

Time Out in Thessalonica

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 9th of July 2000 the preacher is Phil Muleman and his sermon is entitled Time Out in Thessalonica and is from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 17 through to chapter 3 verse 13 You may like to open your Bibles to page 959 as we continue on looking through Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and today we're looking at chapter 2 verse 17 through to 3 to the end of chapter 3 How do we show our concern for other people?

Is it shown in words? Is it shown by action? Whether by things done or things that are given to people and so on Is our concern for people only while we are with them?

Or do we have a genuine concern for people when we are absent from them at the same time, for some time? And what about that old saying? Absence makes the heart grow fonder Is that saying a true saying?

In 1986 when I travelled overseas I travelled with a mate and we both left our girlfriends behind It was a bit of a sad day when we left And I'd only just started six weeks prior or so going out with Barb And then I had to leave her for six and a half months while I travelled through Europe and Asia naturally I was concerned about our relationship during that time Would we still love and care for each other while I was away?

Would we still love and care for each other after I returned? Would she still love and care for me? I was determined that our relationship would strengthen while we were absent And that meant then that I had to work hard on that relationship in the best way that I could And I wrote almost daily, if not daily I sent parcels from the strange and wonderful places that I had visited And I sent also a tape recording once of my strange and wonderful voice just so she could hear who I was And there were also hours spent in the post office queuing up so we could just make that long distance phone call from India and Pakistan and in Nepal places where it's very hard to ring home It was hard work It was hard work being separated from the one that you love

[2 : 5 6] It was hard work being separated in person But it was well worth the effort, the travelling and it was well worth the effort to do that hard work to maintain the contact and show your commitment And I would do it all again if I had to Well in today's passage the Apostle Paul moves from defending himself against the slanderers as we saw last week in chapter 2 verses 1 to 16 to revealing here his concern for these Thessalonian Christians He opens his heart telling them how much he and his companions that is Silvanus and Timothy longed to see them But he'd been prevented from returning to see them in person Why is that?

The reason is seen in verse 18 He says We wanted to come to you Certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again But Satan blocked our way Now there is much speculation amongst the commentators as to how Satan stopped Paul Some people say Paul was prevented from coming because of an illness Others And that would also have meant that Silvanus had an illness as well Well that's perhaps a bit dubious Others suggest that Satan stopped Paul by using Paul's enemies to prevent him from coming and to hinder the work of the gospel And there's other sorts of reasons as well But the truth is We just don't know how Satan stopped Paul Certainly the Thessalonians would know what Paul is talking about in this letter But we just don't have that information which tells us what stopped Paul from coming

But what you do notice here in these verses is that Paul has no doubt about the activity of Satan. In verse 5 of chapter 3 in the same passage we're looking at today Paul calls Satan the tempter. Elsewhere Satan in the Bible is known as the evil one. In 2 Corinthians 4 the god of this age the accuser the devil and so on Satan is real. He is real. He's not just some figment of Paul's imagination. And just as Paul saw that Satan was real we too should think no less of him either. He is real. And because he's real he's opposed to our best interests especially when it comes to the gospel proclamation. Satan will do whatever he can to prevent the gospel from being proclaimed.

Because when the gospel is proclaimed and someone comes into God's kingdom that's one less person for Satan's kingdom. Satan is real. Now although it is true that Satan does his part and can hinder the work of the gospel we also need to realise that God still retains supreme authority. No matter how powerful we may think Satan is he is subject to the greater power of God. Our Lord God. Thou hast made the heavens. He's made everything. And you know what?

When we are a child of that living God nothing nothing can take us from his loving arms. Satan might try and hinder that work and even tempt us away from him or prevent us from seeing those whom we are concerned for just as he prevented Paul from revisiting the Thessalonians at this point but Satan has no power over the creator of this world the God whom we worship. Well Paul longed to see these Thessalonian Christians and there is no doubt that Paul has a love and concern for them just as a parent does for their children. There is an intimate bond between them even though they are separated between Paul and these Thessalonian Christians even though they are separated and Paul goes on and uses a metaphor of the ancient games in verse 19 to tell us why we wanted to come to you he declares for what is our hope or joy or crown or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

[7 : 36] He asks him that question What is our boast? Is it not you? Yes You are our glory and joy. Paul's hope Paul's hope is that the one who began a good work among them will bring it to completion and that work that work that he does in the present in nurturing and encouraging and strengthening the Christians that work is his joy and its completion will be his crown and the crown of which he speaks is the wreath. In this metaphor is the wreath that is given to the victor at the games of the ancient world and presumably when they get that wreath it's placed on the victor's head so for example the victor at the ancient Olympian games was given an olive wreath when they had got their victory. In Paul's contest here the Thessalonians the Thessalonian Christians were his crown one and that was going to be a crown that would last forever and which would bring lasting proof that he hadn't run in vain and in such a crown he boasts and he glories now maintaining the metaphor of the games.

