

A Love Story

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Steve Zeisler

I learned something about preaching last week. (I'm sure you will all be glad to hear that!) One should always finish a story even if the point being made comes in the middle. You may recall that I talked briefly about a football game I was preparing to play in when I was in high school, but I didn't say what the score was. So I'll report to you this morning that we did win the game (the score was 17 to 7), but two weeks later we lost to another team we should have beaten and ended up second in the league anyway. I know all that because I checked out my high school yearbook just to make sure I got the facts straight.

I discovered something else too. Looking through a high school yearbook is a very amusing way to spend some time. I recommend it to you if you haven't done it lately. But along with the humor involved I think there is a nostalgia that comes when you check your old yearbook. Yearbooks are part of a large category of things that accomplish that same reflection evaluation purpose in our lives. Diaries, photo albums, scrapbooks, ballads, reunions, dozens of things have been concocted by the human brain to accomplish this purpose of being able to review our lives and check the goals we set for ourselves when we were young.

There is a desire in the heart of man to know whether or not his life has meant something, whether it has accomplished any worthwhile purpose. That desire is given to us by the Lord, I believe, to reflect on our experience, because there is a day coming when we will go through that process for real and under the most serious conditions. That will happen on the day when the Lord returns. All of us who are Christians, or are familiar with the scriptures, know that the day of Christ's return will grant us an opportunity to stand before him and to have him discuss with us what has been important and valuable about our lives. We will have our lives come under his scrutiny and we will receive from him his analysis of the kind of people we have been.

Now let me give you a hint right away. The things that are going to count on the day of the Lord's return concern people. God made people to last forever, and from eternity's point of view, what matters is what he has been able to use us to accomplish in the lives of people. Those are the clippings that will go in the scrapbook. You may build a thousand widgets in your lifetime, or be the founder of a great library, or walk on the moon, but what is going to be measured on the final day is what the Lord has been able to do in your life for the sake of building the character of those who have been created in his image.

Continuing in the book of 1 Thessalonians, we are going to look at a passage this morning that deals with this very issue. You will recall that the first chapter of this book introduced us to the Thessalonian church. This remarkable group of people had seen their city overturned for Christ's sake. Chapter two deals primarily with the lives and commitment of Paul and his friends that produced this great ministry.

Continuing in chapter two, beginning with 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. 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.

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. 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. 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?

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; 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.

You will notice right away that the beginning of this section refers to the coming again of our Lord. In verse 19 of chapter two, Paul speaks of "the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming," and in verse 13 of chapter three, he speaks of "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." I think what Paul suggests here is that when the Lord does return the thing that will give us delight is not so much the time we spend in looking at ourselves, but our joy will be when we see what God has done in other lives through us. We will see the way in which our obedience and service to him has produced growth, maturity and beauty in the lives of others around us. Paul says that very directly in verses 19-20:

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.

At the end of chapter three, Paul speaks of our own hearts being "unblamable in holiness before our God and Father," but that is a result of what he says in verse 12, where he directs these Thessalonians, "and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you." Somehow the significance with which we view our opportunity to love and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ, and those around us, is going to affect the kind of people we are and the evaluation of us that will be true on the Lord's day. Do we love and value those people that Christ has given us to be members of his family? Is it supremely important to us that growth, maturity and depth become true of those around us? These are very important questions. These are the things that will be recorded in the final yearbook. Those issues are the ones that we will see as most important on the day of his return.

Now, what we read between these two references to Christ's coming again is what might be called "A Love Story." It is a description of the way Paul felt about these Thessalonians that gives content to the love that he tells them he feels for them. It is an autobiography of his deep concern and commitment to them. I think we ought to learn four things from this description, four principles that those of us who want to become lovers of the brethren can take home with us.

The first principle is mentioned for the first time in verse 18 of chapter two, and then again in verse five of chapter three: "For we wanted to come to you--I, Paul, more than once--and yet Satan thwarted us" (2:18). Then, again, "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 should be in vain" (3:5).

Christian love and Christian relationships are the subject of serious, concerted attack by Satan. It is important to realize that there is no natural drift toward Christian commitment. The natural drift is away from Christian commitment. You may have wondered, for instance, why it is so hard to write letters. Letter writing is very easy. Simple notes to friends to let them know you're thinking about them are not very difficult to write. Yet all my life, whenever the subject comes up, I always describe myself as a poor letter writer, as if I had a gene for poor letter

writing stamped in me somehow. But one reason I'm a poor letter writer is that this is an area where the enemy has effectively attacked me. My commitment to communicate and show my concern for those who are important to me gets taken away because I can't quite seem to keep up with all my correspondence.

