

gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.
(1Pet 5:1–3)

...in person, not in spirit — were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

By adding “in person, not in spirit,” Paul is simply emphasizing that even when it was necessary for Paul and his companions to leave Thessalonica, they did so as a necessity, not as something they personally wished to do. The Greek literally has “in face, not in heart” (*προσώπῳ οὐ καρδίᾳ, prosōpō ou kardia*), meaning “absent physically but not in thought.” And then he expresses the constant and growing desire he had to be together again with the believing community in Thessalonica. Clearly Paul stands as a model for all who carry the responsibility of being a shepherd or pastor within a local assembly of believers. True shepherding flows from a heart that longs to honor the Great Shepherd, Yeshua, in caring for the “flock” He died to save.

For we wanted to come to you — I, Paul, more than once — The desire to return to Thessalonica and to be with the community of believers there was surely regularly on Paul’s heart or mind. But the ability to do so was simply not available, owing, no doubt, to the fact that if he did not act in wisdom, it might have been extremely dangerous for him to simply “show up” in their location.

... and yet Satan hindered us. — The Greek word translated here as “hindered” is *ἐνέκοψεν, enekopsen*, which apparently originated as a military term for “cutting up a road to make it impassable.” We are not told exactly that to which Paul refers in this case, but it seems most likely that he considered the desire of those who opposed him, to even do him bodily harm, as being led by *the Enemy* himself. And thus there was no clear indication that things had changed in Thessalonica which would enable them to return and not be confronted with the same danger to their lives that had caused them previously to leave the city.

19–20 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Yeshua at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.

In the previous verses, Paul has explained the circumstances that resulted in the need for them (Paul and Silvanus/Silas) to escape from the mob who intended to do them bodily harm, and thus to leave

Thessalonica quickly. He now goes on to emphasize that their sudden departure was not in any way to be construed as being disappointed or down trodden over the response of the Thessalonian community to the gospel message they had proclaimed. Much to the contrary, for Paul continues to glory in the work of God which was evident among the Thessalonians as they received the gospel message by faith and demonstrated the genuine change of life that was evident within the community of believers.

He even goes further by describing the believing community as demonstrating the evident fruit of genuine faith in Yeshua and thus fully affirming the gospel message while at the same time marking the successful ministry of Paul and his colleagues.

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? – Here Paul uses the kind of language which proud parents might use of their children. His “hope” ($\xi\lambda\pi\lsq\iota\varsigma$, *elpis*) is not what is often construed by the word “hope” in our modern English, that expresses something that is wished for but surely not certain, as in the phrase “I hope so!” Rather, when used of the promised and evident work of God, Paul uses the word “hope” to describe that which the believer can hold as something future and inevitable. Note the use of this same Greek word ($\xi\lambda\pi\lsq\iota\varsigma$, *elpis*) in 1Cor 13:12-13.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith ($\pi\lsq\iota\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$, *pistis*), hope ($\xi\lambda\pi\lsq\iota\varsigma$, *elpis*), love ($\alpha\gamma\acute{a}\pi\eta$, *agape*), abide ($\mu\acute{e}n\iota\epsilon\iota$, *menei*) these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1Cor 13:12-13)

When Paul states that these three, “faith, hope, love,” abide, the word means “to continue to exist, remain, last, persist, continue to live.”¹ Here the Apostle Paul makes a clear statement regarding the “perseverance of the believer,” the biblical doctrine which states that once a person exercises true saving faith in Yeshua and is thus “sealed by the Ruach HaKodesh” he is therefore eternally the possession of the Lord, never to be lost. As Paul confirms in his epistle to the Ephesians:

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Eph 1:13–14)

¹ BDAG, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, “μενω,” p. 631.

This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." (Jn 6:39–40)

...or joy – It is this understanding of “hope” to which Paul refers that brings true and lasting “joy” (*χάρις, xaris*) both to the believers in Thessalonica as well as to himself. The settled joy that is the possession of every believer does not mean that they never experience sorrow, discouragement, and the woes of living in a fallen world, but it means that ultimately the joy the believer has will surely triumph. As Yeshua Himself taught:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33)

It is this “joy” that Paul has, for he has witnessed the reception of the gospel by the Thessalonian believers and has also seen the perseverance they have demonstrated, even in the face of persecution. Seeing, once again, the power of the gospel and the work of God in saving the lost and drawing them eternally unto Himself, Paul and his companions experience true and deep “joy” as the faithfulness of the Lord is demonstrated in such a powerful way.

...crown of exultation, in the presence of our Lord Yeshua at His coming? – Here Paul envisions the coming of Yeshua and all that will take place as the history of the created world gives way to eternity. He speaks of a “crown of exultation,” (*ἡ στέφανος καυχήσεως, he stephanos kauxēseōs*), but unfortunately, when modern readers see the word “crown,” we often equate it with a “golden diadem” worn by a king or other royalty. But in the Greek world in which Paul lived, the “crown” did not immediately envision “royalty” but rather the wreath (usually made of laurel) which was given to the winner in one of the contests of the games, and which was the winner’s ultimate prize.

