

# Goodbye?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Good morning. It's an absolute privilege to be here this morning, let alone seeing Adam and Brenda and Benjamin and their family. I remember very clearly the time when Adam became a follower of Jesus.

It was through an Introducing God course. His cousin brought him along. And it's one of those things that really make ministry that sort of delight and joy.

So I'm really, really happy to be here to be sharing this with you. As Steve mentioned, this is going to be our last Sunday here.

And I have to say out front, I'm terrible at saying goodbye. Really, really terrible. I hate it. I don't know what to say and how to say it. I'm told again and again that I'm emotionally stunted.

Not just terrible at expressing it. My daughter says when I want to cry, I can't cry, so I just look angry. So if I look angry today, it's because I'm trying to cry.

[ 1 : 1 5 ]     But I do feel something. I've chosen to share from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 to chapter 3 because it expresses emotions in a way that I wish I could.

But it's also about separation and grief. It's written by a pastor to people who are a deed to him that he's been ministering to. And most importantly, I think the passage gives us a perspective that's sort of beyond ourselves.

Not just my perspective or your perspective, but God's perspective on things like separation and grief. And it is my prayer and hope that we will both be learning from this something of great value and lasting value.

And above all, that we would give glory to God that he alone is worthy. As we begin, will you join me in prayer? Gracious and loving Heavenly Father, thank you for your word.

That is more than just the word of men, but word that can give life. And I pray especially that you might save me from saying things just to please men.

[ 2 : 3 7 ]     And for us as well too, that you might save us from just hearing things that simply please us. That I may speak and that we may hear that which is pleasing to you only.

You who alone knows our hearts. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So this is a little bit weird for me as well too, preaching in English. So I've got to get used to that.

Just by way of background, very quickly, the Thessalonians is sort of located in modern-day Turkey. The church that this letter was addressed to is a tiny little church and very young, but very vibrant.

Known for their faith, their hope and their love. Known in the sense that other churches were copying them. And yet, it's a church that is very needy and vulnerable.

It's only been in existence for a few months by the time Paul was writing to them. Paul himself planted that church. And he's been with them only for a few weeks before he was suddenly and violently forced out.

[ 3 : 54 ] The church, as I mentioned, as far as we could tell, was quite a small church, possibly only 40 or 50 people. You can imagine they had no building to meet in or permanent building.

They had no governance structure. There was no parish council. There was no budget. There was no support, no recognition. In fact, Christianity itself was a foreign thing to the city.

What they had instead was hostility and suspicion and afflictions. So you could sort of picture the situation that they were in.

There's no guarantee, in fact, very high likelihood that they would not survive for a young church. But what they did have as well, too, was in Paul, a very impressive pastor.

I just want to make it very clear in choosing in this passage, I'm not claiming to be Paul. I wish I was even one-tenth the man that he was to his church.

[ 4 : 59 ] He was deeply committed to his flock, apparently at great personal cost. He labored for them night and day. He prayed for them night and day.

They were all he could think about all the time. For we find out today that the church wasn't just a job to him. They weren't just clients.

They were as dear to him as his children. Circumstances were such that he had to lead them very suddenly, very unexpectedly. And although he wished to, they may not see each other again.

So our passage begin today by Paul making very clear that although they have been separated physically face to face, they have never left his heart and his mind.

If you're following in your Bible, he says that in verses 17 and 18. Let me read that to you. Paul says, Paul continues to have the Thessalonians in his thinking, in his prayers and in his plans.

[ 6 : 39 ] He used very strong words when he says this. He longs to see them, but it hasn't been possible. That is the nature of our world, of our age.

It is one of separation. For social reasons, we separate. For economic necessity, as we change jobs, sometimes even within the church, there is disagreement.

And sometimes we separate because life just got busy or get busy. Circumstances change. Maybe it's sickness. But ultimately, of course, in this age and in this world, we are ultimately separated by death.

Although, Paul says, they're separated by distance, and no doubt both Paul and the Thessalonians would have other relationships and people that they must now focus their attention on, they remained in each other's thinking, particularly for Paul.

And this is the aspect of the relationship that I want to draw your attention to. There is a dimension in the relationship that I think we can learn from today.

[ 7 : 59 ] And we can read it in verses 19 and 20. Why does Paul want to see them? Why does he long to see them? He says in verse 19, What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. Paul says, You are you. This is a follower of Jesus, an apostle of the Lord Jesus.

Not Jesus, not God. You are our hope, our glory, our crown of boasting. That's what you are. You represent to me what life is all about.

It's already more remarkable when you remember that they had only known each other for a very short time. For what they have, this dimension of their relationship is a gift.

It is a gift from God. Like all our relationship in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were brought together, not by accident, not by fate.

[ 9 : 15 ] They did not choose one another. What they have together was planned by God before the beginning of the world.

God had brought them together in the Lord Jesus. And as we read the New Testament, we see that that is how God has planned things.

This is how he's gone about saving the world, making a kingdom, making a people holy and fit for him and his world. He pulled together all sorts of people.

Smart people, not so smart people. Sociable people, not so sociable people. And he patiently and he mercifully and he graciously make something of this people.

What he doesn't do is to preselect people who have an aptitude to get along well and enjoy the same things. I'm sort of stunned, always, by what we have.

[ 10 : 27 ] What Christians have. For our relationship is so unnatural. We are not brought together as people who have something in common.

Except the Lord Jesus Christ. Our relationship is supernatural. Supernatural. Supernatural not because our relationship exceeds our expectations.

For if you have belonged to a church for any period of time, you know that church experience often is the opposite of our expectations.