Have you ever wondered why there always seems to be a family crisis, or a home repair project, or a customer's phone call that always seems to precisely coincide with the times when you could be together with your Christian brothers and sisters? At those times when important and needful fellowship is taking place something inevitably comes up that always seems to get in the way. Or why it is, when someone needs my financial resources, or my time and energy, I'm at my lowest ebb in terms of being able to provide those things? Why is it that the times when the heaviest demands for me to love someone always seem to be precisely those times when I have the least energy and least ability to respond? If you review your life, you can probably think of hundreds of seemingly insignificant reasons why a relationship fell apart; why a casual conversation was overheard and misunderstood by someone and turned into a rumor that destroyed what had been an important relationship in your life. Satan is committed to keeping us from having deep and valuable Christian relationships. There is a war going on, and one effect of that war is to keep Christians from being able to love each other.

The second principle that Paul mentions in this section is the very important need for Christians to be together. We read 17 verses this morning and let me quickly note the times when this subject of Paul's desiring to be with the Thessalonians was mentioned.

...we were all the more eager with great desire to see your face (2:17)

For we wanted to come... more than once... (2:18)

...when we could endure it [the separation] no longer... (3:1)

...when I could endure it no longer... (3:5)

...just as we long to see you... (3:6)

As we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face... (3:10)

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;... (3:11)

Time and again in this short section Paul refers to the absolute necessity he feels, the burden he carries, to be with these people; to be able to put his arms around them and to speak to them face to face; to enjoy their company and to serve and show his love for them. This is a much different proposition than saying, "Let's be on one another's prayer list." That is very important, but it is certainly way short of this inability to endure being separated from his friends that Paul expresses. How important it is to spend time with those people whom God has given us for special relationships.

I think the closest I came to experiencing anything like this was the 12 months or so before my wife Leslie and I got married. She lived in Richmond and I lived in Palo Alto and I don't know how many trips I made back and forth to see her. There were times when I would make the commute of two and a half hours to be able to spend about 45 minutes with her. (KEAR, the Christian radio station, used to have a radio drama called "Unshackled" that came on at 1 o'clock in the morning that tells how men and women have been saved by the gospel message through an urban mission. I can testify that that program saved my life by keeping me from driving off the Dumbarton bridge into the bay on half a dozen different occasions!)

There is something appropriate about young people's need to be together when they are in love, but somehow it is not very common for us to have that same tension, that same need to be together with our Christian brothers and sisters. I can name eight or 10 people in my life with whom my Lord has given me significant relationships. I know that I need to be committed to them because of what we have meant to each other over the years, and because of the *quality* of the relationships God has given to us. And yet somehow I am able to endure (in a way

that Paul was not), not being with them. I have figured out some way of lessening my concern that I spend time with them.

It seems to me that everyone, at least once in his life, ought to have the experience of spending money he doesn't have and using time that is already pressure-filled just to fly, say, to Cleveland just for the weekend to be with somebody whom God has given him to love. And for no other reason than that. We ought to get accused--at least now and again--of being irresponsible for love's sake. If nobody ever says of us, "That was an irresponsible act"; if no "sane" person ever questions the things we do in the name of love, I think there is probably something wrong. Paul could not endure not to be with these Thessalonian believers, so he took action.

The third principle we ought to see in this is the willingness of Paul to be deprived for the sake of the Thessalonians. He says, "I determined to be left behind at Athens in order to send Timothy to you." If you read chapter 17 of Acts, you realize that Paul's ministry in Athens was one of the most difficult, one of the most demanding, and in many ways, one of the darkest hours of his whole missionary experience. The thrust of that chapter of Acts is that his heart was broken by this very difficult, recalcitrant city. He was ridiculed, and he faced the whole thing alone. He was deprived of the companionship he expected, that had been his pattern all his life, and the reason he was deprived was so that he could send Timothy to the Thessalonians to see how they were doing.

