

LESSON 4

ABSENCE FROM THE THESSALONIANS (1 THESS. 2:17-3:13)

The Place of the Passage

Having defended his ministry among the Thessalonians in 2:1–16, Paul now defends his absence from them.

The Big Picture

Paul explains his absence, expresses concern for the Thessalonians' suffering, reaffirms his affection, and thanks God for Timothy's encouraging report.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the passage for this study, 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13. Then review the following questions concerning this section of 1 Thessalonians and record your own responses.

Paul's Pastoral Heart (1 Thess. 2:17–3:5)

Paul explains that he and his associates longed to reunite with the Thessalonians, but "Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). What are some dangers of being under-aware of the demonic realm? What about being over-aware? From this passage, we see that Satan can hinder our plans (1 Thess. 2:18) and tempt our hearts (1 Thess. 3:5), but what does Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11 assume about the scope of Satan's power?

In 1 Thessalonians 2:19–20, Paul calls the Thessalonian church his "hope," his "joy," his "crown," and his "glory." This is remarkable, especially in light of all of this congregation's faults. How do you view your own local church? Are you aware mainly of its faults or of its beauty? What might need to change, whether in your thoughts, speech, or behavior, to more closely resemble Paul's perspective and heart?

Paul describes Timothy not merely as his coworker but also as God's coworker (1 Thess. 3:2). Why do you think he ascribes such a lofty and unusual title to Timothy? How does Paul's explanation in 1 Corinthians 3:5–9 clarify the meaning and significance of this title?

What are all Christians "destined" for, according to 1 Thessalonians 3:3–4? Does this surprise you? Why or why not? Notice also that Paul did not merely mention this in passing while in Thessalonica; he "kept telling" them (1 Thess. 3:4). This was Discipleship 101 (see also Acts 14:21–22).

Timothy's Encouraging News (1 Thess. 3:6–13)

Why, according to 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5, did Paul send Timothy to Thessalonica? Having been reassured through Timothy's report, Paul declares, "Now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thess. 3:8). What are you most tempted to "stand fast in" besides the Lord? Why?

Paul's wellbeing is deeply bound up with the Thessalonians' wellbeing: their flourishing brings him comfort (1 Thess. 3:7), gratitude (1 Thess. 3:9), joy (1 Thess. 3:9), even life (1 Thess. 3:8). What are some ways to cultivate a heart that is more easily edified—even electrified—by reports of God's grace?

What can we learn about prayer—what it is, what it is for, and how to do it—from 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13?

1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 form a transitional prayer linking the previous section (1 Thess. 2:1–3:10) to the second half of the letter (1 Thess. 4:1–5:22). 1 Thessalonians 4:11 looks back, whereas 1 Thessalonians 4:12–13 look ahead. Based on 1 Thessalonians 4:12–13, what themes will feature prominently in the rest of the letter?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Definition: Satan

A personal supernatural being who is the great deceiver (Rev. 12:9), the captain of demonic forces (Matt. 12:24), and the archenemy of God and his people. Satan was the first sinner; indeed, he has “been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). Jesus called him the “father of lies” and “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44)—language harking back to the dawn of history. Elsewhere he is called “the evil one” (Matt. 13:19), “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31), “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). In Scripture we witness Satan spearheading attacks on God's people (Job 1:6; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1), with “power” (Acts 26:18) to bind (Luke 13:16) and “oppress” (Acts 10:38). Nevertheless, he is no match for heaven's King. The Devil was defeated (Col. 2:13–15), is being defeated (Eph. 6:10–20), and will be defeated (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:10).

Definition: Local church

A covenant body of believers who assemble under the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, or ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper). Put another way, a church is an embassy of heaven on Planet Earth, a covenant body of baptized Christians who regularly gather for worship and scatter for witness—although the worship is also witness and the witness is also worship. The Christian life is a church life; believers are knit together as children in God's family (1 Tim. 3:15), members of Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:12–14), and stones in the Spirit's temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:20). Membership in the universal church finds expression in formal commitment to a local church.

Gospel Glimpses

FREED FROM SATAN. Satan can powerfully influence you as a Christian, tempting your mind (1 Thess. 3:5) and hindering your ministry (1 Thess. 2:18). But he no longer has mastery over you;

those days are over (Eph. 2:1–2). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Take heart, then, if you are a follower of Jesus. Satan was defeated (Col. 2:13–15), Satan is being defeated (Eph. 6:10–20), and Satan will be defeated (Rom. 16:20). Yes, he “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8), but at Jesus’ death he was defanged, and at Jesus’ return he will be destroyed. No wonder Martin Luther declared in his hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (c. 1529), “The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him / His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure / One little word shall fell him.”

Whole-Bible Connections

FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNITY. Paul twice conveys his profound longing to see the Thessalonians “face to face” (1 Thess. 2:17; 3:10). His affection for the congregation runs so deep that he describes his abrupt departure as being “torn away”—literally “orphaned” (1 Thess. 2:17; see also Acts 17:5–11). Yet Paul’s longing to reunite with the Thessalonians is not merely a striking example of Christian affection; it is also an echo of Eden and a preview of the new Eden (Genesis 1–2; Revelation 21–22). In other words, he craves face-to-face fellowship not simply because he is a Christian but also because he is human. Created in the image of a relational God—the Trinity, after all, is a community—we were custom-designed for unhindered union with our Maker and our neighbor alike. Ever since humanity’s rebellion in Genesis 3, however, sin has infected and fractured our relationships in every direction. Still, we remain relational creatures who long to know and be known, to love and be loved. This is why there is nothing more painful—more unnatural on our most primal level—than the relational and physical severing of death. Yet Christianity insists that even the parting brought on by death is not the end of the story for those united to Jesus. The day is coming when the “age of the ear” will give way to the “age of the eye” (see 2 Cor. 5:7) and we will see God’s face (Rev. 22:4; see also 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

Theological Soundings

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY. “Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you” (1 Thess. 3:11). Paul’s prayer for divine intervention is grounded in his conviction concerning divine sovereignty. Despite Satan’s hindering activity (1 Thess. 2:18), he was not finally decisive in Paul’s plans; God was. “Direct our way to you” (1 Thess. 3:11) is not a plea for general guidance but a specific request for God to remove the demonic obstacles mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 2:18. It is vital to understand and believe that Satan’s havoc extends only as far as God’s hand allows. One of the most comforting lessons of the book of Job, for example, is that Satan is on a leash. And though in a fallen world this leash can feel painfully long, there is an infinitely wise hand at the end of it. He who is for you in Christ (Rom. 8:31), who refused to spare even his own Son for you (Rom. 8:32), will thwart your enemy’s ultimate goals, bending them instead for your ultimate good (Rom. 8:28).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in

his gracious promises. Note the personal applications for your walk with the Lord in light of the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of 1 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

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