

○ The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, 350BC wrote, “Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” The sole goal in life is your happiness. It seems that that is still the philosophy of our world today.

○ Nothing has changed. We live in a culture that implies that success will lead to happiness; if we can achieve certain goals then we’ll be happy. And those goals can be all manner of things. If we were thinner; more beautiful; had a certain figure; more money; more toys; fitter; newer car or home. And so we often seek after unrealistic standards of beauty, or we’re constantly busy striving after something that we hope will make us happy.

But the baseline for happiness remains the same. Studies have shown that for those who have won the lottery, eighteen months later, they were no happier than they were beforehand. In fact many are less happy. And so it is, for those who put their hopes for increased happiness into marriage, or change of job, etc.

○ In our reading today, Paul’s emphasis is upon that which really matters in life; that which is our most fulfilling purpose as we interact with one another. There is a deep desire within each one of us, that what we have done, or are doing in this life has been worthwhile; has accomplished a good and meaningful purpose. We want our lives to count!

And so, what are the things that are going to last for eternity? What is the measure of your life? What is the result of the way that you have lived your life thus far? What are the things which will stand the test of the refining fire of heaven? Are the things that you put your energy into, the things that will last?

I think we will be challenged today to put more time and effort into that which will last for eternity – namely, other people. ○ And as Paul, Silas and Timothy write to the church in Thessalonica, they do so to encourage the new believers in Christ as they go through times of trial and persecution; to fortify them in their faith to remain steadfast because their eternity depends upon it. They want their words and actions to count for eternity, and so they invest in people.

Paul’s heart is for people. He desires that they be saved, transformed in character and fruitful. And he demonstrates this through both word and action. In spoken word and written word. Through this letter written to the church in Thessalonica he reveals his heart for them.

Let me set the context to this part of the letter. Paul has been speaking about the Jews back in Judea who were vehemently opposed to the gospel, and as a result had brought persecution upon the church. ○ He now begins v.17 with the word “But” because he wants to contrast himself to them. Although he too was a Jew, he not only brought them the gospel, but was also prepared to suffer persecution for doing so. This was not a “them and us” scenario, Jews against Gentiles. Instead, he begins to pile up term upon term, outlining his love and affection for them.

“We were torn away from you” – is linked with grief. They felt as though they had lost a loved one when they were forced to leave at such short notice. It was a bitterly painful experience. These new believers who had come to faith in Jesus were soaking up all the information that they were being given. It was so exciting to see them hungry for the truth. And receiving it so joyfully and passionately. As pastors, it is our greatest joy to see people respond to the gospel, and then to see them hungry for more of the Lord – eagerly spending time in His Word. And for Paul, Silas, and Timothy, felt “torn away”.

“With intense longing they made every effort” to come back to see them. They longed to return to Thessalonica to continue to encourage, comfort, and urge their children to live lives worthy of the Lord (v.12.). Paul says in v.18 that “speaking for himself” he wanted to return to them, again, and again, and again.

But their endeavours to do so were roadblocked by Satan. Now, we're not told just how, and I guess that's not important. But Satan and his demons will try the very same tactics with us. Have you ever wondered why, when you're about to go out the door to church or to fellowship with other Christians a crisis arises, the phone rings, or an argument develops? Why is it, that when we sense we need to give time and effort to another, that's when further demands come upon us, or we lack the energy or ability to respond? As you look back over your life, can you see how a casual conversation that was overheard, blew up to the point where a relationship was destroyed?

You see, Satan doesn't want Christians encouraging, comforting and urging one another on in their faith in Jesus. He doesn't want us loving one another – doing all we can for one another's well-being. He seeks to keep us apart and destroy relationships. He'd rather us try the Christian life on our own because then we're more like to give it all away. A single soldier in a paddock is easily picked off, but a platoon with many eyes sees the enemy coming and fights together. So, let us not forsake gathering together. Let's be like Paul, longing to spend time with other Christians.

And of course, it's good to include others on your prayer list – even better to call them on the phone and pray with them, - even better, invite them over, or go out for coffee to enquire and encourage them in their faith walk.

