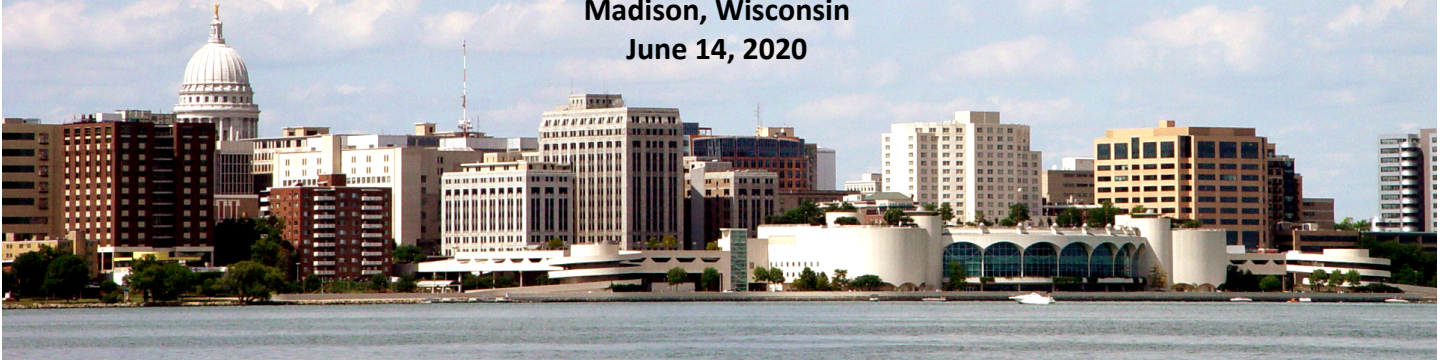


Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-20

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with you again this morning! We survived another week! We came together last Sunday, and we made it! We've learned some things along the way, and we are certainly thankful to have a place of our own where we can spread out a bit, where we have some flexibility to have multiple services like this. All of us should already have the bread and the fruit of the vine with us (either from home or from the table in the entryway). We will partake of those immediately after today's lesson. We will then close with a song and get outside.

As we have done over the past few months, I want us to start this morning with a summary of God's plan. God is holy, and we are not. We were created with freedom of choice, but all of us get to the point where we sin, where we choose to violate God's law. Thankfully, though, God made a way for us to come back, to make things right. He sent his Son as a sacrifice for sin, and we respond to that good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are then raised up out of the water having been born into God's family. At that point, the Christian life begins, and we live for him.

This morning we are looking at the example of Riley, who was baptized at the Mount Juliet Church of Christ down in Tennessee several days ago. What she has done you can also do! We have a baptistery downstairs, we can go to one of our local lakes, or (if you have one) we can go to the hot tub in your back yard! But if you have any questions about the word of God, if you have a weird question you think nobody has ever thought of before and you would like to discuss it, please get in touch. If there is some way we can serve you, we hope you will give us a call.

As we think about being separated like this – some of us meeting here in two services, some of us watching online, and some of us listening in on the phone – and as we slowly come back together, I thought it might be appropriate to at least briefly consider a passage from 1 Thessalonians, where the apostle Paul writes about the challenge of being separated from the Christians in Thessalonica. As we make our way to 1 Thessalonians 2, I should mention that Paul first visits Thessalonica on his Second Missionary Journey. Paul and his team cross over into Macedonia, they baptize Lydia and the Jailer in Philippi, and they continue to Thessalonica, a seaport city in northern Greece, along the Aegean Sea. In Acts 17, we find that when Paul gets there, he starts preaching

in the synagogue of the Jews. Some are persuaded, but others get jealous and round up an angry mob to basically chase Paul out of town after only three weeks. The brethren sneak Paul out of town by night, and he continues on to Berea, and then to Athens, and eventually to Corinth, where he writes the book of 1 Thessalonians. And this is why I've noted Corinth on the map up here. This brings us to 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, where Paul refers to this separation that has taken place.

Today, then, as we think about being separated from each other, as we anticipate all of us coming back together at some point, I want us to look to the word of God for some encouragement and advice. Let's look together at what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20,

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. 18 For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us. 19 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? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

In the time we have left, let's think about the negative and then the positive here.

I. And we start with what we might describe as a PAINFUL SEPARATION, the NEGATIVE part of this.

And what I hope we notice is that Paul wants to be together with these people, but he is hindered. He is ***“taken away,”*** and that phrase comes from a single word that has the word “orphan” in it. It's the idea of being torn away, an unwilling separation. And in verse 18, Paul attributes this separation to Satan, ***“Satan hindered us,”*** he says. In the ancient world, the word we have translated here as ***“hinder”*** means “to cut into” and was sometimes used in the military and sometimes described an army digging a trench or tearing up a road, to impede the progress of an enemy. Years ago, I remember when Mayor Daley decided to shut down Meig's Field in Chicago, but they still had planes that wanted to land on that airstrip out in Lake Michigan, so he actually excavated several large “x's” out there in the runway in the middle of the night. This is the word Paul uses here. Satan “cut into” Paul's path. Satan ***“hindered”*** him from staying in Thessalonica. And so, this separation was not Paul's idea. Paul wanted to stay. Paul wanted to continue teaching and preaching. Paul wanted to build up the church, and yet, as we know from Acts 17, Satan prevented it. Satan did everything possible to ***“hinder”*** the progress of the gospel.