Paul sees himself like an athlete boasting in the sense of glorying in his victory before his dignitaries now this I'm sure you're all thinking about the Olympic games right at the moment because it brings up images for us all of an Olympic athlete who can forget Kieran Perkins magnificent 1500 metre swim at the last Olympics remember that he won a magnificent swim and then he held up that Olympic gold medal and the bunch of flowers that they give you for all to see for him it was an incredible moment and an immense sense of achievement as he stood on that dais before his dignitaries and millions of supporters around the world were watching him tomorrow morning we'll all be watching Pat Rafter hold up that Wimbledon plate and celebrating we hope the dignity that Paul stands before is bigger and better than any crowd or dignity that we could stand before in this world his dignity is none other than our

Lord Jesus and Paul goes on to say at his coming only then in that presence will achievement be truly assessed not now not by others not even by himself but only by Jesus in his coming when he returns the ultimate reward for Paul's ministry it wasn't gold medals it wasn't an advertising contract with Nike worth squillions of dollars it wasn't even prestige or fame but new believers whose lives had been transformed by God by the proclamation of the gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ this is why Paul longed to see them no matter what ministry God has given to us our highest reward and greatest joy should be those who have come to believe in Jesus and are growing in him continuing to grow in him every effort

Paul had made to see the Thessalonians had failed and it would have been frustrating not having news about their well being in the Lord he was over in Athens and he's trying to find out what's going on well it's about 500 kilometres from Thessalonica a bit hard to find out when they didn't have phones and those sorts of things in those days now when I was overseas I tried to make several calls to Barb to find out how she was but due to the remoteness of the places or the poor telecommunications that I was in some parts of Asia I was unable to get through and there were several times that it was very frustrating to say the least and there were times when I wouldn't be able to get through that I would urge the tour driver Kurt let's move on to the next town so I can get to a telephone to try and ring Barb and find out how things are going sorry honey Paul's suspense grew and it grew until he could bear it no longer something had to be done to relieve the tension so in verse 2 of chapter 3 we see he sent

Timothy and this is how he describes Timothy our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ now Timothy was sent to Thessalonica for three reasons the first one was to strengthen and encourage them for the sake of their faith Timothy was sent to build them up give them comfort and urge them in their faith and trust in God now all new Christians need building up in their faith in God with someone who is able to do so Timothy in this case was the one who could do that and the purpose of strengthening and encouraging them is seen secondly so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions which Paul talks about in verse 3 Paul was worried that the Thessalonian sufferings might lead them astray from the message of Jesus that Paul had originally come proclaiming now this church in Thessalonica was suffering persecution from

[13 : 29] Gentiles and from Jews within the city and Paul was worried that the sufferings that they were going through might lead them astray now here again is another important reason why Christians should not give up the habit of meeting together it's vital that we support and build one another up help others and help ourselves through any sufferings we may be enduring whether physical or spiritual perhaps the best way to protect people from being upset by persecution or sufferings that come our way is reminding them that it is a necessary part of our Christian vocation suffering is a part of it comes with it and Paul did just that he says at the end of verses 3 and 4 you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for in fact when we were with you we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution so it turned out as you know a regular topic of

Paul's instruction to his readers was that suffering would be inevitable Jesus himself taught it as Christians we too should not be surprised when suffering comes upon us in one form or another now the third reason Paul sent Timothy is seen in verse 5 when I could bear it no longer I sent Timothy to find out about your faith I was afraid that somehow the tempter that is Satan had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain Timothy was to report back to Paul with news of how the Thessalonians were doing so that's the third reason that Paul sent Timothy well Timothy goes and he spends some time with the Thessalonians and he comes back with a greatly encouraging report all Paul's fears are dispelled and in verses 6 to 10 we read about the good news of their faith and love of the

Thessalonians faith and love and in addition Timothy reports about the way the Thessalonians remember Paul and his companion kindly in other words the persecutions that they had been suffering at the hands of the Jews and the Gentiles in that town had not affected their faith and their strength as Christians so this fabulous report of good news encourages Paul and in fact overwhelms him leading him to say that he is encouraged despite the persecution and the distress that he himself is suffering and he's encouraged because of their faith their faith in Jesus Christ he's encouraged because they are standing firm within that faith the anxiety and the stress that he had not knowing how they were really doing is turned into thanksgiving to God and joy before God because of the faith and the love of the

