

1 Thessalonians 2: 17-20;"Endeavoring to See your Face",
Sermon # 13 in the series - "A Persevering Faith",
Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on June 29th, 2008,
in the Afternoon Worship Service.

As we read the book of Acts in the 17th Chapter and the 5th verse we find that it was because of the persecution that came to Paul and Silas on account of their preaching the gospel to the Thessalonians, that they were forced to leave that city. After the hostilities were commenced by some of the unbelieving Jews who were envious of the great crowds of people coming to listen to the Apostle Paul speak; they took some of the people of the marketplace and gathering a mob, they set the city in an uproar. When these things happened Jason and the brethren there immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. Paul and Silas were only going to stay away for a short time and then return to them, but this was not to be. For when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was being preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds." In verse 14 it says, "Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there." Then it says in verse 15, "So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed." This is where the words of our text in 1 Thessalonians come in to play. Verse 17 says, "But we brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoring more earnestly to see your face with great desire." What do you do when you are forced to be separated from the brethren that you love in the bonds of Christ? Well these verses describe for us the desires of the Apostle Paul to see his beloved Thessalonian converts once again.

The spiritual desire of the Apostle Paul to see the believers at Thessalonica again, having been separated from them by God's providence and Satan's hindrances; he expresses in the most exalted terms. In these verses we will find that there are some things which we can learn from Paul's experience; things about holy Christian love and holy Christian desire which will do us in good stead in our own experience if we find that we are separated from those whom we love in Christ. How does Paul describe his own thoughts and feelings in relation to this separation? We will find, if we look carefully, that he has described them as three stages in his experience. The 1st Stage is - The Great desire begun. (Verse 17) The 2nd Stage is- The Great Hindrance to that desire being fulfilled (Verse 18) And The 3rd Stage is - Great Joy in the ultimate fulfillment of that desire (Verse 19) Let's look into the heart of the great Apostle for a few moments and see if our heart is like his heart.

The 1st Stage of Paul's experience in relation to this separation was Great Desire begun. (Verse 17)

"But we brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire." When Paul uses the words, "having been taken away from you", they actually convey a much stronger emotion in the original Greek than what it is translated as in our New King James. Calvin translates it, "having been bereaved of you". Lenski translates it, "orphaned from you for period of time". Hendricksen translates it, "having been torn away from you for a short time". Albert Barnes says that the word properly has relation to the condition of an orphan, or one who is bereaved of his parents. This was the kind of feeling that Paul experienced at not being able to go back and see them. It was an intense longing which could not be fulfilled. It was a feeling of intense loss that their relationship could not continue, as if a child had lost its parents. But Paul did not rest in his feelings of bereavement. He had something to combat it with. He had great desire. And because of this great desire he would try everything he could to see these people again. He remembered how they had received the word of God from him like his own children would have. He remembered the feelings of being both spiritual father and mother to them. He had them together with him in his heart even if he was absent from them. His great desire led him often to think about them, to pray for them, and to make plans as to how he could return to them again. The word "endeavored" means that this was something that he undertook seriously to do. It was not a matter of if he was going to return to them, but when.

I think that Paul knew and understood well the problem of his absence from the church in Thessalonica. There were probably people there, the very ones who disapproved of the conversion of these dear saints, who were telling them, "You see, these men who preached the gospel to you; they have left you here to fend for yourself. You are spiritual orphans and the reason that they left was because they really do not care about you at all. They've got you hooked on this new doctrine, this teaching about Jesus, but their intention is simply to spread their teaching, and to build their own churches by it. It was never their intention to give to you their spiritual hearts. Paul knew his own heart; he knew that this was a lie, and he knew that he must combat this misimpression. Because he was not there in person, they might easily begin to believe such a lie. He would write, and he would tell them of his great desire to return to them, of his eagerness to see their faces once again, and to help them along in their faith. He was an apostle but he was also their friend.

