January 28/29, 2022

It's The People

A People of Hope Series

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Pastor Bryan Clark

Understanding that we only get one shot at this life, I think we'd all agree that everyone wants to live a life that matters. So let me just ask you a few questions. Over the last 30 days, what did you give yourself to, that's bigger than you, actually bigger than all of us? Over the last 30 days, what did you pour yourself into that will still matter 100 years from now? And over the last 30 days, what did you involve yourself in that required real courage and sacrifice?

Well, that's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, I invite you to join us in First Thessalonians, Chapter 2. If you're new with us, we're working our way through the New Testament book of 1 Thessalonians. Last week, Ryan talked to us about walking in a manner worthy of the gospel. He reminded us that that takes both the right words and the right behavior. We pick it up then in chapter 2, verse 17:

> **But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and *yet* Satan hindered us.**
>
> (*NASB, 1 Thessalonian 2:17-18)

So, in chapter 2 Paul has identified both that *we came to you as a mother who loves her children*. He also uses the imagery *of a father with his children*. So there's no question Paul sees himself as the spiritual parent…and these are his children. So he keeps that imagery going in verse 17, where he says, **having been taken away**. The Greek word that's translated **taken away** is the word from which we get our English word *orphan*. So he's feeling like they have orphaned their children. We know from Acts 17 what happened. So, Paul and his team arrive in Thessalonica. They're only there for a few weeks when the religious Jews become jealous. So they stir up an angry mob and things get so dangerous so quickly, that the believers sneak Paul and Silas out of town in the middle of the night, and they have to flee for their lives. So they go up to Berea, and then they end up in Athens.

Now stop and think about this. These are your children, and while you fled for your life, your children remain. So Paul is deeply concerned. "What's happening to my kids? Are they being persecuted? Are they thrown in prison? Are they being put to death?" That's what he's talking about. "I've longed to see you; I've longed to come back." It's highly likely that the religious leaders were saying something like, "See, Paul doesn't care. When the going got tough, he fled town. And now he's on his way, and he's long gone, and he doesn't really care about you." And so Paul is writing back to say, "You know, we do care about you; we love you. We've wanted to come see you, but **Satan has hindered us.**" The Greek word translated **hindered** is a word that means *to tear up the road*, something to block his way back. Now, nobody knows exactly what that was, but probably more to the point is Paul is identifying that Satan is real, and he's powerful, and this is a cosmic battle! And what is at stake are the eternal souls of people. This isn't just playing church. This is a cosmic war. Satan is described as the architect of the culture, and everything in

his system is opposed to God. So when Paul gets to town and starts talking about Jesus, everything erupts. And Satan is doing something to keep Paul from coming back and spending time with these people. That's what he's talking about there. But one question might be, "What difference does it make to Paul?" I mean, he came to town; they chased him out of town; why not brush the dust off, go down the road, and move on? Well, he answers that in verse 19:

> **For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.** (Vs. 19-20)

What Paul says there is: this is about the people. It's always been about the people. This isn't about getting rich; it isn't about fame. It isn't about glory. It's about these people, and he loves them as a parent would love his or her children. He says, "You're our **crown**; you're our reward."

But he also begins to talk about something that is a consistent theme in this book, and that is the return of Christ. The Bridegroom is coming back for His bride, and what Paul knows is if these people have truly been saved, truly transformed by the power of Jesus, they are part of the Bride of Christ. And this effort is to do everything possible to get the bride ready, to help the bride become as beautiful as she possibly can be for that glorious day when the Bridegroom comes for her. Why would Paul endure such a lifestyle? I mean, the guy keeps getting beat up. He's been left for dead; he's been imprisoned. This is a really hard way to live. Why would you do that? His answer is because he loves these people. They're like his spiritual children. He knows that they're going to be part of this glorious reunion with the Bridegroom, but he is concerned about them. Chapter 3:

> **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 Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we *kept* telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.**
>
> (Chapter 3:1-5)

So, Paul, Silas, and Timothy are in Athens. But what Paul just said is, "I finally reached a point I couldn't take it anymore. I had to know, 'Are my children, okay'?" The time in Athens was a very difficult time for Paul. It's a very large city. It was a very pagan city. They were very anti the gospel. It was probably one of the lowest times in Paul's missionary journeys, but at least he had Timothy there. But, at great personal sacrifice, they make the decision that Timothy must go back to Thessalonica and find out, "Are my children okay?" So he sends Timothy back, in order to encourage them, in order to strengthen them. There is a concern he says, **that no one be disturbed by these afflictions**. Afflictions means the persecution. So, if Paul fled for his life, you would assume that the Christians that have been left behind are afflicted, that they're being persecuted. This can't be easy for them.