...For you are our glory and joy. The obvious point Paul is emphasizing here is not that somehow he is taking any credit for the saving work that is accomplished by God through the death and resurrection of Yeshua and the regenerating work of the Ruach. Rather, he is referring to having been used of the Lord to bring the gospel to those who are perishing and that he thereby is seen as a true servant of God, doing the work He has given him to do. While the word “exultation” can carry

the sense of “boasting,” it likewise can mean “putting one’s confidence in something and thus to ‘glory’ in it.” As Gordon Fee notes regarding Paul’s use of the Greek word *καυχησίς* (*kaukēsis*) “to boast, exalt” in this verse:

...in its positive sense means to put all of one’s hope and security in the living God. Likewise here, with imagery from the games Paul is picturing himself as standing in the Lord’s own presence at his coming, wearing the victor’s wreath. But the “wreath” in this case is none other than the Thessalonian believers themselves, in whom he will glory because they are there with him in the Lord’s presence at his Parousia.¹

Here we are mindful of the parable Yeshua taught of the Master and his servants. The Master gave funds to each of his servants to accomplish good work while he was away on a journey. Those who diligently used the funds to acquire more for their master were praised with the phrase, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” It is to this very thing which Paul alludes when he describes a “crown of exultation” in the final day when Yeshua returns. The Thessalonian believers are the divinely ordained “fruit” of the labors put forth by Paul and his colleagues, for they obeyed the commission of Yeshua Himself to be a witness of His saving grace and the salvation procured for all who come to Him in faith. Indeed, this was the message Ananias was to give to Paul after he had regained his vision, having been blinded on the Damascus road:

But the Lord said to him [Ananias], “Go, for he [Saul/Paul] is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; (Acts 9:15)

Thus, the Thessalonian believers were themselves the divinely enacted fruit resulting from Paul’s obedience to take the gospel of Yeshua to “Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” To hear “well done, good and faithful servant” is the “crown” we all should desire as the race of life is completed. And it is our living to honor Him, to be living witnesses of His grace, mercy, and greatness, that by the work of the Ruach Who dwells within every believer we are enabled to “run the race set before us” (Heb 12:1-2) and to complete it well.

Some of the fundamental aspects of living out our faith in order to

¹ Gordon Fee, *1Thess* in NICNT, p. 110.

“run the race set before us” are:

- a. Seeking to know Yeshua as He truly is, and utilizing the pattern of His life as that to which we strive to be conformed (1Jn 2:4–6).
- b. Keeping the glory and honor of Yeshua as the central focus of our lives, finding increasing joy in pleasing Him (Col 1:18).
- c. Gaining spiritual strength as the Spirit teaches us through the Scriptures about the infinite value of Yeshua’s work on our behalf (Jn 15:26; 16:13).
- d. Resting in Him, that is, relying fully upon His perfect work of redemption, His death and resurrection, and in His ongoing work as our heavenly high priest, Who always lives to make intercession for us. (Matt 11:28–29; Heb 4:3–11).

It is when believers in Yeshua commit themselves more and more to focus all of life on the goal of honoring the Lord and being witnesses in this world of His saving grace, that we long to tell others about the Lord and the “so great salvation” He has won for all who come to Him in faith.

And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; (Lk 12:8)

So Yeshua said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” (John 20:21)

...but sanctify Messiah as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; (1Pet. 3:15)

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1Cor 10:31)

Chapter Three

commentary

1–2 Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Messiah, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,

The opening “Therefore” (*Διὸ, dio*) is tied back to 2:17–20 and Paul’s explanation why he and his colleagues secretly left Thessalonica because of the life-threatening situation that had occurred when the “enemy” stirred up some of the Jews to take physical as well as legal action against them.¹ Having found them gone from the house of Jason where they were staying, the mob took Jason but he was not ultimately arrested.

Having been away from the Thessalonian community for some time, Paul, Timothy, and Silas were very concerned about how the believers there were doing. Clearly the possibility of further turmoil and actions against them by those who opposed Yeshua and His followers was a weighing factor. They simply felt it a great necessity to know the status of the believing community in Thessalonica.

Therefore when we could endure it no longer... – Paul now recounts their flight away from Thessalonica and their coming to Athens. But before going to Athens, they had remained in Berea. Luke relates how the Jews, those who had sought to take the lives of Paul and his colleagues while in Thessalonica, when they discovered that Paul and his colleagues were in Berea, they came to that city also “agitating and stirring up the crowds” (Acts 17:13), no doubt with the hopes of taking their lives. But Luke relates that the community there “sent Paul out to go as far as the sea” and then was taken to Athens. While there, he sent word back to Timothy and Silas that they should join him in Athens.

This is where the narrative picks up in our text: the three of them agreed that both Paul and Silas should remain in Athens, but that Timothy should return to Thessalonica. It was the fact that they needed to know how the believers in Thessalonica were doing that prompted the need to send Timothy.

Paul writes that “we could endure it no longer.” The Greek is: *μηκέτι στέγοντες* (*mēketi stegontes*), which more literally is “because we could hold out no longer.” The verb *στέγω* (*stegō*) can have the sense of “hold

1 See Acts 17:1–10 for Luke’s account of what took place.

something in,” as a container that holds water, or calking on a ship’s haul that keeps the water out. This offers a mental picture that expresses a heart-felt need to know the reality of a situation and not to “miss anything.” Paul uses this language to express his pastoral need to know how the believing community in Thessalonica was doing, especially with the realization that persecution for their faith was a constant, eminent threat. Such a burden required some action, doing whatever possible to ascertain the current condition of the believing community there, so as to know how best to come to their aid.

... we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone... – At least two aspects of Paul’s situation in Athens may help to explain their reasons for remaining in Athens. First was the fact that Paul was a prime target for those Jewish leaders who wanted him to be silenced. Others, such as Timothy and Silas, were less “sought after” by those who stood against Yeshua, both regarding Who He is and what He taught. A second motivation for remaining in Athens was Paul’s desire to evangelize people in this key city. That he did so openly at the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17:22ff) would seem to indicate that he felt burdened to find ways to openly proclaim God’s truth and the gospel message, centered in the person and work of Yeshua. At the conclusion of Luke’s account of Paul’s message to the philosophers at the Areopagus he writes:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:32–34)