

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

The Victorious Christian Life

Christ Church Liverpool

Theme: Because Paul has gospel priorities for the Thessalonians he has passionate concern for them. So he sacrifices his own comfort for their strengthening.

Aim: Understand that others going on with Christ is our true glory and so sacrifice our comfort for their growth.

There are lots of preachers who have a bee in their bonnet about “victorious Christian living.” You can see them on the God Channel and endless YouTube videos. If you Google the phrase you’ll find thousands of churches where “victorious Christian living” isn’t merely a title for a sermon but a mantra for everything.

Do you know what? Those churches and preachers are right. Victorious Christian living is vital. After all what would be the point of being a Christian if you didn’t experience and embrace all that comes from being a follower of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, the one who has conquered sin and death. Surely we would be foolish not to follow in every aspect of life in the footsteps of this majestic ruler who calls Christian people his brothers and sisters?

Do you not long to have everything that he has won for you? Do you not want every gift that he has available to you right now?

The apostle Paul certainly believed in the victorious Christian life. In fact in these verses of 1 Thessalonians he tells the young converts in that important city all about the ingredients of such a life.

1 Its feeling – intense longing

At first sight it seems a bit surprising that, having spent no more than three weeks with the Christians in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul seems to be so emotionally involved in the whole thing. After all it’s not a long time to form a relational bond with someone is it?

But clearly, for Paul, there was something pretty intense about the feelings the Thessalonians aroused in him. Being separated from them was, he says, like being orphaned. That word that could be used in Greek to describe a child being separated from his parents or, more likely in Paul’s case, a parent being separated from their child. If you are a parent here the emotion Paul is describing is the one you get when you turn round in the supermarket and your child has disappeared. And Paul did not just feel orphaned, he also had an “intense longing” to see them and, after a while, he could “stand it no longer.”

As I say at first sight it seems hard to comprehend why Paul has such strong feelings after such a short time. But, when you think about it, that’s actually quite normal. Anyone here ever had a holiday romance? That can be pretty intense can’t it! Or think of the TV programmes like “I’m a

Celebrity” where there is a massively powerful shared goal of surviving in the jungle.

In fact very emotionally powerful bonds are often formed quickly when the person we get to know is really, really important to us. If they are the person who helps us survive in a dangerous situation or the person we think could be our life-partner, our feelings for them can be astonishingly powerful after just a few hours or days. Some of those feelings are healthy. Unchecked the kind of obsessive infatuation we experience sometimes can be profoundly damaging.

So the questions we need to ask are: what is it about the Thessalonian Christians that aroused such powerful emotions in the apostle Paul? And why is it that Paul thinks such an intense emotional response is an appropriate and good one?

Fortunately Paul tells us the answers in v19! The Thessalonian Christians matter so much to him because they are his hope. This small group of very ordinary people from a range of social and cultural backgrounds, is Paul’s joy, the crown in which he will glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes.

If you believed that about a group of people you can understand why you might feel pretty strongly about them!

We’ll come back in a minute to think more about **why** the Thessalonian Christians played such a huge part in Paul’s inner life. But it’s good to pause for a moment just to ask ourselves whether other people, and especially other Christians, have the same kind of impact on us.

Here at Christ Church we like to think of ourselves as a friendly bunch. And, based on my visits to lots of other churches over the last few months, I’d say we do OK on that front. But, as important as it is, there is a real danger in putting an emphasis on welcoming new people. Because we might start to think that once someone has joined a small group and feels comfortable with the people there, made three or four friends they can ring up on a Friday night to go for a drink with and can name the other people on the CCL football team we have done enough and can get on with the other stuff in our lives.

But that kind of socially easy, comfortable friendship, while it’s really important, is just not enough for the apostle Paul. If you were in a situation where the devil himself (we don’t know how, but in some way) was stopping you getting to see your brothers and sisters at Christ Church Liverpool, would you try again and again to make your way round the roadblocks to get here? If you were in a situation, as Paul was, where you had been run out of town under threat of violence, would your passion and commitment to the people in your church be so strong that you would run the risk of being beaten to make sure you could be here?

Obviously if you're new here I'm not expecting you to have that level of bonding with us on your first Sunday! But I do want you to know this morning that feelings of intense longing to be together are the kind of relationships we are looking to build in this church. If a sense of passionate, heartfelt concern for other Christians is where you want to be in your life, I can't promise you that Christ Church Liverpool is completely there yet. But I can promise you that is somewhere we are trying to get to.

And if you are a regular here this morning can I just gently challenge you that intense longing to be with your brothers and sisters is what Paul sees as normal for Christians. For us as a church family the ultimate expression of that togetherness is our Sunday meetings. So if, for you, the prospect of going away for the weekend is always more thrilling than coming to meet with your brothers and sisters in church it suggests that something is wrong with your focus.

So let's come to our second headings and consider why it is that Paul believes this perfectly ordinary church full of perfectly regular believers to be the very centre of his emotional life...

2 Its Focus – future glory

I guess the most obvious objection to what I've said so far, the idea that our gathering together to be with each other, on Sunday mornings and evenings, in LifeGroups or at Christian Union, should play a hugely important place in our lives, not just in duty but in our feelings, is that it just seems to odd.

