[WHAT IS OUR HOPE, OUR JOY...WHEN HE COMES?

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Key Verse: 2:19

“For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?”

In the last lesson, 2:1-16, we thought of Paul’s life as a gospel worker and shepherd. He makes his appeal against false accusations that he was just like all other false teachers of that time. In this appeal, he clearly asserts that he did not have impure motives and was striving to please God, having God as his witness. His appeal was to protect the church of God’s flock of sheep. Then he positively testifies to his life as a mother and father-like shepherd – like a nursing mother’s gentle care and sacrificial service to her little children and a father’s exhortation and discipline of his own children. Today’s passage is Paul’s defence against another false accusation regarding Paul’s failure to return to Thessalonica which implied that he had no true concern for the people there. Paul’s appeal in this defence rather exposes his deep affection for the Thessalonians, and further his hope and joy in Jesus’ second coming. Certainly, Paul’s outstanding affectionate heart for them is the reflection of God’s loving heart for his people in Jesus Christ, and Paul’s hope and joy in the expectation of the Lord Jesus’ coming indicates what truly matters in life.

**First, out of sight, not out of mind (17-18).** Verse 17 says, “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.” As we studied, Paul’s leaving Thessalonica was forceful and abrupt. He was driven out of the city against his will. Paul and Thessalonians had to be separated on the contrary to their wishes. Paul used this expression, “Brothers, when we were torn away from you…”, which could imply his heart being torn apart. He felt like a parent who has been torn away from his beloved children. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that his heart was not okay with the sudden departure.

Then it is written, “for a short time.” He made sure that in such a situation he felt it would be a short time in his mind. He wanted them to know that he did not think it would be an indefinite long time in disguise of no return. Even a short time of separation was not bearable to him.

And it is clearly written, “in person, not in thought.” There is a saying, “Out of sight, out f mind.” But not in this case of Paul. The persecutors could separate Paul and the Thessalonians in person, but never in Paul’s thought. The Thessalonian believers were in Paul’s heart and thought amid that unwanted separation. He always remembered them as described in 1:3, “We continually remember before our God and Father…”

Then Paul says, “out of our intense longing.” There was intense long in his heart to see them. It was not an ordinary desire, but a great eager desire, “all the more eager with great desire” to see them face to face described in other translations.

And such longing and desire made Paul and his companions endeavour, try hard, make every effort to accomplish what they wished.

Subsequently Paul says in verse 18, “For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again…” Here we see more and more Paul’s heart for them. “We wanted to come to you” seems to be redundant, yet he expressed it. And here are three more emphasises in the descriptions, “certainly”, “I, Paul” stressing his personal longing on top of the team’s longing, and “again and again.”

Then he says in verse 20, “our hope”, “our joy”, “crown”, “our glory” and again, “our joy.” In this way, Paul assured them of his heart and longing and love for them, with more than even a 10-fold emphasises.

We believe that this is none other than the reflection of God’s heart and love for us his children in our Lord Jesus Christ. From time to time God’s people feel that they have been torn apart from God in their adverse situations and human conditions, and cannot be sure of God’s love. However, we are to know God’s love is unchanging. What changes is our attitude towards the unchanging love of God due to our adversity and affliction. Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Our God and Father wants us to be assured of his unchanging love in any changing human circumstances. Furthermore, he wants us to go deeper into his love in such situations. In Thessalonians 2, we thought of a nursing mother, her gentle and tender care for her infant baby in her arms, which is the most gentle, tender and cherishing relationship in all of human life. But God says in Isaiah 49:15-16, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands…” God also says in Zephaniah 3:17, “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” This love of God is fulfilled demonstrated in Christ Jesus. Romans 5:7-8 says, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Who in the world could die for ungodly, ugly, wicked sinners like you and me in this world? But Christ died for us sinners, and this is the demonstration of God’s love. What can be greater demonstration of God’s love than this? Surely, nothing.

In the gospel story when the disciples heard of Jesus’ leaving, they felt that they would be like orphans in this world. But Jesus said, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (Jn 14:18). It was the promise of the Holy Spirit. Then the risen Jesus said, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:20). Now at the right hand of God he is interceding for us (Ro 8:34). Hebrew 7:25 says, “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” It is as we sang in the Hymn Song “Moment by Moment”, “Never a trial that He is not there, Never a burden that He doth not bear, Never a sorrow that He doth not share; Moment by Moment I’m under His care.” The song continues, “Never a heart-ache and never a groan, Never a teardrop and never a moan, Never a danger but there on the throne, Moment by Moment He thinks of His own.”

