



THE DISCIPLER'S LONGING • Eternal Rewards

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

I Thessalonians 2:17-3:11

In I Thessalonians 2: 1-13, Paul's "love" was his proof of sincerity. In 2:17-3:11, it's Paul's "longing" for the Thessalonians that demonstrates that commitment. Paul's critics have seen in the apostle's absence, evidence for their contention that he doesn't care – "How come you never visit us?" The passage affords us a glimpse at the motivations of discipleship: what a discipler longs for, what gets him out of bed on Monday morning and what sustains him in the labor of ministry.

A Discipler's Longing: Relationship With Disciples

So what does Paul long for? The Thessalonians. Paul uses emotionally charged language in order to convey the intensity of his longing for them. He describes being "ripped" away from them, and a longing so "intense" that he "made every effort" to see them, trying "again and again," so that "when he could stand it no longer," he had to send Timothy to check on them.

Paul also gives an explanation for his absence and it has nothing to do with not caring about them. He had actually tried to visit on multiple occasions, but Satan kept them apart, presumably to isolate them as well as plant the seed of doubt concerning his affections. Paul assures them that he still has every intention of coming, "Now may our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you."

A Discipler's Longing: The Disciple's Faithfulness

What else does Paul long for? What else makes him say "I live for this"? Seeing his disciples walk faithfully with the Lord. Here we see hints of paternal imagery and language – the pride and joy of a father. This is certainly appropriate as the Thessalonians are, after all, his spiritual children.

It isn't difficult to picture a father holding up his newborn as a trophy of God's grace and source of pride and joy, when Paul says, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy." It reads like a Hallmark card – "I couldn't be more proud of you if I tried."

Ah, if only parenthood was comprised of such Hallmark sentiment. There is, however, a painful side of caring so much. As Paul describes his anxiety over their spiritual well-being, it's like a nervous parent pacing the waiting room awaiting his child's prognosis: "when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith."

What's the Big Idea?

With the concern and longing of a father, we need to protect, strengthen and encourage believers in the midst of trials so that Satan might not dissipate their faith.

What's the Problem?

Without protective prayer, encouragement and support, young believers are as vulnerable as a young child against Satan's attacks.



When the report from Timothy comes back positive, only then can Paul breath a sigh of relief: “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” And actually, Paul had not been pacing but rather praying “day and night”(3:10).

As Paul longs for their faithfulness, his concern is that trials or persecution may have overwhelmed these young believers. While Paul continually prayed for them he also sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them.

Infant mortality isn't a big issue in the U.S. today, but it has been throughout history and continues to be in many parts of the world. A young child lacks the capacity and constitution to ward off serious infection and so any illness can turn life-threatening – as can any trial young believers face. Without a history of walking with the Lord with mature, tested character, a discipler is rightly concerned about the danger presented by trials, temptations, and persecution. The vulnerability of a young believer requires extra care, prayer and attention on the part of the spiritual mentor.

As a parent's life is centered and subsumed in the well-being of a child, so Paul's is for the spiritual health and growth of his disciples.

A Discippler's Longing: The Fruit of Labor

For a discipler, and any kingdom laborer, motivation is critical because it's not an easy job. Sometimes that motivation comes from the labor itself: seeing disciples growing and thriving. But this isn't the only source of motivation, and it's a good thing because ministry results are anything but a stable source of encouragement. In the text, Paul alludes to eternal rewards as a powerful motivation for a hard-working ministry: “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus”

As Paul mentions such rewards in many of his letters, and as Jesus promised such to His disciples (“great is your reward in heaven” Luke 6:23), this is anything but an insignificant source of encouragement. Our patient, diligent labor, in Christ, will be rewarded.

While there are better passages to explore this important New Testament teaching, it is not dealt with elsewhere in the *Cru.Comm* curriculum so it's addressed here.

Eternal rewards are often referred to in Scripture as crowns. Some think that they are, indeed, actual crowns, while others suggest this is merely symbolic and that our rewards will grant a greater capacity to love and serve God in the age to come. In the end, I think we need to say that we just don't know for sure.

Some people are uncomfortable with the concept of rewards and partly because we're used to rewards having no connection with the action being rewarded. If you're awarded a trophy – say, a gold emasculated male holding a laurel wreath – for teaching Braille to the blind, that is pretty silly.

But what if the reward lay in seeing the blind reading? Pursuit of reward is not a misplaced motivation when the reward is the action in its fulfillment. As C. S. Lewis notes, we don't see love as mercenary when it seeks the reward of marriage. And as Paul refers to the Thessalonians as his “joy and crown,” this seems to be precisely what's in view.

