

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Joy During Unholy War

Key Idea:

Because spiritual warfare is real and Satan actively opposes the faith, God's people must anchor their joy not in circumstances but in His faithful work in the lives of those they love — a joy no enemy can destroy.

Key Text:

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

¹ Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,
² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith,³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.
⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God,¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10 ESV)

Key Points:

- **The depth of Paul's love for fellow believers drove an intense holy desire to be with them.** Paul and his team were not merely separated from the Thessalonians — they were “torn away” (2:17), a word evoking forced, painful severance. Paul tried to return again and again. This was no professional concern; it flowed from a love that had shared not just the Gospel but his very life with them (2:8). Such deep pastoral love is a mark of those who have been transformed by the Gospel.

- **For God's people, the greatest source of joy is not personal comfort but the spiritual growth of those they love.** Paul calls the Thessalonians his “hope or joy or crown of boasting” before the Lord at His coming (2:19), and “glory and joy” (2:20). Three of his four uses of “joy” in all of 1 & 2 Thessalonians are concentrated here — signaling this is a central theme. Similarly, from a Roman prison, Paul calls the Philippians his “joy and crown” (Phil. 4:1). For Paul, joy was not circumstantial but eschatological — rooted in what God was building for eternity.
- **Satan actively wages war against the faith of God's people, and we must take this seriously.** Paul twice names Satan as the force behind his hindrances (2:18; 3:5). Satan hindered Paul from returning; he also sought to exploit the Thessalonians' persecution to destroy their faith. This “unholy war” is not new — it began when Cain killed Abel — and it will continue until Christ returns. Christians are not meant to be surprised by it (3:3–4; 1 Pet. 4:12), but neither should they be naive about it. Satan is real, he is active, and even the apostle Paul could be thwarted by him.
- **The proper response to the unholy war is not despair but earnest prayer and trust in God's power.** When Paul could not return himself, he sent Timothy — even at the cost of being left alone in Athens (3:1–2). When affliction pressed in, he prayed “most earnestly night and day” (3:10). Paul did not respond to spiritual warfare with paralysis or despair but with Spirit-directed action and fervent prayer. The same posture is called for when we face what we cannot control or overcome in our own strength.
- **When those we love stand fast in faith under persecution, the result is overflowing joy, thanksgiving, and praise.** Timothy's report of the Thessalonians' faith and love (3:6) transformed Paul's affliction into comfort: “Now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord” (3:8). Their perseverance under fire produced in Paul an outpouring of thanksgiving and renewed intercession (3:9–10). A proper response to persecution causes faith and love to grow rather than diminish — and seeing this in those we love is cause for the deepest Christian joy.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened with the story of his oldest son moving to Alabama and the joy — and anxiety — of watching him grow in faith from a distance. Who in your life do you most long to see flourish spiritually? What does that longing feel like?
- Paul says the Thessalonians are his “hope or joy or crown of boasting” before Christ at His coming (2:19–20). What does it mean that Paul's joy is eschatological — oriented toward the Last Day rather than the present moment? How does that reframe what joy is and where it is found?
- Paul wrote his most joy-saturated letter (Philippians) from prison, and this passage contains his highest concentration of “joy” language in his Thessalonian correspondence

— written during persecution and separation. What does that tell us about the nature of Christian joy? How does it differ from happiness?

- Paul names Satan twice as the force behind his hindrances (2:18; 3:5). Many Christians are either overly focused on spiritual warfare or dismissive of it altogether. How do you tend to think about Satan's active role in your life and in the church? What does Paul's sober, non-dramatic acknowledgment of it model for us?
- The teaching notes that this spiritual war has raged since Cain killed Abel, and that persecution is the "normal Christian life" (3:3–4; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet. 4:12–14). Does that description match your expectations and experience as a Christian? What happens to our faith when suffering catches us off guard?
- When Paul could not return to Thessalonica himself, he sent Timothy — leaving himself alone in Athens — to "establish and exhort" the Thessalonians in their faith (3:1–2). What sacrifices are you willing to make so that those you love might be established in Christ? Is their holiness or their happiness your primary concern?
- When Timothy returned with good news of the Thessalonians' faith and love, Paul wrote, "Now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (3:8). Have you ever been sustained, comforted, or even revived by hearing of someone else's faithfulness under trial? What did that experience reveal about our interconnectedness as the body of Christ?
- C.S. Lewis wrote that God finds our desires not too strong, but too weak — that we are "far too easily pleased" with things far less than infinite joy. Where do you see yourself settling for lesser joys? What would it look like to set your desires on the things that will make you a "crown of boasting" for those who love you at Christ's coming?
- The outline asks: "Is my joy founded upon and centered in God, His kingdom, and His work — or in this passing age?" Take a moment to honestly assess: what are the things that most reliably destroy your joy? What does that reveal about where your joy is actually anchored?

For Further Study:

- Read the passage running from Acts 16:15 through to Acts 17:15. Then read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10 again. Let the story in Acts deeply inform your reading of the passages in 1 Thessalonians, especially as it related to Paul's understanding of joy in the face of Satan's opposition and persecution.
- This week, pray the blessing that we used on Sunday, which is taken from St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer: "May Christ be your shield today: Christ before you; Christ behind you; Christ beneath you; Christ above you; Christ on your right; Christ on your left; May Christ be with you, Christ be in you alone and in multitude, near and afar; for all you face and for all your life, that you may live in the protection, power, and blessing of the Holy Trinity."
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [joy](#); [perseverance](#); [Satan and demons](#); [spiritual warfare](#); and [holiness](#).