

Concern for Believers

1Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Has anyone here this morning ever received a threatening telephone call?

Many years ago I got a call one evening from a collection agency.

This was just before the time cell phones became mainstream and I am pretty sure the regular phone we had at the time did not have a display that showed the number of the person calling.

Do you remember those days?

Today I can look at the number and have a pretty good guess that it's some kind of telemarketing scheme, but back then it was a total shot in the dark.

So the phone rings and I answer, "Hello." The person on the other end replies, "Yes, may I speak to Michael Sealy?"

"Speaking", I said.

"Yes Mr. Sealy I'm calling from such and such on behalf of Visa because we see here that you have a balanced of \$7000 and we are wanting to know how you are going to pay for that."

This statement was both surprising and deeply concerning to me.

I responded, "I'm not planning to pay for that because I don't even have a visa card let alone a \$7000 balance on a visa card."

That's when the questions started. I can't remember exactly all that they asked me but I'm pretty sure it was along the lines of name, birthday, address, etc.

I fully admit I foolishly gave them too much information because that very easily could have been a scam, but by the third or fourth question it became clear that they had the wrong Michael Sealy.

Can you believe that? There is more than one Michael Sealy living in the province of Ontario.

Once we figured that out I hung up the phone and never heard from them again.

I'm glad it all came to nothing and I'm glad I did not fall victim to a scam, but I will tell you in that moment I was deeply concerned.

[Most of us can likely relate to that. A moment or a situation that cause us deep concern. That is a situation the Apostle Paul finds himself in on several occasions and our text this morning **1Thessalonians 2:17-3:5** tells us about one of those occasions. He brings us back to a time when he was forced to leave these believers and he shares with us the great concern that had in that circumstance. While there may have been reason to be concerned about himself and his own situation, the concern that he shares in this passage is the concern he had for these believers. That is something the bible talks quite a bit about and it is something we should be cultivating in our hearts as followers of Jesus. These verses show us three very important

lessons. They show us what creates concern in our hearts for believers, what that concern produces, and why the action produced by concern is necessary. First, let's look at what creates this good and godly concern in our hearts. Verses 17-20 show us that...]

Point #1 – Valuing believers creates concern for believers. (2:17-20)

When we begin to wrap our hearts and minds around what it means to be in Christ we will have an interest in those that belong to Him.

Verses 17-18 express the Apostle Paul's deep desire to see the believers in Thessalonica.

The words 'we were torn away from you' is a powerful reminder to the church that when Paul and his gospel coworkers left town it was not what they wanted to do.

They left because enemies of the gospel had 'set the city in an uproar' according to Acts 17:5 and because of that turmoil the believers sent Paul and his companions on to Berea.

The bible is silent on the details of how and why that decision was arrived at, but from what we know of Paul it is safe to say that they decided to leave because they felt it served the highest good of the church and the cause of the gospel.

Though it was the right decision it was nevertheless a very difficult decision.

Gene Green in his commentary on this verse suggests the picture of the original language is that of children and parents being separated from one another.

Just try to imagine for a moment being on a vacation somewhere with your family and when you get to the airport to fly home the police come and take you away from your kids and lock everybody up in separate rooms.

I'm guessing if that happened the top priority for the parents would be to see their kids and I can only imagine that the kids are going to desperately want to see mom and dad.

That is the level of concern Paul has for these believers and because they are so imprinted upon his heart he has had an eager desire, it says here, to see them 'face to face'

He has wanted to come to them it says, "again and again". Commentators think that phrase indicates he had made plans to visit them on more than one occasion, but he says "Satan hindered us".

How the devil does that he does not say, we simply know that our great enemy wanted to keep him from these believers.

Two questions arise here.

Why is Paul so concerned for these people and why does the Devil want to throw a wrench into his plans to see them?

The answer is the same for both questions. (19-20)

This is so much more than saying something like, “I want to see you because I miss you.”

I would suggest this is even much more than saying, “I want to see you because I care deeply about you.”

This is, “I am deeply concerned about you because you being in Christ is an eternal treasure.

He is looking ahead, as he often does in his letters to the Thessalonians, to the coming of Jesus.

His reference to Jesus as ‘Lord’ here is significant. It means that Jesus is the ruler over all creation and everyone comes under His judgement and authority.

That is what Christ’s coming is about! It is a calling to account of everyone under His rule.

As the apostle looks ahead to that day his ‘hope’ for that day in wrapped up in these believers, they will be his ‘joy’, they will be his ‘crown of boasting’ meaning his reward.

This kind of boasting is the only good kind of boasting that is possible it is a boasting of praise and worship to God for what He has done through the ministry of the apostle to bring these folks to faith.

