

*1 Thessalonians 2:17-20*

## PREFACE

In our passage today Paul contrasts the despicable behavior of the Jews, as described in vv14-16, with his affectionate yearning for the Thessalonians. Paul declared that the Jews:

- killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets;
- Persecuted and hounded Paul and his fellow missionaries out of the cities they visited;
- Instead of being obedient to God, failed to please Him;
- were antagonistic to all men, because they sought to obstruct the spread of Christ's saving gospel by hindering missionary efforts toward the Gentiles.

In sum, the Jews had more than just an opposing religious view; they were arrogant, self-righteous and narrow-minded—not unlike liberals today who are not satisfied to just argue against a competing view, but are hell-bent on *destroying* anyone who offers anything not in line with their philosophy, or at least *denying* them their voice in the marketplace of ideas.

This contrast, between the Jews and himself, is set off by the first two words of the final paragraph in Chapter Two: "But we"; that is, Paul is saying to the church, *I have just described how the Jews feel about you; here is how I feel about you.*

**Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20.**

## v17

Verse 17 is one of the most emotion-packed sentences in all of Paul's letters, but much of that emotion is hidden from our view. It is unfortunate that some of our translations do not express the deep, visceral feelings contained in the original. Among our common versions, the ESV and NIV come closest.

**But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,** (ESV)

**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.** (NIV)

This whole paragraph, but especially v17, is an eloquent expression of Paul's true heart for—indeed, his passionate devotion to—those to whom he delivered the gospel of Christ.

*But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while*

He, of course, addresses them as brothers.

**brothers** = *adelphoi* = from <G1> (a) (as a connective particle) and **delphus (the womb)**; a brother (literal or figurative) near or remote [much like <H1> ('ab)] :- brother; **from the same womb**.

Paul uses this as no mere formality or boilerplate. The church in Thessalonica was comprised of individuals who were now “from the same womb” as Paul. Each of them had been born again in Christ Jesus—the “firstborn.” It was His blood that made them so, and they were further “related” by the Holy Spirit who indwelt each of them

He presses this relational connection further with “having been taken away from you,” or “torn away from you.” The latter hints at the depth of feeling in the Greek.

**were torn away from** = *aporphanisthentes* = from <G575> (apo) and a derivative of <G3737> (orphanos); **to bereave wholly**, i.e. (figurative) **separate** (from intercourse) :- take.

Note the word buried inside: “orphan.” It is the picture of a child who has prematurely lost his parents’ they have been “torn away from” him. So much more than just “I miss you,” the word “combines the idea of separation with the mental anguish accompanying it” (Thomas).

And this expression of loss is further intensified by the relatively brief span of time since they had been together: “...for a **short while**” literally means “for the occasion of an hour.” It had been only a few months between Paul’s stay with them and his writing of this letter. With this idiom he is saying that even this brief absence seems an eternity.

*in person, not in spirit*

Though not necessarily inaccurate, the NASB is an outlier in translating this “spirit.” The word is *kardia* [kar-dee'-ah], and means the heart: the inner man, the seat of the affections and purposes. “Out of sight, not out of mind” (Rutherford).

Paul quickly clarifies the nature of this absence; here in its most succinct form is one of Paul’s favorite thoughts: Because we are “from the same womb,” through the supernatural auspices of Christ and our heavenly Father, we are never truly apart from each other. Thus by long distance he shared in the joys of the Colossian church—

**Read Colossians 2:5.**

—and handed down his judicial verdict to the Corinthian church.

**Read 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.**

*...were all the more eager with great desire...*

If we remove the modifying clauses from the middle of this verse we get the central thought: “But we...were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.” Even removing what we have looked at so far, Paul’s deep longing for the Thessalonians comes through.

all the more eager  
endeavored more eagerly  
endeavored the more abundantly  
made every effort (the NIV reverses the order)

all the **more eager** = *perissoterōs espoudasamen* = beyond, **superabundantly**, exceedingly; to use speed, i.e. **to make effort**, be prompt or **earnest** :- do (give) diligence, be diligent (forward), **endeavour**, labour, study.

with great desire  
intense longing

with **great desire** = *en pollēi epithumiāi* = much, many largely; a longing (especially for what is forbidden) :- concupiscence, desire, lust (after).

I don't want to get so pedantic with this that I put you to sleep, but if you will bear with me for just a moment I believe it is worth our time and effort to burrow down into this last word, translated "desire" or "longing," to grasp the true intensity of Paul's longing for these brothers and sisters.

**epithumiāi** from **epithymeō** from **thymos** [noun; **passion** (as if breathing hard) :- **fierceness**, indignation, wrath] from **thyō** [a primary verb; properly to rush (**breathe hard**, blow, smoke), i.e. (by implication) **to sacrifice (properly by fire)**].