The word translated **disturbed** is a very interesting word. It can be translated, *disturbed* or *shaken*, or something like that. But it was often translated to describe a dog wagging its tail. It carried the

idea of flattery, of false promises, like coming along and petting the dog, getting the dog to wag its tail. With Paul's fear that the tempter would tempt them away, I think it is highly likely that Paul's concern is that these false teachers, these religious Jews, are going to come to these Christians and say to them, "You know, Paul doesn't care about you. He's fled town; he's not coming back. And if you're willing to compromise, if you're willing to give in, if you're willing to kind of set aside this Jesus stuff and join our team, then there'll be no affliction, and everything will be fine." So the religious Jews are kind of petting these new believers, and they're wagging their tail, and he's concerned they're going to be tempted away. So he tells them, "When we were with you, we told you that this was going to happen." As a matter of fact, he says something that we really need to understand, when he says at the end of verse three, *"You know that we have been destined for this,*" it could be translated, *appointed for this.*

This is a very consistent message, all through the New Testament. It starts with Jesus, and it goes all the way to the book of Revelation. And that is: *If you're going to accept the call to follow Jesus, it is a call to be afflicted*. That's part of the call. There's a cosmic war going on. Satan is real. Satan is the architect of the culture. And if we're going to stand in the culture and represent Jesus, it will mean affliction. So he reminds them, "I told you this…and it's come to pass, exactly as I warned you." Verse 6:

> **But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord. (**Vs. 6-8)

So Timothy has returned, and the news is good. As a matter of fact, that Greek word translated **good news**, is most commonly used to describe the gospel. As a matter of fact, there's only one time in all of Paul's writings that he ever uses the term to describe anything other than the gospel, and that's here. It's as if Paul reaches into his bag and finds the strongest term possible to communicate how good this news is—that my children are standing strong, my children are growing, my children are being faithful—because it is a confirmation that they've truly been saved. They truly do get it. They truly have believed, and God is in a process that He promises to finish… to get them all the way to the finish line. They absolutely will be part of the magnificent bride of Christ that's getting ready to meet the Bridegroom when He comes. So he goes so far to say, "Even in our afflictions, even in our struggles, we have been comforted, we have found joy, because we know that you're standing firm."

This is a consistent message of Paul. Why would he live this way? Why would he constantly endure such suffering, such pain, such abuse? The answer is *the people*. He loves these people, and he knows that they have been transformed by the power of Jesus. And what he is saying is, "When I know that's true, whatever I go through, it's worth it because Jesus wins in the end." The idea of *standing firm*, is actually military terminology: "Hold your ground!" It's, "Stand firm and represent Jesus in the midst of a hostile culture." Verse 9:

> **For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day, keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?** (Vs. 9-10)

Last week, one of the points that Ryan made very strongly is the reminder that, "At the end of the day, God does the work. "I" can't change someone; "I" can't transform someone. Ultimately, God has to do that." And that's exactly what Paul affirms. He is thanking God, because God is the One that has done the work in these believers in Thessalonica. They're praying for them, and they can't wait for the opportunity to get back. It specifically says, "**That we may complete what is lacking in your faith."** What he means by that is the mission is not to make babies. The mission is to make disciples. It's not just converts; its disciples. It's about teaching. It's about training. It's about encouraging. It's about growing. These people have only had about three weeks of teaching from Paul. It's not like the Bible was available where they could go read it for themselves. So they're operating on very little information. He just wants to get back and to teach and to train and to answer questions, and correct misperceptions in order that they grow stronger and stronger in their faith. He wants to disciple them and can't wait for that opportunity. Verse 11:

> **Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;** (That Greek word *direct* means to repair the road so they can get back there.) **and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.** (Vs. 11-13)

So Paul can't wait to get back. And he's praying that they will grow in their **love for one another**, **and their love for all people**. And how do they do that? By remaining *blameless in holiness*. The word **holiness** just simply means *to be other than*, *to be set apart*, to be other than the rest of the culture, *to stand firm* from the rest of the culture. That's how you love all people. He ends again with a reminder of his excitement that they are going to be part of this great return of Jesus. We're going to talk more about that in two weeks.

For this morning, as we start to pull this together, what is the implication for us? I see three very practical things to think about. First, there's a consistent theme of the importance of *community*—the importance of coming together, the importance of being a bride, the importance of being together to encourage and to strengthen, and to grow. It's a theme all the way through. It's a reminder that the New Testament knows nothing of Lone Ranger Christians doing their own thing, all by themselves. This is something we do together. This journey is not easy. It's a cosmic war; we do it together. So, it's a reminder of the significance of community.

Here in Lincoln Berean, there's a couple of things that are primary in order to make that happen. One is this—the weekend service. Obviously, you have found that. The second would be Life Groups. We've talked about them a lot, but they're very important—to get together with a group of people that you can grow with, that will walk with you, that will strengthen and encourage you. So, if you're not involved in a Life Group, I would strongly encourage you to consider that.