Paul then says this in v19-20, ○ **“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.”** The Greek word for “crown” referred to the crown-like garland that was awarded to the winner of a race. And naturally it was worn with great pride.

Paul says, “You are our glory and joy; our pride; that which we fight for and defend. You are what matters to us. We are proud of you, and you bring us great joy.” People and their salvation; their continued transformation by the gospel and their fruitfulness was what mattered most to Paul. “Our hope, our joy, our crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus, is you.” He says in the next chapter, v8-9, **“For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”**

You see, people are made for eternity. People, and people only, will move through into eternity. Are we investing our lives into other people? Or are in a fruitless pursuit of happiness through other ways? Each of us has our own special sphere of influence. You have different people in your circle than I have in mine. And we are encouraged to invest ourselves into their lives such that they might be our joy; our boast in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes.

Paul now describes how his actions also demonstrates their love for them. Their actions spoke as loud as their words. They didn't just talk the talk, they walked the walk. Although there was security in numbers, they were prepared to send Timothy back to them to check on them, and to encourage them in their faith during these difficult days of persecution. Verses 1-5...

○ **“So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.”**

Paul, Silas and Timothy were finding it tough going in Athens. Their ministry was less fruitful, and although they weren't copping the same degree of physical opposition, they sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. Their heart for the Thessalonians was clearly evident.

Paul was very concerned that the new believers may have been most unsettled by the trials and persecution that would have come their way; that they may have succumb to the lies and doubts of the great accuser. And so Paul's actions showed just how much he cared for them, and was concerned for their eternal wellbeing. He sent Timothy to encourage and strengthen them, and assure them that trials and persecution were to be expected.

The same is true for us; trials are to be expected and come uninvited. Trials don't walk up to the door, knock on it and when we open it say, 'Hi, I am trial. Can I come in?' No, trials may come at the most inconvenient times. We may not see them coming, and we may not understand just why they've been sent. But come they will! And rather than view them with resentment or as a disappointment, maybe we should see them as a divine appointment. For nothing occurs without the permission of our Father; trials included.

For the folk in Thessalonica, no doubt they would have preferred no persecution, however their faith grew through these days of trial and their faith was applauded all around the region. You may not realise it, but the trials that you endure are a testimony to others, and you encourage them to endure their trials. So, continue to stand firm. One of the ways that we become established and strengthened in our faith is through trials. But we handle them best when we handle them together.

Many of you have gone through affliction, suffering, pain and heartache, and some of you are going through that at this moment. God uses it to reveal his will to us, to train or transform us, to rise above it and to strengthen our faith in Him. Our trials come by way of divine appointment; not by accident.

You'll recall that the disciple Peter faced a trial that certainly didn't catch Jesus by surprise. Jesus said, Luke 22:31-32, **"Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."**

Did Jesus pray that Satan would be prevented from testing Simon, or that Simon would not have to go through this test? No. He prayed that Peter's faith might not be shaken by it. Jesus saw that it was important that Simon Peter went through the trial of denying him. Why? Because there was a lesson in Peter's life that could only be learnt by the fire of testing and trial. Did Peter go through the trial? Yes. Did he fail? Yes. Did Jesus lift him up and restore him? Yes. And Jesus expected him to go on and strengthen his brothers and sisters. Remember everything that comes to you and me has already been through the hands of our loving Heavenly Father and has received his stamp of approval for our lives. And God is with us through the trial, and as we seek to encourage others.

We have seen this morning that Paul, Silas and Timothy brought the gospel to the Thessalonians in word, and followed it up in action. And this reflects the way our loving Heavenly Father and how He moves in our lives. He speaks through His Word, and He strengthens us through one another and His Spirit.

Is He bereaved at my disobedience; or when I abandon Him? Yes. Does He long to restore fellowship with me? Yes. Did He send Timothy to me, or did He send Jesus His Son for me? Did He reveal His love for me on paper in his Word and then fulfil His love through the action of the Cross? In this passage this morning we see God's divine love and affection dimly reflected in Paul's affection for the Thessalonians.

Let us share in communion...

I trust that we may talk the talk, but beyond that, may we walk the talk – live it out in actions.

TN126 Go forth in His name