Why would any sane and rational person think that the kind of things we do when we meet together are the emotional highlight of the week? I mean the singing here is good but it hardly compares to the aesthetic impact of the Philharmonic choir down the road does it? And the coffee here is fresh and hot, but it's not quite a caramel latte in your favourite independent coffee house. And the sermons are, I hope, moderately interesting, but you'd probably look forward to Eddie Izzard at the Echo arena more an experience of public speaking.

So why should Paul, why should we, view being in church, being with other Christians, as so absolutely vital to him that he longs to see them?

To understand that we have to go back a few years to the day when Paul first encountered Jesus Christ. He was on his way, that day, to Damascus to have some Christians arrested and, if possible, executed. But just on the outskirts of the city he was blinded by a dazzling light and heard a voice which said to him "why are you persecuting me?" The voice was Christ's and Paul suddenly realised that he had not been doing God's work persecuting Christians but a work of evil. Wonderfully, rather than striking him down as a wicked man, Christ then commissioned Paul to a great work: he was to be God's chosen messenger to proclaim the name and rule of Jesus Christ to all the peoples of the world.

Paul believed that his divine mission was to see people of all nations come to faith in Jesus Christ, the living, loving king of the universe. So when this group of men and women from Thessalonica came to such faith, Paul was thrilled.

They are his crown in which he will glory when Christ returns. Not because they are proof that Paul is an especially good missionary. But because they are the demonstration that his life's work has not been wasted. The Thessalonian Christians are, for Paul, a demonstration of the truthfulness and power of the message he brought.

These Christians in Thessalonica were a living expression of what Paul gave his life to. So it's no wonder they are his joy and glory.

But, of course, the commission Paul had from Christ, was not totally unique. Just as Paul was commissioned to take the good news about Jesus to the different peoples of the ancient world so all of Christ's disciples were commissioned to make disciples of all nations. So church leaders are called to do the work of an evangelist bringing more and more people into the safety of Christ's fold and keeping them there. And so every Christian is called to ring out with the good news about Jesus and to strengthen each other as each passing day brings Christ's return closer.

Every Christian believer is called by God to give their life to the task of helping people come to know Jesus. To give your life to helping Christians stick with and grow in that faith. The other Christians in your church, the people who have come to faith in Christ here, the people who are growing and being encouraged here, are a living expression of what we are to give our lives to.

Look around you. These people are your hope, your glory and your joy. That's not to deny that Jesus Christ is the hope, glory and joy of every Christian. It's to affirm that we believe Jesus when he tells us to give ourselves to seeing people trust and grow in him.

There are lots of Christians who seem to think that the real sign of godly strength and maturity in their lives is that they could carry on being a Christian without being part of a church family. Can I say, very clearly this morning, that belief is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Of course it is possible that some Christian believer in some unreached country might be the only Christian in their town or city. But what would such a Christian do? Surely they would try and share the good news about Jesus with some more people so they could be in a church!

And none of us are in such a situation. So if you are a mature Christian you will be involved in a church. Because the people in that church, their going on believing in Jesus, their continued commitment to living the Christian life, is your crown. If you want to be a mature Christian you won't spend all your time with your head stuck in a big book of theology. Instead you will long, week by week, to meet your brothers and sisters, to find out how they have got on this week, to hear their exciting stories of talking about Jesus to people, to strengthen them with love and comfort when they are going through the mill.

Because on the last day, when the Lord Jesus comes, v19, it won't just be you and him. It will be you and him and every brother and sister together. And you will find honour and glory in being before Jesus with people you have led to Christ, people you have encouraged, people you have challenged, brothers and sisters you have loved.

The focus of the victorious Christian life is future. But that future focus means that life now is full of challenges. Because Paul's key teaching about the victorious Christian life is suffering...

3 It's teaching – suffering

Most of the preachers in Liverpool who use the phrase "the victorious Christian life" a lot part company quite drastically from the apostle Paul at this point.

For Paul the main expectation Christian people ought to have of life in this world is not freedom from sickness, success in the workplace and prosperity in the bank. Instead the main emphasis of Paul's message to the Thessalonians was, v3, trials. What these first Christian believers were destined for was, v4, persecution.

And this was not some particular prophetic insight that came to Paul specifically for the Thessalonian Christians. He did not expect that they would suffer more opposition for their faith because the city or time they lived in was especially wicked. Paul's message was the same wherever he went: a central teaching of the victorious Christian life, the life that really is saved, the life that really is following Jesus, the life that really is on its way to glory, is suffering. As Paul writes in another of his letters: **everyone** who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

By the time Paul wrote this letter the Thessalonian Christians were suffering persecution for their faith. So Paul wants to remind them that this should not be a shock. Paul hadn't gone round telling people that they ought to follow Jesus because it was wonderful and liberating and fantastic and leave it at that. No, v4, he **kept** telling the people who were thinking about becoming Christians that they would be persecuted, abused and rejected if they did.