This leads me to say that Christians ought not to be those who do nothing to show their love for other believers. If your spiritual desires are right towards the brethren, you ought to communicate those desires to them. They are brethren and they are beloved and you ought to have, by the Spirit's working in your heart, desires for their spiritual well-being that will lead you to long to spend time with them. You may be separated from them by distance, by the circumstances of your job and your life, but you ought not to let those things deter you from communicating your eagerness to spend time with them and to see them face to

face. This is true for all Christians but particularly this is true for ministers of the gospel. The faith that a minister preaches is the same faith which will lead him to have great desires to see Christ's people, and will lead Christ's people also to have great desires to see him. There is an endeavoring to get together and a making plans to do so. This is really one of the main ways that the kingdom of Christ is furthered.

The 2nd Stage of Paul's experience of desire was the great Hindrance to that desire being fulfilled. (Verse 18)

"Therefore we wanted to come to you--even I Paul, time and again--but Satan hindered us." It is evident that during this time period when Paul went to Berea and then to Athens, that his intention was to come back to Thessalonica. Young believers need attention, and they need teaching and the encouragement of the ones who have brought them to saving faith; especially if they are undergoing persecution. But every time that Paul thought to implement his plans to return, something went awry. He attributes the hindrance to his being able to go, to Satan. We are not told exactly how Satan hindered Paul from coming to them. We know that Satan has many schemes for hindering the advance of Christ's kingdom. And he has schemes for hindering individuals who are instrumental in the preaching of the Word; men whose preaching is the instrument that God will use to add to Christ's kingdom. The Scriptures tell us that he can only do that which God permits him to do, but we must understand that he will take all the leash that he can get and use it to his own advantage. He did this with Job, a man who was a man of great integrity, a man who feared the Lord and was turning away from evil. He hindered him greatly by getting permission from God to kill his children with a wind, and to destroy his possessions with fire from heaven, and to destroy his health with boils. Satan can indeed hinder us personally when God's permission is given. This can be in the form of the harassment and persecution of the people who preach the gospel, hindering them from coming to the very people that they have preached to and seen converted under their ministry. This is what happened here. It was Satan who was working in the minds of the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica, so that they continued to pursue Paul to Berea and this forced him to leave that area altogether by a ship which took him to Athens. These persecutions by these wicked men were instigated by Satan who wanted to keep Paul from coming back to strengthen the faith of the believers in Thessalonica. A great dent had been put into Satan's dark kingdom in that place, and he did not want the truth to spread any farther.

There are two things which we should remember about these hindrances of Satan. First of all, they are hindrances in the area of our faith. Satan's intention in seeking and gaining permission to hinder us is so that our faith might grow weak, or fail altogether. "Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded permission to sift you as wheat." Satan likes to see Christ's saints discouraged in the work of the Lord; hindered at every turn if he can. He likes to see their best laid plans disrupted and defeated, even if only for a time. His instigations will often come through people

who have heard us speak of the gospel of Christ and their need to believe in it. He will so agitate their hearts and minds against you that they will think of ways to hinder you from bringing spiritual help and encouragement to others. Satan thought that if he could just get Paul separated from his traveling companions and helpers in the faith, that his desire to preach would be lessened. He would become discouraged and he would grow weak in the work that God had called him to. So Paul ended up taking the ship to Athens and he was there alone. Satan had hindered him from doing what he had wanted to do. But he hadn't hindered Christ from communicating His purpose to Paul of what He wanted Paul to do.