From the Scripture, we do know this for sure: we will be rewarded in the age to come for our Kingdom labor and these rewards are a powerful motivation to involve ourselves in discipleship and to think wisely about how we invest the time we have here.

What's Our Response?

You want the group to consider their own longings for close Christian friends and disciples, particularly those who are going through trials.

You want them to see that Christ is where hope, encouragement and strengthening should be centered.

Last, you want them to understand that our labor in Christ will be rewarded. This is a powerful motivation and leads to a greater eternal perspective of how and where we spend our time. Put negatively, if a faithful kingdom laborer is not rewarded, why push on when things are difficult?

What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 2:17-3:11

LAUNCH

What is the most meaningful/coolest/most impressive award you have ever received? What did you do to get it? Did you do it in order to get the award? Would it have mattered who gave the award to you?

EXPLORE

Read 2:17-3:11.

1. What words or phrases does Paul use to communicate the intensity of his desire to be with the Thessalonians?
2. When Paul says he was “ripped away” from them, to what is he referring? (Look up Acts 17:5-10 if you need.)
3. Describe each of the points Paul makes to prove the depth of his longing to see the Thessalonians?
4. Why does Paul go out of his way to explain his longing for them and his efforts to visit?
5. Why would Satan try to stop Paul from visiting? How does Paul know its Satan and not God?
6. What things have you done to keep in touch with close Christian friends, disciples, even parents?
7. Why is Paul so anxious about their spiritual well-being?
8. How do you see similarities between Paul’s attitude toward the Thessalonians and a father or parent?
9. Why is a young believer more vulnerable in both trials and temptations?
10. Paul states that as new believers he had warned them of the impending trials. Do you think we warn new believers enough about what’s in store for them? Why?
11. Typically Paul refers to Christ’s return as our hope. Why does Paul say here, that when Jesus returns, the Thessalonians will be his “hope and crown?”
12. Look up the following verses and write what they teach about rewards given at Christ’s coming.
I Corinthians 3:10-15
2 Timothy 4:8
I Peter 5: 2-4
13. Why does this teaching on rewards not conflict with the truth that we are saved by grace apart from works?
14. What do you think these rewards will be? Are crowns just symbolic? Why do you think God does not choose to be more descriptive of these rewards?
15. When Paul refers to the Thessalonians as his crown, does he mean that God would reward him according to his ministry to them or does he mean the presence of the Thessalonians in heaven will be his reward?
16. In Matthew 6:20, Jesus says “store up for yourselves treasure in heaven.” Why do the Scriptures not condemn this motivation as being selfish?

APPLY

17. In what ways do you feel convicted when you see Paul’s protective paternal longing for his fellow believers?
18. What do you think Timothy shared with them about Christ, grace and salvation that “strengthened and encouraged them”? What would have been “good news” to them in their situation?
19. Who do you know that is going through a trial that you could “strengthen and encourage”? What is the “good news” they need to hear?
20. What effect does Jesus command to “store up for yourselves treasure in heaven” have on you? On where you invest your time?

What Are the Answers?

1. He says he was “ripped” away from them and that his longing for them “intense,” and he “made every effort” to see them “again and again” and “when he could stand it no longer,” he sent Timothy.
2. Read Acts 17:5-10. Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica was abruptly ended when he was run out of town.
3. He has tried on many occasions to visit; he has never ceased longing for them; and, he has even sent Timothy to encourage them.
4. Some in Thessalonica had questioned his love and sincerity.
5. It could be to make them question Paul’s love, and to isolate them from him.
6. You might begin with some examples of your own.
7. He is concerned about how they’ll handle trials and persecution being so young in the faith.
8. See notes under “A Disciples Faithfulness.”
9. See notes. They do not have a strong foundation yet in the Lord.
10. Allow the group to discuss.
11. Paul’s great hope is the return of the Lord Jesus. But, when He returns, Paul is hoping to receive his full reward as a faithful minister of the gospel to the Thessalonians.
12. Give the group time to look up the verses.
13. Rewards are not about our salvation, but how the saved will be commended for their faithfulness.
14. The Scriptures are not clear on this, but it does seem in some way that they will be tied to a greater capacity to serve and worship the Lord.
15. Most likely both, but the thrust of his argument hinges more on the rewards he will receive, based on his labor with the Thessalonians.
16. See thoughts about rewards at the end of the notes.
17. This is the issue to which the study focuses for personal reflection.
18. This question is to help the group realize that true encouragement is centered in Christ: what he’s done for us, His care, His love, His provisions, His promises, His presence, etc.
19. Discuss. This combines the important elements of the last two questions.
20. Discuss. Eternal rewards lead us to having an eternal perspective on how and where we invest our time and lives.

Memorize

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes? Is it not you?

I Thessalonians 2:19