Number two is *service*. We all have a role to play. Discipleship is not something one person does. It's what the body of Christ does together. Each of us has a role in doing our part, to help make the bride as beautiful as she can possibly be, in preparation for the return of the Bridegroom. Ben just talked about this. We're discipling children. We're discipling our teenagers. We're discipling our college students. We're discipling our adults. There's a lot to do to make the bride beautiful, to get her ready for the return of the Bridegroom.

This past year, as you know, Christmas landed on a Sunday. And one of my favorite memories of Christmas morning was, I had to arrive a little bit early because of something I had to do. So I got here Christmas morning, about nine o'clock, and I can say the building wasn't very crowded. There was almost no one here. But all of a sudden, I started to hear voices, and people were laughing, and they were joyful, and they were talking, and lo and behold, it was the coffee team. The coffee team! They were already here. They were already busy making the coffee, getting everything put out so that when people arrived on Christmas morning, they'd have a warm cup of coffee waiting for them. And I thought to myself: This is Christmas morning…this is Christmas morning! These people aren't paid. They don't have to be here. There's a whole bunch of other places they could be. But they were here. And they were joyful, and they were happy. Pretty soon along come the ushers; along come the greeters; along come the security people; along come the worship people. And I'm thinking: This is Christmas morning. None of these people are getting paid. There are all these other places they could be. But they're here, and they're happy. and they're joyful, and they're making it possible for us to do what we do. And as I drove home that morning, my heart was full. I thought, "I love these people. I love this place. I love these people, these amazing people." It's Christmas morning, and they're here serving us. If you've been here very long, you've heard me say this before. When people ask me what makes Lincoln Berean so special, I always say the same thing, "It's her people! Amazing people, over the years, that God has brought, who sacrifice, who serve, who make it possible for us to do what God has called us to do." If you're not plugged in serving somewhere, I would strongly encourage you to consider getting involved and do your part, as we seek to make the bride as beautiful as she can be for the return of her Bridegroom.

Thirdly is Paul's admonition to *stand firm*. This is a battle; it is a cosmic war. The architect of the culture is Satan himself and everything he does is to oppose Jesus and the gospel. It is not easy to stand firm. It's very interesting to me, at the end of chapter 2, when Paul says his prayer is that *the believers would love one another more, and love all people,* what does that mean? Well, he defines it by being *blameless in our holiness*. In other words: *to be a set-apart-people that walk worthy of the gospel*.

But sadly, there's a movement across the country where some Christians are convincing themselves that the way you love all people is to compromise everything that creates tension in the culture. We're back to the tempter patting their heads, getting them to wag their tails, so that whatever it is that creates conflict, whatever creates tension in the culture, we need to give in, we need to compromise so that they'll accept us. That's how we love them. If that's the page you're on, I would strongly encourage you to re-read the text, because what Paul just said is the opposite of that. The admonition is to, *"Stand firm"*. The whole concept of holiness is to be *other than*. We don't fit in here; we don't belong. We're citizens of heaven. We represent truth that is opposed to the architect of the culture, and our calling is to stand firm. That is how we love all people.

A couple of months ago, I read a very interesting book. It's called *The Comfort Crisis.* It's a secular book, so if you read it, just know some of the language is pretty colorful. (Just saving myself a few emails. You don't have to email me and tell me that.) (*laughter*) Basically, the book starts with a discussion about some studies at Harvard. One of the things they talk about is what they call *problem creep*. They wondered if people had most of their problems resolved, would they then be more happy, more satisfied, more content? And the answer is, "No". They experienced what they call problem creep. And what's meant by that is they simply lower the threshold for what defines a problem. So now I'm creating problems that don't need to be problems. I'm creating conflicts that don't need to be conflicts. It moves then to a discussion that's more to the theme of the book, of what he calls *comfort creep*. And basically the idea is, with every advancement in comfort, I become dissatisfied with the previous level of comfort. So, today's comfort is tomorrow's discomfort. And we just keep going farther and farther down that path until we ultimately end up in a *comfort coma*. That would be one thing if the research showed that makes us happier, more content, more satisfied. But the research shows just the opposite. We, as Americans, live more comfortably than any people have in the history of the world. Yet the research shows we are more discontent, we're more angry, we're more fearful, we're more anxious, we're more depressed, we're more despairing, we're more dissatisfied with life than any of the previous generations.