In Brown's *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, this word is catalogued under the English heading, "Desire, Lust, Pleasure." It is often used in a bad sense—i.e., unbridled and evil, lustful passions; Paul uses it elsewhere as an expression for the sinful flesh which rules man. Here in our verse he uses it in a good or neutral sense, but we can now understand the passionate intensity with which Paul longed to return to the Thessalonians. And note: even this already intense word he modifies with "great"!

...to see your face.

To what, specifically, was this intense emotion directed? To see (behold) them not just in the heart, but in person—face to face. The word translated "face" [*prosōpon*] includes the idea of presence, person. Paul did not just want to "see" them; he wanted to be in their presence, *with* them.

*from the Cambridge Bible:* they were parted in sight, not in affection; but true affection longs for sight.

## v18

Then in v18 Paul explains to the church why he was not able to return to see them face to face—and in his explanation there is a clue to why he went to such great lengths in the previous verse to express his emotional longing.

### Read v18.

I believe one reason for Paul's emotional outburst in v17 was to contrast his affections for the Thessalonians with the lack of same from the Jewish community in their region. But a second reason is hinted at here. Remember: Timothy (and, perhaps, Silas) had returned to Thessalonica; Timothy, later meeting up with Paul in Corinth, is the one who brought news from Thessalonica to Paul, thus giving him cause for writing this first letter.

*we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—*

There may have been some in the church who were grumbling that Timothy returned to them by himself because Paul didn't care enough about them. Or perhaps some of the local Jews were spreading nasty rumors about Paul's disinterest in the Thessalonica church.

Whatever the reason, Paul felt it necessary not only to pour out his heart in v17, but to further emphasize his *personal* affection for them in his next sentence (v18). *All of us ["we"] wanted to come back to you for a visit—time and again, more than once, I, Paul, personally wanted to see you again.*

Even the word translated “wanted” (we *wanted* to come to you) expresses a strong intention or desire; more than a mere inclination or wish, it was their *will* to come.

*and yet Satan hindered us.*

But that will was thwarted [lit., *to cut into; like runners in a race*] by no less than Satan. Paul was not one (as some do today) to ascribe every obstacle or inconvenience to the work of the devil. He knew well that God Himself could change their well-intentioned plans—that is what had brought them to Macedonia, instead of Asia, in the first place.

### **Read Acts 16:6-10.**

Even his enlistment in the beginning was the work of Christ changing his plans (Acts 9). But Paul could also recognize the work of Satan, and that he was just preoccupied with ministry elsewhere he would not have attributed to the enemy; Satan would not have encouraged that work either. To the Corinthians Paul wrote, in his second letter to them,

**for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.** (emphasis added)

The bottom line is that he dearly wanted to return to Thessalonica, but circumstances organized by Satan, and thus beyond his control, prevented it.

### **w19-20**

In v19 Paul continues to reassure the Thessalonians of his affection for them—and it is further evidence that his mind is already on what he will be discussing later, in both letters, about the end times.

*For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?*

It was not uncommon for Paul to refer to those in the churches he started as his “joy and crown.” To the church he started in Philippi, just before coming to Thessalonica, he said much the same in his letter to them.

### **Read Philippians 4:1.**

[Back to 1 Thessalonians.](#)

*Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?  
[v20] For you are our glory and joy.*

It occurs to me that an examination of this “crown of exultation” or, literally, “crown of boasting,” as the ESV has it, is a perfect example of how the Spirit of God is required for a correct understanding of Scripture.

Absent the Spirit, the world would read these two verses and not surprisingly conclude that Paul would arrive in heaven, stand before the judgment seat [[bema](#)] and begin bragging about all the souls he had racked up for the Lord. For this service he would then be awarded a golden crown studded with precious gems, which would promote him to favored-son status in the heavenly realms.

*With* the Spirit, however, we know that that is not the picture at all. First, this crown will not be like the heavy, gold- and gem-encrusted crowns worn by European royalty, such as those stored in the Tower of London. Nor will it be a simple, narrow band, called a *diadema*, holding a tiara.

**crown** = *stephanos* (stef'-a-nohs) = from an apparently primary **stepho (to twine or wreath)**; a chaplet (as a badge of royalty, **a prize in the public games or a symbol of honor general**; but more conspicuous and elaborate than the simple fillet, <G1238> (diadema)), literal or figurative :- crown.

Think of Judah ben Hur mounting the rostrum, and receiving from the governor, Pontius Pilate, the laurel wreath of victory for winning the chariot race. [The crown of thorns worn by Jesus was a \*stephanos\*.](#)

Will believers be rewarded by Christ? Indeed.

**“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”** (Revelation 22:12-13)

But believers in that moment are not boasting in what *they* have accomplished, but what Christ has graciously accomplished *through* them. As Paul writes to the Corinthians,

**But he who boasts is to boast in the Lord. For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.** (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)

Beyond that, if ordinary believers are to follow the pattern of the twenty-four elders in heaven, we will be in possession of our crowns for only a brief moment anyway.

**Read Revelation 4:9-11.**