in, invite them in to the hope of fellowship continued.

3.

Fellowship Perfected (19-20)

1.

Our fellowship most certainly will continue in this life, despite however much Satan may try to snatch it away from us. Our fellowship will continue, because God will carry it on to perfection when Christ returns. **Philippians 1:6** says, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it unto the day of Christ Jesus." Fellowship begun in your faith leads to fellowship continued in your love. And fellowship continued eagerly hopes for fellowship perfected.

2.

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Paul joyfully expresses this hope in vv. 19-20:

1.

"19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy. "

2.

Now most certainly Paul is saying that our fellowship with God will be perfected when Christ returns. Jesus told us in **John 14:2-3**,

1.

"In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3 "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. "

2.

Even now you are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit, and because Christ has risen from the dead we know that we do not have hope in Christ for this life only, but we also have hope for the life of the world to come. Christ will come again to take us home to dwell with God in heaven. This is what Paul means when he says that we will have joy in one another "in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming." In that day a loud voice in heaven will say, as **Revelation 21:3-4** tells us,

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"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. "

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God will perfect our fellowship with Him in the new heavens and the new earth, and we eagerly long for that day.

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But Paul does not focus here on our fellowship with God. His concern is to tell you that when Christ returns, not only will you have the full enjoyment of God to all eternity, but your fellowship with one another will be perfected as well.

1.

He asks the question, who is our hope, or joy, or crown of exultation? You see, the great hope, the eager expectation of Paul's ministry, was that you, God's people, would be built up in your faith and maturity, so that one day you would be able to stand holy and blameless before God, so that God would take delight in you, and you would take delight in God. But not only did Paul desire for you to be with God, he desires to be reunited with you, so that he may rejoice in the fact that God has given you all the blessings of salvation. He says that you are his joy. When he sees you again in heaven, he will be overjoyed to see you, because he had poured his life into making sure that you would grow up into maturity, to make sure you would one day delight in the perfected fellowship of the saints. And after being reunited with you, he likewise will be honored by the fact that God has truly done a great work of salvation in you, and he will praise God for doing this in you. You will be his crown of exultation, giving him all the more reason to praise God for allowing him to be used for your salvation.

2.

Your fellowship with one another will be perfected in glory. My friends, look to that day with eager expectation. Know that as much as you have begun to love one another now, to find great joy in your fellowship with one another, so much more will be your joy in one another in heaven. One young man asked me whether his wife and he would still enjoy the same blessed fellowship they have now once they get to heaven, and here Paul gives you his answer—your fellowship with all the saints will only be greater in heaven. As Paul says in 1 Thess. 3:12, in this life God will cause you to increase and abound in love toward one another, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. And as he goes on at the very end of the book in 5:23-24, we know that the God of peace Himself will sanctify you entirely; in order that your spirit and soul and body will be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

3.

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God is making you His holy people, to dwell with Him, and with one another in glory, and so take heart that however much you must suffer the pain of separation from your beloved fellow believers in this life, God will give you even greater joy in fellowship with one another in the life to come.

4.

Conclusion

1.

God has desired to dwell in your heart, and among you His people. He has not left you far off, outside of His family, outside of His love, and care, support, and protection, but He has invited you in, from the highways and byways, from the ends of the earth, to fellowship with Him, and with His people.

2.

And so you now have the hope of fellowship. Fellowship begun at your salvation, continued amidst trial and tribulation, and finally to be perfected in glory.

3.

Let us now take delight in this blessing, and share it with those around us. May God cause us to increase and abound more and more in our love for God and for one another, unto the day when Christ returns and we commune with Him in glory.

1 Cf. the same word used in Rom. 15:22 and Gal. 5:7; it refers to a hindrance to the continuation of travel begun, more than to the hindrance of the beginning of travel; a roadblock at the midpoint of a road rather than at the beginning of the road is the background metaphor.

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