Well, how does Satan ***“hinder”***? Like he did in Thessalonica, he tries to separate us. He tries to take us away from our Christian family. He tries to disrupt Christian fellowship. He tries to keep us away from worship. And we see it right here in 1 Thessalonians 2. If you have your own Bible open, notice up in verse 2 he refers to the government interference that happened back in Philippi. And then, in verse 14, he refers to suffering at the hands of our own countrymen (our own people, society at large). We think back to what happened in Acts 17, and we have some of the Jewish leaders working through the mob. They round up ***“some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.”*** They then harass Jason (a believer) and demand that he put up some kind of pledge. Jason, then, is on the hook for this. In a sense, Jason posts bail, with the promise that Paul will leave without causing any more trouble.

And so, instead of staying three years like he did in Ephesus or eighteen months like he did in Corinth, Satan makes sure that Paul is ***“taken away”*** after only three weeks. Satan is doing everything in his power to ***“hinder”*** the growth of the early church. Satan wants these people separated from Paul.

In the same way, it's probably safe to say that Satan also wants us separated. Satan wants us on our own. He wants us cut off from our Christian family. And we do know from Scripture that he will do everything in his power to accomplish that mission. He will use the government, he will use the community at large, and he will even use those who are closest to us. But this is the first big idea from this passage: We have a painful separation.

II. And yet, as we go back to the text, we find that Paul does not live his life with a sense of regret or remorse – he doesn't dwell on the past, he doesn't focus on the separation – but he looks to the FUTURE – HE LOOKS FORWARD TO A JOYFUL REUNION at some point.

In Paul's mind, the best was yet to come. At the moment, Paul is separated from his Christian family, but in his mind, the best is yet to come. He wants to see these people face to face, but in the meantime, Paul looks forward to the coming of Jesus. He looks forward to seeing these people being his hope, his joy, his crown of exultation. The word "***crown***" refers to the wreath awarded to those who won in the races back then. Paul, then, is looking to the finish line. And so, he is looking to the end. In the meantime, he is with them not in person, but in spirit, and he looks forward to seeing them with the Lord, at his coming. They are his glory and joy. He's not dwelling on the past, but he is eager for the future.

"Often I'm hindered on my way," as we sometimes sing, "burdened so heavy I almost fall. Then I hear Jesus sweetly say, 'Heaven will surely be worth it all.'" Although he is hindered by Satan, Paul isn't focusing on that, but he is looking forward to what is coming. He wants to see these people face to face, but if that doesn't happen, Paul is hoping for what comes next.

Right now, I know that many of our members are still feeling a bit cut off. Some of you are feeling somewhat "***hindered.***" But Paul's encouragement here is: Don't lose hope, but instead, look forward to what comes next. And in the meantime, we have options. Most of us are able to make a call. Yes, we have been separated. We've been "orphaned" from our Christian family, but we have the ability to reach out in other ways. Sit down with the church directory and pick out three random names to call this week. And then do it. Make a call, send a text, do a drive-by.

Yesterday I was thinking about some of the "***one another***" passages in scripture, and I realized: We don't even need to be together in worship to do most of those. We are to "***love one another***" (John 13:34). Do we need to be together here in this building to "love one another"? Absolutely not! In the same way, we are to "***be devoted to one another***" (Romans 12:10), we are to "***live in harmony with one another***" (Romans 12:16), we are to "***accept one another***" (Romans 15:7), we are to "***serve one another***" (Galatians 5:13), we are to "***bear with one another***" (Ephesians 4:2), we are to "***encourage one another***" (1 Thessalonians 5:11), we are to "***live in harmony with one another***" (1 Peter 3:8), and we are to "***show hospitality to one another***" (1 Peter 4:9). As I understand it, these are all things we can do outside our Lord's day worship assemblies. Yes, it is good to be together, but these are things we can do right now, even from home. Some of these we can even do by writing a letter.

And speaking of writing a letter, do we realize that if Paul had not been separated, if he had not been hindered by Satan in this way, we probably wouldn't have the book of 1 Thessalonians? If Paul had stayed in Thessalonica for three years, we wouldn't have this letter right now! Paul, then, does not get discouraged, but he lives his life in hope, looking to the future. Over the past 2,000 years, literally millions upon millions of people have been encouraged by what we now know as the book of 1 Thessalonians.

Conclusion:

So, as we wrap it up, we see the apostle Paul 1.) Hindered by Satan as he is torn away from his Christian family, and yet 2.) He is not discouraged, because he anticipates a joyful reunion, and in the meantime, he connects with these people through this letter. He finds a way to encourage, even without meeting together face to face.

In just a moment, John/Aaron will lead us in the prayers for the bread and the fruit of the vine, and then we will close with a song.

Let's close today's lesson with a prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you today for being the one and the only great and awesome God. We know that Satan is a terrible adversary, but when he blocks our way, we also know that you are able to find a way for us. We are thankful for our Christian family. It's frustrating to be separated like this, but we look forward to the time when we can be together again, both in this life and in the next.

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for giving us a way to come back to you. Thank you for the promise of a life to come.

We come to you this morning in the name of your Son, Jesus. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com