The rest of the book, then, is a call to reject the comfort coma and step into discomfort—to take some risks, to come alive, to get your heart beating, to get your adrenaline going, and to rediscover what it means to be human and live. Now all of that comes from a secular point of view, but I do think of the relevance of this to our discussion. So, do you think perhaps that we, as American Christians, suffer from persecution creep? We are one of the few countries in the history of Christianity where Christians, by and large, have not experienced persecution. So, do we see that as an unimaginable opportunity to go full speed to accomplish the mission, or do we experience persecution creep, meaning we simply lower the threshold of what we define as persecution. So pretty soon we think we're persecuted if somebody says something about us on Facebook. We think we're persecuted if somebody on the internet says something nasty about Christians. We think we're persecuted if we don't fit in at school, if we don't fit in, in the workplace, if we don't really fit in, in the culture, and we think that's persecution. Combine that with this comfort creep, where we just become more and more comfortable, and we're so adverse to discomfort that pretty soon we no longer have the ability to live for Jesus, because it's just too uncomfortable. "You're asking too much of me."

So just to be clear this morning, I want to make sure you understand what I'm *not* calling you to. I'm not asking you if you have a little extra time, if you have nothing else to do, if it wouldn't inconvenience you too much, every once in a while, maybe do a little something for Jesus. I'm not asking you that. Frankly, I want nothing to do with that…and neither does Jesus. I am asking you, "Would you consider an all-out commitment to what it means to follow Jesus? To walk in a manner worthy of the gospel? To understand, if you accept that call, you are accepting that you've been appointed for affliction? It's not going to be easy. We're not playing church here. This is a cosmic war. Satan is real. He's the architect of the culture. It's not easy to stand firm against that which is offensive to God. I am asking, "Are you willing to step out of your comfort coma and embrace discomfort? To take some risks? To get your heart beating to get your adrenaline going? Are you willing to find your wild side again, and commit to the adventure of a lifetime to change the world?" I am asking, "Are you willing to rearrange your life in whatever way is necessary, in order

to pour yourself into something that's bigger than all of us? To something that will still matter a hundred years from now? I am asking you to find the courage and to make the sacrifices necessary to be the Church—all of us working together to make this bride as beautiful as she can possibly be, in anticipation for the glorious return of the Bridegroom, and paradise forever. I am asking us to be a city on the hill, to be a light in the darkness. I am asking us to be a *People of Hope.*

Our Father, may we be what You've called us to be as your Church. God, You haven't called us to comfort. You haven't called us to compromise. You've called us to courage, to sacrifice, to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, to stand firm, to be a light in the darkness. Lord, may that be true of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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WINTER 2023 // WEEK 3

Life Group Questions

A People of Hope // January 28/29, 2023

It's The People // 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Introduction

This week's passage reminds us that the church is primarily about people. We see the encouragement exchanged between Paul and the Thessalonians by way of Timothy. We also see the importance of the mission being to make disciples, not just converts. Paul wants the church in Thessalonica to keep growing towards maturity!

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

1) **What's your choice: jigsaw, crossword, or numeric puzzles, or something else?**

2) **What is one of your favorite stories from the life of Jesus?**

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) As you think about this week's sermon, what truth leaves the strongest impression in your mind?

2) In *1 Thessalonians 2:17-20*, Paul explains his desire to see the Thessalonians because he is encouraged by their faith ("You are our glory and joy"). Is there someone in your life that you have encouraged/influenced as a follower of Jesus, and you are encouraged by how they have continued to grow? Please share what about their discipleship to Jesus encourages you.

   What is the difference between being a convert and a disciple?

3) Look at *1 Thessalonians 3:1-5*. Paul reveals that he is concerned that persecution might have hindered the Thessalonians faith or caused them to have second thoughts about being disciples of Jesus. Have you ever faced persecution for following Jesus? What was that like?

   In those times of persecution, what encouraged you to stay on course as a disciple of Jesus?

   If you have not faced persecution, based on the entire passage what do you believe would encourage someone to continue following Jesus despite persecution?

4) In *1 Thessalonians 3:6-10* Paul describes how the report from Timothy encouraged his own discipleship. It was not only their faith, but also their love that brought him great joy that turned into giving thanks. Galatians 5:6b states, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." **Discuss the importance of faith expressing itself through love.**

How does this happen—how is someone changed into a more loving person? What part does God play? What part does the person play? What part do other people play?
(Include *1 Thessalonians 3:11-13* as part of this discussion)

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

Prayer Focus: In your times of prayer this week, take a few moments for the following:

1. Thank God for the people in your life that encourage you in your discipleship to Jesus.
2. Ask God to bring one person to your mind and pray *1 Thessalonians 3:11-13* over them.

Scripture Focus: Each day read *Psalm 37:1-8* as a reminder of how to deal with persecutions or frustrations that other people may cause in your life. Maybe even put it on a notecard or as the wallpaper for your phone, so you can look to it more often to be reminded to trust God.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of "coming together" is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say "Amen" aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?