What he is looking forward to the most about eternity is that these people will be with the LORD forever calling attention to His matchless grace and mercy because they have believed the gospel that he had the privilege to preach.

The devil knows that and that is why he wanted to hinder Paul, to keep him from joy in the glory of Christ.

To say that he valued these people hardly does justice to what is written here.

[Do you know what most people do with the things they value? They show concern for them. Earlier this summer I was in a sailboat race and another boat crashed into my boat. I’m happy to report there was no real damage but at the moment it happened, I was very concerned because even though my little boat isn’t worth much, I happen to like it very much.]

Can you relate to that?

It is interesting how we can become concerned about temporary things that one day will come to nothing while at the same time be quite indifferent towards people purchased by the blood of Christ.

Without a doubt we are called to be good stewards of created things.

Without a doubt we have the liberty to enjoy good gifts from the LORD.

But nothing in this present creation is heading into eternity.

There will be no hope, joy, or crown for us in material things.

It is people rather than things that we should value, particularly those who belong to Jesus, because in

eternity we will be worshipping God for redeeming a people to Himself through His One and only Son.

[Just take a moment and look around the room. What do you see? If we only see a bunch of strangers for which we feel little or no concern, then let us plead with God to have the Holy Spirit open our hearts to the reality that those in Christ are sons and daughters of the King. These are people for whom Jesus died to the glory of His grace. If we value one another like that then we will be concerned for one another and that is going to do something else in us. We see that in these next few verses, we see that...]

Point #2 – Concern for believers motivates the encouragement of believers. (3:1-3a)

When we have a desire for the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters in Christ we are going to want to build them up in their faith.

I want to call your attention in these first few verses of chapter three to what Paul does on account of his great concern for these believers and also to why he does it.

We see what he does in **verses 1-2a**.

Again imagine a mom and dad locked up in airport security in a foreign country with their kids having been taken to another room.

How easy would it be to get to the place where the mom is saying, “I can’t take it anymore?”

If I were in that situation I’m pretty confident I would get to that place pretty quick.

No imagine there is a knock at the door and a rather unfriendly looking fellow comes in the door carrying a big gun and he says to the dad, “If you want you can come with me to check on your children!”

Do you think the mom in that scenario is going to be excited about being left alone?

Not at all, but most likely out of great concern for her kids she is going to say to her husband, “Go!”

That is the sense of what Paul is talking about here.

He is not able to go personally, but he can send Timothy.

Does he want to be left alone? No! Timothy has proven to be a very important part of Paul’s ministry.

Additionally, it is the rare exception in the bible where we see the people serving the LORD all alone.

Just read 1Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 and you will see the necessity of fellow believers in the church.

Sending Timothy is less than ideal and the sense here is that it is costly to Paul, but his concern is so great he says, “You go Timothy.”

Because Timothy is both a ‘brother’ and ‘God’s coworker in the gospel’ he is well suited to the task of going to these believers.

We ought not to take the word ‘coworker’ here to mean somehow Timothy is equal partners with God or that God’s work would be impossible without Timothy.

Commentators will tell you there is evidence in the early manuscripts of NT that this could be translated as ‘God’s servant’.

Coworker here is to be understood as the LORD is working through Timothy as a chosen servant.

For the apostle Paul the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is something to be delighted.

God has commanded us to serve, He empowers us to serve, and our service completely depends on Him. Could He do it another way, absolutely, but He has chosen this way and we should be putting our hands to the plow not sitting on them.

The point is Timothy is the guy for the job. What’s the job? **(Verses 2a-3a)**

He is going there to ‘establish’ these believers.

That word has the sense of strengthening something.

[The image that comes to mind is a new plant. How many kids have grown a lima bean in a cup? If you want that lima bean to grow into a healthy well established plant what do you need to do? You need to take care of it, water it, feed it nutrients, make sure it get sunlight, and eventually transplant it into soil where its root system can spread out to support the plant.]

Timothy’s task is to go and give these believers the water and light of the gospel so that the roots of their faith will grow and sustain them.

He is also to ‘exhort’ them in their faith.

That is a great word in the original language, one that is often connected to the work of the Holy Spirit.

It can mean to urge, encourage, or comfort.

Think of it like giving people convincing and joyful reasons to press on.

Pay careful attention to the fact that it says, “establish and exhort you in your faith”.

The world’s idea these days of encouragement is to tell you about you!

That is a terribly idea and always leads to terrible places.

Timothy was sent to these believers to encourage them with the truth of who God is and what He has promised in His Son.

If our faith rests with us, that is a foundation of sand that will be swept away by the wind and waves of life, but if our faith rests on Christ then we can be sure our feet are planted on immovable ground.

