

**5.10.20 Finding Joy During Hardship 1 Thessalonians 2.17-3.13
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One of the things many of us are missing as the weeks of social distancing continue is being able to see people face to face and not on a computer screen, tablet, or phone. We long to be with people in person. I'm sure that's especially true for some of you who would like to be your mother today. It's also true of the apostle Paul in today's scripture. He's feeling the pain of being separated from the Thessalonians and eagerly wishes to be with them. Paul expresses that feeling in 1 Thessalonians in 2:17-3:13.

17 As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but **Satan blocked our way.** 19 **For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting** before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 **Yes, you are our glory and joy!**

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of **your faith**, 3 **so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.** Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, **we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution**; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about **your faith**; **I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you** and that our labor had been in vain.

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you, **and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.** He has told us also that you always remember us kindly **and long to see us—just as we long to see you.** 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and **persecution** we have been **encouraged** about you through **your faith**. 8 **For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.** 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return **for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?** 10 Night and day **we pray most earnestly** that

we may **see you face to face** and restore whatever is lacking in **your faith**.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.
 12 **And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.** 13 **And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”**

Today’s scripture reveals how we can find joy while living in a time of hardship. Paul is in a time of *“distress and persecution”* yet he’s encouraged and feeling much joy thanks to the Thessalonians. I’m going to share four things I see in this passage that I hope will be helpful for you.

The **first thing** you need to do if we’re going to get to a place of joy even during hardship is to **Know Your Opponent – Evil is real and an active force in the world.** Reading this passage, it’s clear **Hardship is part of life so don’t let it catch you unprepared.** In **verses 3, 4, and 7**, Paul says persecution is **to be expected** and part of why Timothy was sent to them was **“so that no one would be shaken.”** **A first step in facing hardship is recognizing that evil is real and an active force in the world.** In expressing his desire to see the Thessalonians face to face, Paul says something that may sound strange to some of us. *“For we wanted to come to you—but Satan blocked our way.”* Some people may think, “that sounds odd, like an excuse or a justification for not making the effort required. I don’t believe Satan exists.” If that expresses how you’re feeling, and even if it doesn’t, I want to take a few minutes share some of what we learn about Satan and evil in the New Testament.

If you look at Jesus’ temptation in Matthew 4.1-11, **(4.1) “the devil,” (4.3) “the tempter,” and (4.10) “Satan,” are names for evil conceived as a personal will actively hostile to God and God’s good will.** In much of the New Testament Satan was regarded as the source of moral evil, suffering, and disease. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have a version of the story of Jesus saying, (Matthew 12:26-28) *“If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?”* Jesus believed Satan was a real adversary with his own realm over which he had power and influence.

In **John 8:44**, Jesus describes the devil this way, *“He was a murderer from the beginning and **does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.**”* For this reason, we know that people who lie consistently and repeatedly are living more in the spirit of Satan than of Christ who is (John 14:6) “the truth.” For example, in **Acts 5:3**, Peter asked Ananias, *“**why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?**”*

In **Acts 26:17-18**, Paul is describing his encounter with the Risen Christ and part of the message he heard was, *“I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you **to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.**”*

Jesus, Peter, and Paul all Know their Opponent – they believe in the reality and power of Satan, the devil, the tempter. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians and Ephesians 6 that there are forces that are actively opposing God’s will for good in the world including in human lives and relationships. We can either prepare ourselves to do battle against them, or we can ignore them, deny the reality of evil, and in doing so, give evil more power. If two people are in a boxing ring and one person is trained, hardened, and ready to fight and the other person hasn’t trained and doesn’t know what’s taking place, you know who will get hurt, and it won’t take long. In the 1976 movie, Rocky, Apollo Creed's Trainer, Tony "Duke" Evers urges Apollo during his bout with Rocky: *“He doesn't know it's a show, he thinks it's a fight!”* We’re in a fight against evil in the world and we’re far more likely to get beaten and knocked out if we don’t realize it.

Know your Opponent. A first step in facing hardship is recognizing that evil is real and an active force in the world. Hardship is part of life so don’t let it catch you unprepared. We’re all going to face hardship, the question is do we learn from it, grow from it, even become stronger for having endured it.

A second step toward finding joy in hardship is **Express Your Feelings – Paul is open and clear about how he feels toward the Thessalonians.** He expresses how he could bear it no longer not knowing how they were doing, how much he wanted to see them, how he longs for them, fears for them,

and after hearing Timothy's report is filled with joy because of them. This part of 1 Thessalonians really sounds like a love letter. How open and clear are we about our feelings? When we express our feelings, people don't have to guess what's in our heart or our head. Expressing our feelings appropriately, speaking the truth in love, not in an angry or intentionally hurtful or manipulative way is important to healthy relationships. Because Paul expressed his feelings for the church clearly, and the Thessalonians did too, both Paul and the church are encouraged. Expressing your feelings provides clarity, comfort, and reassurance. I'm happy to have Jill participating in worship with me this week and as we discussed this passage I shared that the love and joy that Paul felt for the Thessalonians is similar to how we feel about all of you who are connected to BBC and we've had the blessing of sharing life and ministry with you for much, much longer than Paul did with the Thessalonians. What Paul expressed about the Thessalonians is true for us with you, ***"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 Yes, you are our glory and joy!"*** 3:9, *"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"* Expressing and sharing our feelings is mutually beneficial. I have been encouraged by so many of you who have been contacting me one way or another to share kind words, appreciation, and prayers. It helps give me energy and encouragement which is part of the third thing I want to share. **After knowing our opponent and expressing our feelings, the third thing to find joy in hardship is we need to**