Thessalonian Christians Paul next tells them what he's praying for he prays in verse 10 that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith so he's obviously got some information about some issues that are going on now back in verse 18 Paul has made it clear that Satan has hindered him from seeing them now he prays that the way would be made clear to see them in order to help them understand any spiritual gaps in their faith both in their doctrinal and their ethical understanding and he long to see them complete that was Paul's desire to see them complete whole and mature as Christians thus he intends to visit for now though he will have to write giving them instructions and chapters 4 and 5 deal with the ethical and doctrinal issues which we'll look at over the next two weeks but he still prays that he will be able to see them face to face person to person and his prayer is eventually answered when he does get to go and visit the churches of

Macedonia some years later during his third missionary journey and it's about five years later I think that he actually gets to visit the church in Thessalonica and Acts chapter 20 very briefly but gives you the details of that visit that he was able to make well he prayed now there's two things to note here when we say that we will pray about something we should keep on praying just as Paul did in chapter 5 verse 17 of this letter he says to the Thessalonian Christians pray without ceasing don't give up keep on praying he eventually met up with the Thessalonians again but it as I said it was some time later it was about five years later and secondly we should do our best to keep in touch with Christian friends who are absent from us whether they be overseas or interstate we should do it to encourage and strengthen them to find out how they are going in their

[18 : 48] Christian walk and we should pray for our Christian friends regularly today it is so easy to keep in touch either by letter by email by telephone and so on I know that when I was overseas there was nothing I loved more than getting letters from friends and family and Barb it was so encouraging and one of the great things that we can all do as Christians is encourage those who are absent from us now having said that he prays most earnestly to see them Paul turns in verses 11 to 13 to prayer and these three verses are prayer he expresses three precise and particular petitions namely that God will bring him to see the Thessalonians again and that he will increase both their love and their holiness although it's a short prayer it's only a couple of verses it's got a lot of substance in it doesn't it in verse 11 he says now may our

God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you and the first thing to notice here is that there is an equality between the Father and Jesus he puts them on the same level he prays to God the Father God the Son Jesus and his prayer is that God will direct the way that Satan has cut up that we've seen in chapter 2 and Paul knows as he prays even before he prays that God is bigger than Satan and will therefore bring about his purposes he's a man with a lot of faith secondly Paul prays in verse 12 may the Lord meaning Jesus make you increase and abound in love for one another in other words referring to the Christian community and then he goes on and he says and for all meaning I think the whole human race just just as we abound in love for you so his example is there at the end the

Thessalonian Christians their love must expand beyond the church to everyone else and here he uses himself as an example not to give information to the Lord about how he'd like the Thessalonians to act but because this prayer also functions as a means of instructing the readers as to how they should pray and as to how they should live now it's equally as important that as Christians we instruct new Christians how to pray and how they too should live and that has to be seen in action as well as in word and so often it's easy to tell people how to live but it's another thing to model it isn't it and to be honest that is something that I struggle with constantly but if we can't model our Christian faith amongst our Christian peers then there is little hope of us being able to model our faith out in the real world thirdly

Paul prays in verse 13 may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints namely all who belong to him there is no greater call to holiness than the vision of the return of Jesus or of the Lord that is when Jesus returns in glory with all his saints and in order that we may be holy and blameless then Paul prays that we may be inwardly strengthened now growing in holiness for all Christians is a present and continuing process when we become a Christian it doesn't mean that we are perfect straight away we need to continue on growing in holiness and love and commitment of God we're not perfect perfection does come to us but it awaits us at the return of the Lord

God now we all need to be growing in holiness and so we ought to be praying for ourselves and others that this will happen as Christians we all need to be concerned as Paul was for God's people earlier in chapter 2 Paul expressed his love for the Thessalonian Christians likening himself to a nurse which really means a nursing mother and a father in chapter 2 verse 7 he says we were gentle among you like a nurse referring to a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children and in verse 11 he says as you know we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory Paul felt and acted toward these

[24 : 20] Thessalonian Christians as if they were his own children and in a sense they were since he is the one who introduced them to Jesus when as we saw today Paul has to leave the Thessalonians there is a profound impact on him he felt orphaned as we're told back in verse 17 he was torn apart that he had to be suddenly separated from these young Christians and his separation brought on anxiety for him because he was concerned about their spiritual well-being so it was a huge joy and a relief when Timothy reports back about their love pardon me their love and their faith his love and concern for them is so inextricably tied up with them like that of a loving parent for their children and friends that is true

Christian love and commitment it is tied up with these young people and it is this sort of past relevant commitment that the apostle Paul has for the Thessalonians that we are challenged to today for each one of us here at Holy Trinity and for Christian churches throughout the world we're called to that same kind of love that a parent has for their children it's not just some nice feeling soppy or sentimental kind of love but it is a love that shows its concern for each other's spiritual growth a love that compels us to grow and to pray and support one another and this is the kind of sacrificial selfless love that Jesus himself has shown for you and for me so the challenge is for us to live this out in our daily lives will