[As Paul is thinking of how precious these folks, he is filled with concern. He has so much concern that he is willing to endure the absence of his beloved co-worker Timothy so that he can go and encourage them by telling them about the greatness of Jesus. Are we doing that? Can we do that? It is so important that we do. That is what we strive for week in and week out from this pulpit. I hope that is happening in our homes, and small groups, and bibles studies as well. Why is that so important? Why must our concern for one another motivate us to encourage one another? That is what is explained to us in the second part of verse three through to verse five. Here Paul shows us that...]

Point #3 – Believers need encouragement because affliction is certain. (3:3b-5)

In one form or another things will come into the lives of God's people that present challenges to faith. Because that is true we need be called to persevere in our trusting of Christ.

Half way through verse 3 we see the important little word 'For'.

This is why Paul out of great concern for the Thessalonians sent Timothy to encourage these believers. **(Verses 3b-4)**

A good theology of suffering has been somewhat missing in the theology of North American Christianity for some time, but it was very much present in the early church.

Preachers who talk about the Christian faith as worldly favour and gain simply ignore how Jesus Himself talked about following Him.

Jesus told people to 'count the cost', He told people to 'take up your cross', and He said that the world would hate those who decide to follow Him.

Paul experienced that early on in his discipleship journey and it seems clear from this passage that he was really upfront with new believers about facing affliction on account of their faith.

The message of the cross is "Come and die to yourself, come and endure all things for the sake of Christ because He is worth it."

It is one thing to hear that and agree, it is quite another to experience it.

[Just think of Jesus' closest followers for a moment. How many times did Jesus tell them that trials were on the horizon? They didn't get it did they. At the last supper Jesus says to them,

“You are all going to fall away!” (Mark 14) Do you know what they said? They said, “No way, even if we have to die we won’t disown you!” How did that go?]

That is precisely what Paul is concerned with here. Look with me at **verse 5**.

In my early years as a believer I looked down on the disciples for abandoning Jesus.

I thought of them as cowards and I always imagined myself as standing strong with the LORD.

Now, I think myself an utter fool for ever thinking such things.

I know that if left to my own devices, if left to my own strength I would fail just like they did and most likely to a much greater degree.

The temptation to quite on Jesus because things are tough or because things are not the way we want them is a real temptation.

Notice also, the power behind that temptation is ‘the tempter’ almost certainly another reference to Satan and the forces under his control.

It is always important to remind ourselves that the devil and his demons are finite creatures whose power cannot compare with that of the living God.

It is equally important to remind ourselves that his power far exceeds our own and the only shield that can protect us from his fiery arrows is ‘the shield of faith’.

If we give that up all is lost.

That is Paul’s fear for these believers, that they would stop believing and prove his labour among them to be vanity/empty/ineffective.

Of course when people hear verses like this they ask, “Does that mean I can lose my salvation?”

The answer to that question is no, but that is the wrong question to ask of this text.

The write question to ask is, “Can a person be saved part from faith in Christ?”

The emphatic answer of the New Testament is, “No!”

Listen to this very carefully, “Saving faith is persevering faith!”

How do we persevere in faith? I like the way one preacher puts it, he says, “God causes us to persevere but enabling us to do persevering things.”

One of the persevering things we need is encouragement from fellow believers.

When Satan is tempting us to quite in the midst of trial, we don’t need to tell one another about how good and wonderful we are. We need to tell each

other that our Saviour has paid our debt, He has conquered the grave, He has sent the Holy Spirit, and He is holding on to us!

That is true for believers in places like China, Iran, Somalia, North Korea, and alike.

It is true in the school yard, it is true in the hospital room, it is true in the court room, the house of commons, or anywhere else where the tempter would have us believe it is not worth it.

In all of those places we need to be encouraged in the strength, wisdom, and glory of our great God.

What are we concerned about this morning brothers and sisters?

There are lots of worldly things to be anxious over, but none of those things will last and Jesus very clearly tells us to not worry about such things.

Instead the bible tells us to direct our concern elsewhere.

It tells us to be concerned for one another. Are we?

If we can see the value of what it means to be bought with the precious blood of Christ, then we will be concerned.

If we are concerned for one another we will seek to encourage one another.

We will encourage one another because we will know how desperately we need to be reminded of the riches of faith in Christ in the face of things that seek to draw us away from Him.

Do you know the hymn, "I love to tell the story?"

It says, "I love to tell the story! Twill be my theme in glory—to tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love."

That is what we need to hear in the face of trial and temptation.

May we treasure one another enough to encourage one another in the Saviour's love.