Understand How Faith Works – our faith is personal but not private. Our faith impacts the faith of other people whether we realize it or not. It either serves to strengthen their faith or to weaken it. When our lives, our decisions, our words, our actions, positively reflect our faith, that can strengthen the faith of other people. When we waver, that can lead to others wavering. Paul expresses this in verse 5, *"I sent to find out about **your faith**; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain."* The faith of the Thessalonians was personal, but not private, if they had been tempted away from faith, if their faith wavered or weakened, it would have directly impacted Paul in a negative way. In hard times our faith helps us to hold on and it helps others to hold on to; it's like the beach grass we

see all over the Cape that helps to hold the dunes in place. It may look like each blade of grass is an individual strand, but underneath the surface, the roots of the grass spread and intertwine and helped to hold the sand which helps other grass to hang on.

Paul says, “we have been **encouraged** about you through **your faith**. For **we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.**” This verse beautifully expresses the interconnectedness of our mutual faith. Paul was encouraged through the faith of the people. All of us can and will have times when our faith is wavering or weakening, and the faith of other people carries us onward. This can be true especially at times of grief. I received a lovely letter this week from a member of our church who lost her spouse a little while ago now and in it she expressed her gratitude for the church, her small group, and all her friends here who loved and supported her through the most painful period of grief and loss. She is in a good place now thanks to the people around her who stood firm in their faith in the Lord, expressed their feelings of compassion and stood with her in friendship and did the final thing I want to share with you – shared their love with her.

If we hope to find **Joy in hardship, we need to Know our Opponent – that evil is real, Express our Feelings, understand how faith works, and, fourth, Share Your Love** – Timothy brought good news of the Thessalonians faith and love. Paul noted how they remember him kindly and longed to see him. The Thessalonians expressed their feelings for Paul and shared their love and that delighted Paul and filled him with joy. We often don’t realize how much our expressions of love mean to other people. Paul’s prayer for the church is that the Lord would “**make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.**” I have been constantly encouraged in the last two months by the many ways all of you are sharing your love. From small groups, prayers for a friend facing surgery, weekly grocery shopping for folks stuck at home, going over to help someone with a computer. These are just a few ways people are sharing love even with the limitations and boundaries we have in the pandemic.

Two of our primary sources of strength, resilience, and even joy when facing hardship are faith and relationships. This is evident in today’s scripture. **Faith**

is mentioned five times. Strengthening our relationship with God and with people are immensely helpful when facing hardship

To find Joy even in hardship – remember you get to choose where you place your focus. **Focusing on Faith and love in our relationship with God and our relationship with people will helps us cultivate joy and not drown in fear and uncertainty.**

I received a call this past week from Cindy McDonough the daughter of Fred and Vivian LeClaire to let me know that Vivian had died. Fred and Vivian were wonderful members of BBC for many years before moving off Cape. They embodied so much of what Paul wrote about that I've been sharing today. They were full of love for each other, their family, and other people. They were encouraging to others and shared a strong faith that enabled them cope with hardship and heartache including the loss of their son. They were thoughtful and kind to our family and to many others. Our prayers are with Fred and his family and I'm grateful for the ways our lives and our faith intersected and helped us both.

Know Your Opponent, Express Your Feelings, Understand How Faith Works, Share Your Love – that's how we can still experience Joy even in hardship.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you do to help yourself find joy even in times of hardship?
2. How do you understand the idea of *"the tempter, Satan, the devil,"* and the reality of evil in the world? How do you know evil when you see it? What standard do you use to determine what is evil compared to something you just don't like or disagree with? Jesus in John 8 and Peter Acts 5 both connect lying to Satan - how is someone who consistently and repeatedly lies reflecting the spirit of Satan? How do you deal with such a person?
3. How easy or difficult is it for you to express your feelings to others appropriately? How does Paul set an example for us in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13? How can you take a step forward in expressing your feelings and emotions appropriately to other people?

4. Paul makes it clear that a person's faith is personal, but not private. Our faith impacts not only our self but also impacts other people either positively or negatively. Recall a time when someone else's faith helped you when your faith was wavering or weakening, or you were in a season of doubt or grief? How did they help you?

5. In verse 12, Paul prays that *"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."* If you were to envision your love like a glass with water in it – how full is your glass? A third? Half? Three Quarters? Abounding and overflowing? Remember we're called to love not just those who love us or agree with us, but even our enemies. In addition to praying for God to pour more of the Lord's love into your heart through the Holy Spirit, what are some tangible ways you can increase and abound in love?