This is the second thing that we should remember about the hindrances of Satan. He may hinder for a time, but even his hindrances are worked into the plan of God for us, and God will overrule them for our good and the forward progress of the gospel. If Satan was hindering Paul by stirring up the spirits of unbelieving men against him, then Christ would stir Paul's spirit up to be provoked by the idols in Athens. Listen to Acts 17: 16. "Now while Paul waited for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw the city given over to idols." Now this is amazing, is it not? We are informed in 1 Thessalonians that Paul knew that Satan had hindered him in his trying to return to Thessalonica, but he didn't let those hindrances stop him from thinking about the lost people around him. Let me ask you, what do you do when your plans to serve God in a particular way are thwarted and you have the sneaking suspicion that Satan has done it? What do you do? Do you become angry and frustrated? Do you give up? Do you cease to pray and ask God for wisdom? No, know that it is always better to persevere, and always abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. This is what Paul did when he was hindered by Satan. He just looked around him and saw what the Lord would have him to do. It says in the next verse, "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there." And great opportunities to preach came to him there and, still not being able to return to Thessalonica, he went on to Corinth and preached there also. A church was founded there as a result. Don't think that hindrances to your personal plans means that God's plan is derailed. Simply keep on doing what God has called you to do and in time you will still see your plans established. "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart." "Lean not upon your own understanding." "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." Your desires to see things accomplished for the Lord may be thwarted for a time, but they will not be thwarted always. Satan may hinder, but Jesus shall prevail. Satan did gain permission to sift Peter like wheat, but remember the statement of the Lord Jesus. "But I have prayed for you that your faith fail not." "And when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." And so Peter did. And so Paul did. And so can you my beloved brethren. Remember that your faith and your success in all that you do for Jesus are all in His hands, not yours. Don't give up your great desires to honor and glorify God, but realize that there will be hindrances from Satan and

keep praying and keep looking to see how you can glorify God in what He sets before you. He can, and will, providentially overrule everything that Satan hinders you in, for your good and for His glory.

Now let's look at the 3rd and final stage of Paul's experience of desire - Great Joy. (Verses 19 and 20)

It was Paul's greatest joy to think of the ultimate fulfillment of that desire that he had at the present time to see the Thessalonians. "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?" "Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" "For you are our glory and joy." What was Paul's greatest desire in relation to the saints there at Thessalonica? It was not just to see them again personally as he so desired to do. It was his greatest of desires to see them and to be with them on that glorious Day when Christ returned. The reason that seeing them again in this life was so important to Paul was because of the great value of their relationship of being involved in each other's experience in the faith of Jesus Christ. Paul wanted their faith to be victorious and to triumph even through the many sufferings that they were undergoing. Paul would teach the Thessalonian believers more about the strength of the love of Jesus Christ if he could. He would teach them more about the strength of Christ's grace and truth if he would be given more time. And he would do that personally by the strength of Christ's grace working in him. And why did he want this so badly? Because there would be a greater assurance given to each of them and to him that they would all appear rejoicing in that glorious Day when Christ comes back. Everything that Paul lived for then, ultimately had its full realization for him and for them, in the 2nd coming of Jesus Christ. It would be the completion of the work of redemption for all of them. Paul wanted to make sure that they continued to hold fast to Christ. He knew that even if they died under persecution that they would not miss out on Jesus' work of glorifying them. They would most certainly be raised from the dead and be transformed in the twinkling of an eye on the last day and at the sounding of the last trump. It was his hope and his joy, and his crown of rejoicing to see their faith established, unmoved, and unharmed by the strategies of Satan and the persecutions of evil men. He wanted to communicate to them in his letter this, his greatest desire, that they would have a faith which would persevere to the end. He wanted to tell them how much he did want to see them at that time, but how much he also looked forward to seeing them on that great day when Christ returns. If he couldn't be with them at that time, he would remind them of the time when nothing would hinder them being together. O how great Paul's rejoicing would be when they would never again be separated, but forever be together with the Lord. The lesson for us here this afternoon is for us to see the value of each Christian's faith. May each of us think of how we can encourage and strengthen the faith of other believers around us. If we are separated from ones whom we would like to see again, but can't, may we think about writing them, or calling them. And if we still cannot find a way to come to them, that we would be reminding each other of that great Day when all separation of saints shall cease and the Bride of Christ will

be completed and made ready for her husband, our Lord Jesus. May each of us also have this kind of love for one another and I am sure that by the grace of Jesus Christ we will endure our separations which are only for a time.