And I am certain, perhaps less so in this congregation, because I spend more time with the other congregation, that I have disappointed many expectations.

Our relationship is supernatural because it is completely other than and outside our expectations. God has brought us together.

[ 11 : 35 ] You and I relate to one another through Jesus. You relate to one another through Jesus. This also means that nothing can take us apart. Not even distance.

Not even forgetfulness. Not even dementia. Not even death. Not even death. Not even death. For God will bring us home. Together.

In fact, what Paul says, this is the other dimension of this relationship. What we have is the only thing that will survive into eternity.

Really, one thing that tests the quality of things in this world of friendship is time. And we know that.

My oldest daughter is completely distraught about moving from the area because she has to leave behind all her friends. And I don't want to question the quality of her friendships or her friends' commitment to her.

[ 12 : 42 ] But my wife and I often say to her, well, we'll see. You know, when you move, after a few months, after a few years, you will know who your real friends are.

And in this world, the thing that will test the quality of things is time. And all the things that we spend our time and energy and our life investing into, you know, wealth, security, reputation, happiness, friendship.

I wonder if you ever consider how many of those things will survive into the future. Or maybe you don't care because, you know, you won't survive into the future.

Well, when Jesus returns and Paul will stand before him, he posed the question, well, what will remain?

What will stand the test of time? What thing of value in his life would he have before God's throne on the last day?

[ 13 : 53 ] What will be his crowning glory? The thing that he will boast in and be most proud of, that he will show to his Lord? The thing that he has to show for his life's work.

What would be yours? Paul understands that it is them, the Thessalonians.

This is why the Thessalonians is what life is about for Paul. He invests in them.

His ambition for them is for each and every single one of them to turn to God from the idols to serve the true and living God.

He wants, more than anything else, for his brothers and sisters to reach the end that the gospel has started.

[ 15 : 00 ] And he wants to reach the end with them, together with them, rejoicing in the relationship that has brought them there. Again, as I think about my last four or five years here in St. Paul's and then the nine years that I've been in Chastwood, I ask myself, well, what is my crowning glory?

What do I have to show for my nine years in Chastwood? What would I have left in the future, you know, when I stand before the Lord and to account for this period in my life?

Paul would say it is you. Hopefully. You are my glory. You are my hope.

You are my crown of boasting. And at that time, the significance of our work, the labor of our hands in this life, will be all to see.

Conclusion. Conclusion. I think, as I was thinking about this morning, I actually think ministers are the luckiest people in the world. Luckiest.

[ 16 : 20 ] But as Christians, we don't believe in luck, so. The most blessed people. I think Christians are the luckiest people in the world. For what can stand the test of time?

The economic downturns or the market corrections. In a moment, in a day, all that we have given our life to can be taken away.

A careless or insensitive word, as we know, can destroy a friendship. Or perhaps even a marriage. But what we have, the Bible assures us, will stand the test of time.

For this is something that is created by God. Maintained by God. Given to us by God. As a gift. It is one thing of value that cannot diminish or fade.

In fact, will grow and flourish over time. And God uses every step, every moment, every situation, everyone along in our journey.

[ 17 : 39 ] To bring us to that final goal. It is, I think, something worth investing your life into.

I don't know. I don't know all of you. Some of you may not have this. Some of you might have been investing your life into something else.

Or too busy to think about it. But let me suggest to you, if what Paul is claiming is true, and I believe it is true because of Jesus, it is something worth for you to look into.

For everybody else. Well, for everyone. I want to thank God for you.

For entrusting yourselves to me. To my care. Unworthy as I am. For I am conscious, as all the ministers in this church and everywhere of the gospel are.

[ 18 : 45 ] Of the many others who are more gifted, more passionate, more gentle, more intelligent, more humble, and more godly than I am. Thank you for bearing with me and being patient with me.

Giving as much as receiving. I want to thank God for you. For the things that I have learned. For the joy that I have experienced. That you have brought for me. For the work that we have done together.

And I do look forward to the day when we stand before our Lord Jesus Christ rejoicing. For the season that we have had together. For the relationship that has brought us there. Paul would go on to say.

He cannot thank God enough. When he hears the good news. Of their patient enduring in faith. There is never a time. He says.

That I can thank God enough. For the Thessalonians. And I feel the same way. As I see the evidence of your faith and hope and love.

[ 19 : 48 ] It brings joy and hope. And it spur on my own faith. And thank you for making me part of this church. We might be apart for a little while.

But one day. We will be together. In the meantime. There is still a race to be run. There is work to be done. And there is a city to be won.

For the Lord Jesus Christ. His love to proclaim. You see when Paul wrote these things. He is not just articulating his emotions to these people. Although he was. He is encouraging them.

He is expressing his love. So that they can follow his example. They are to imitate him. And I want more than anything else.

For you to follow Paul's example of love. This supernatural love. I am the pastor of the Chinese congregation.

[ 20 : 56 ] So I am particularly emotional about them. It feels much more strongly. That I am almost like a parent.

Leaving behind a child. Or children. Let me encourage you. Exhort you. Passionately. Call upon you. This congregation.

To love them. With this sort of love. You know. Make it your life. Life ends. I mean love one another too. But love them.

Make it your life ambition. To stand with them. Pray for them. Help them grow. Don't condescend to them.

Treat them as fellow sons and daughters. Take responsibility for their well-being. And love the whole of Chesswood. There is a city who does not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 22 : 01 ] I am sure that you do. In the meantime. I will entrust you to our great God in prayer. And I pray that you will entrust me as well too.

And may the Lord who make your love increase and overflow for each other. And for everyone else. May he strengthen your heart. 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. Amen. Amen.