I was reading in 2 Samuel this week the story of Jonathan and David. This is one of the most powerful examples of this same truth--the willingness to give up something for the sake of those we love. Jonathan would have been king except for David. Jonathan was the heir of Saul, who was the king of Israel, and by right should have expected to sit on the throne and have all the benefits, all the glory, all the wealth, and all the honor that went with being king. The one man who stood in his way was David, who had been anointed by God to be king instead. And yet, all through Jonathan's life he was sold-out to serve, to care for, and to exalt David. That whole process worked to the deprivation of Jonathan, in terms of what he could have had for himself.

You may recall in Charles Colson's book, "Born Again," the offer that Harold Hughes made to go to prison in place of Colson. What a dramatic effect that had on Colson and on everyone who heard of it. Willingness to restrict my own freedom and all the benefits that go with it and be deprived for the sake of those I love are great, important foundations to a love relationship.

The fourth principle is the willingness to suffer and rejoice because of those God has given us to love. Paul elucidates this principle in 1 Corinthians 12, where he says that when one member of the body suffers, all suffer; when one member rejoices, all rejoice. He lives out the principle in his description in this passage. Francis Schaeffer says of the age we live in that it is one that is committed to "personal peace and affluence." It is an age in which my security, my protection, my pleasure, my inviolable space, is the highest thing I can be committed to. That very mentality plagues the church, as the world works its influence on us. It is very hard to be the kind of people who say to their brothers and sisters, "If you suffer, then I need to suffer with you. I will give up my right to enjoy life itself if you are hurting. Your experience matters that much to me." Our whole tendency is not to want to get so close that we can get hurt. But listen to these words. This is a remarkable passage, beginning with verse 6 of chapter 3:

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.

The implication of verse 8 is quite clear. If the Thessalonians were not standing firm in the Lord then life itself would be lessened for Paul. "We are experiencing abundant life," Paul says, "because of the great news that you are hanging tough, that you are standing firm in the Lord. We would suffer the loss, somehow, of our experience of living itself if we were to hear that you were hurting, and that the tempter had, in fact, tempted you."

Then Paul asks the great rhetorical question in 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?" That is a powerful statement. Paul is saying, "How can I possibly thank God enough for the supreme joy that has been my experience because of you? I'm not rejoicing so much for what has happened to me, but I'm thrilled at what is happening to you, because you matter that much to me."

Romans 9 is a passage in the New Testament that is one of the most difficult, certainly, and one of the most maligned, anywhere in scripture. Because it emphasizes the sovereign choices of God, many have felt that this passage is arbitrary and loveless. But Romans 9 has one of the greatest statements on love that has ever been uttered by anyone. Paul says there that he is willing to be cut off from Christ, to go to hell, if only his countrymen could come to know the Lord. I can't think of any statement that could more thoroughly communicate love than that.

On the day when the Lord returns, what God has been able to use in us to create Christ's character in someone else will give us a sense of joy and fulfillment as nothing else will. That will be the way we are evaluated, to a large extent. And Paul is saying that my influence on others can only come if I love them. Then he mentions at least four things about love. First, love takes place in an arena of spiritual warfare. Love for our brothers and sisters is something that is attacked by our enemy, and we need to live as people who will overcome barriers, and not think that we will drift towards it somehow. Second, he says it is absolutely crucial that we physically spend some time together and that we make that a priority with those whom God has given us to love. Third, we need to be deprived for the sake of those we love. And fourth, we need to be willing to suffer and rejoice on the basis of what God is doing in others, and not merely on what is happening in our own immediate sphere of influence.

The first three chapters of the book of 1 Thessalonians could be described as a lighthouse, in a sense. The Thessalonian church is the beacon that overwhelmed the whole region and became an example and a byword throughout the Roman Empire. Supporting that great church was the character and the principles of the ministry of Paul and his friends, as they became models for the Thessalonian church. But the cornerstone was the heart that beats in the apostle and his fellow-workers, this commitment of theirs to love, to give themselves away and to not stand for anything less than radical, thorough, deep, Christian commitment to one another. It was because they were that kind of people that they became models, and because of their pattern the whole Thessalonian church became as remarkable as it did.

We have been encouraged by our study of this mission to Thessalonica, but it finally comes down to this: What kind of hearts have we? Are we willing to love one another with the kind of life-involvement that is described here?

Thank you, our Lord, for your heart reproduced in us. We ask you, Father, that we will grow in love for one another; the kind of love that makes a difference in the lives we live. In Jesus' name,
Amen

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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