It has always been a central teaching of biblical Christianity that the pattern of the Christian life is the same as the pattern of Jesus' life: *suffering now, glory later*. Jesus came to resurrection through the cross. He came to joy through pain. He came to life through death. It's true that Jesus suffered God's judgment so that we don't have to. That is amazing and wonderful, it's the heart of the Christian gospel. But it is also true that Jesus' life is the pattern for the Christian life.

That doesn't mean that every Christian ought to expect to be persecuted and downtrodden all the time; after all Jesus enjoyed periods of calm and times of joy in his life and ministry too. But we must that life in this world, and especially life as a Christian, is characterised by suffering, and that people's rejection of the good news about Jesus and of his messengers is the dark backdrop to our lives that we can never entirely get away from.

If you're here this morning and you are not yet a Christian, or if you've only been a Christian for a short time, you may find it shocking that persecution is normal for Christians.

After all persecuting Christians is completely irrational. Christian people following the teachings of Jesus are good citizens. They are kind neighbours, responsible parents, and loyal friends. Christians are taught by the Bible to work

hard, pay their taxes and look after the poor. It must have seemed utterly bizarre to the Thessalonians, recently introduced to this life-affirming, liberating, gracious religion that people would want to imprison or even kill them for believing it.

If it seems bizarre and irrational that people should want to persecute Christians today, well it is! There is no good reason for it.

Which is why it's so important that, from day one, those who followed Christ, who saw his suffering and who started the world's first churches taught that we ought to expect being a Christian to be difficult.

The apostles, the first Christians, whose letters and gospels we call the New Testament are clear from Matthew to Revelation that the normal Christian life involves suffering. Suffering is a main theme of the Christian life.

And that, in a peculiar way, means that suffering is an encouragement. One of the reasons that Christians so often struggle to hold on to faith in the midst of dark times is that they simply haven't been properly equipped by those responsible for teaching and leading them to understand that suffering is normal. That suffering for Christians includes all the trials and problems that everyone in this messed up world goes through and the additional sufferings that may come because you are a Christian.

I want you to know this morning that suffering is not a sign that you have been abandoned by Christ. Whatever this academic year brings for you; illness, depression, grief, abuse for your faith, you can still believe the gospel. Because we are destined for trials. They are not a sign that God doesn't love us; they are a reminder that the message about Jesus is true.

Please don't think I am making light of such things. Trials are horrible. Paul knew that. He was desperately concerned for the Thessalonian Christians as they suffered persecution. But the thing that worried him most wasn't that they might be hurting, though he shared their pain. It was that they might give up on Jesus, that, v5, the tempter, Satan, might tempt them to think their suffering disproved the gospel and that they would jack Christianity in.

Our expectation of the victorious Christian life should be that our lives will be like Jesus' – suffering now, glory later. And so our concern for one another should be that we will fight, not to avoid suffering, it can't be done, but fight to ensure our brothers and sisters don't give up on Jesus in the midst of suffering. And that will be costly.

Our fourth heading then: the cost of the victorious Christian life – sacrifice.

4 Its cost – sacrifice.

Paul was so concerned about how the Christians in Thessalonica would cope with the pressure they were under that he sent his friend and colleague Timothy, v1, to find out how they were getting on.

That was a big sacrifice for Paul. Timothy was, v2, his brother and co-worker. Timothy was vital to Paul's

ministry. He was Paul's good friend. And, with his other colleague Silas having already sent to work elsewhere, Timothy's leaving meant that Paul was left alone in the city of Athens, trying to plant a church all by himself. That must have been tough.

But Paul would rather be left alone himself than leave the Thessalonians to face their trials alone. So he gave them everything he could, he gave them Timothy.

Because Paul understood that his true glory was to be found in seeing the Thessalonian Christians go on and grow in Christ he made huge sacrifices to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that they did.

This morning my appeal to you is not to start sacrificing. It is to start believing.

We need to believe what God says in this book that people becoming Christians and carrying on as disciples of Jesus is our glory and our crown.

If we believe that, then it will become obvious to us what sacrifices we need to make.

Perhaps for the sake of others we need to go to LifeGroup this week even though there's a good Orange Wednesday film on.

Perhaps for the growth of others you need to give up on that Mediterranean holiday and do a summer camp in 2012.

Perhaps for the good of the brothers you need to not see your extended family next Sunday afternoon and get to church on Sunday night.

Perhaps so that people can come to know Christ you need to not hang out with church people on Friday night but go out with your work colleagues.

Perhaps there are better ways you could use your money to reflect that it is these people here who are your glory and your crown not your PS3 game collection, your wardrobe or the list of countries you have visited.

There are, no doubt, all sorts of way in which we can give ourselves more fully to seeing our brothers and sisters as our glory and crown. But my appeal to you is not to make some bold but empty resolution. I am not asking you this morning, and nor is Paul, to start sacrificing.

I am asking you to start believing. If we look around at people. If we see our brothers and sisters in the church and see that on the last day we will find glory before Christ in their faith. Then our suffering and sacrifice will be put into their proper place and we will live a victorious Christian life in which no cost is spared to see people go on with Jesus.

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