So Paul declares in Romans 8:35-39, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword…No, all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, no anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We should not let ourselves be drifted away in our life situations and the trend of the world but hold fast to the steadfast love of God so that we may really dwell in his love and experience victory of life one after another through this love of God!

**Second, Satan’s hindrance.** And then Paul says, “Satan stopped us.” He clarifies that Satan blocked their way to come to them. Satan did not want their meeting again. On one occasion, Paul and his companions wanted to preach the word in the province of Asia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to (Ac 16:6-7). Certainly, Paul could distinguish the work of Satan from the work of the Holy Spirit. This time Satan stopped his mission team. Satan hindered and thwarted their plan, blocking the way. Here we don’t know how Satan him, probably sudden change of sailing schedule, Paul or one of his compassions becoming unexpectedly sick, or having injury, etc. Anyway, as for Paul it was clear that Satan stopped them.

How important it is to discern between the two, the Spirit’s blocking and Satan’s blocking. When we are sure that the Spirit does not allow us to do certain things, we should never try to do such tasks; rather we should turn away. However, when it is clear that Satan blocks our ways, we should not be discouraged and give up. Rather, with that discernment we can be encouraged and at the right time challenge again, seeking God’s leading. Later on, we see that Paul prayed and prayed (3:10-11) and finally could meet them on his third missionary journey written in Acts 20.

God allows Satan’s work to a certain limit. And God uses Satan to accomplish his grand purpose in the end for his glory. In Daniel 10, Daniel prayed for his people. Then God’s message came to him: “…Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me/blocked my way twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.” This was one phenomenon of the spiritual world. As for Jesus God’s will for him was to suffer and die for the salvation of mankind. But we see that Satan’s hindered it even through his top disciple Simon Peter right after his confession of Christ. Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling bock to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33). While Jesus was dying on the cross, all sorts of people hurled insults at him, saying, “Come down from the cross; save yourself and us.” Satan can hinder us even through closest human relationships or any kind of people, as we try to do the will of God. When we see Satan’s thwarting and hindrance or any discouragement, we should pray all the more persistently and challenge waiting on God. We remember Jesus’ words, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly” (Lk 18:7-8).

**Third, when he comes (19-20).** Paul then says in verses 19 and 20. “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” Interestingly, after saying, “Satan stopped us”, Paul did help them to have the expectation of his coming to them. Rather, he helped them to have the expectation of the Lord’s coming and meeting the Lord together in glory and joy. What a glorious day it will be? And they will live with the Lord forever without any separation at all, whatsoever. When he comes, the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, as written in Revelation 11:15. And then his redeemed people will live forever in the eternal kingdom of God in new heaven and new earth. Revelation 21:3 says, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with hem and be their God.”

In this world, people want to accomplish many things. It is good to study hard and work hard. But we should really think that when our Lord Jesus comes to judge and to save, what really matters? Surely, the salvation of our souls will be most important. So Jesus said in Matthew 16:26, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his souls? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” in Mark 8:36, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” and in Luke 9:25, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” Also, we are to know that we cannot present before him our degree, position, wealth, or any other things. But here we find something wonderful? When the Lord Jesus comes, we can present before him not only our own souls but other souls who have been regenerated through us, and nothing else. We cannot present our family members or our close friends before him, if they are not regenerated. That will be the moment of eternal separation or eternally being together.

This is the reason Jesus preached the good news of salvation from the outset of his messianic ministry, saying, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15) Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk 8:1). Then he sent out his disciples to preach the kingdom of God (Lk 9:2). Even during the passion week, the last week in his life, what he did is this written in Luke 21:37-38, “Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.” Even on the cross Jesus invited to his kingdom one repentant sinner, who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus responded, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42-43).

Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season…” Another time he said in Galatians 4:19, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you…” And he said in 1 Corinthians 15:58, “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”

We really learn for what we should invest our lives, keeping our faith in the Lord Christ Jesus, praying. Jesus said in Luke 16:9, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

We thank and praise God for his unchanging redeeming sacrificial love demonstrated in his Son Christ Jesus’ death for us. May we dwell in this love at any human situation and discern Satan’s hindrance and invest our lives for the saving of souls with whom we can stand before the Lord Jesus when he comes.