

A FATHER'S JOY

by Ray C. Stedman

Real father love is in short supply in our world today. What we see is a frightening increase of child abuse, of fathers actually attacking their own children. A simple little song, "Dear Mister Jesus," the tale of a child who remembers the abuse she suffered at her father's hand, is being played on radio stations all over the country. Some time ago I read the sad story of a four-year-old boy who was beaten to death by his stepfather because he boy had wet his pants. When his body was dug up, a tiny cross was found clutched in his hand. It tears one's heart to think of fathers treating their children in that way, but it points up the need we have today for father and mother love.

The passage from First Thessalonians to which we now come is a great testimony to a father's love. The church, after all, is a family, and God is our great Father.

No aspect of Christian faith warms my heart more than knowing that God is my Father. I lost my father when I was only ten years old, and I have never known a father other than the Fatherhood of God. But what a tremendous encouragement it has been to me to know that I have a Father who loves me.

On one occasion when Jesus was informed that his mother and brothers were waiting for him, he said of those he was teaching, "These are my mother and father and brother" {cf, Matt 12:47-49, Mark 3:32-35}, thereby indicating that a spiritual tie is as rich and deep as a physical tie -- and oftentimes more so.

In Verse 17 of Chapter 2, the apostle pours out his father's heart of concern for these new Christians whom he had left in Thessalonica.

But since we were bereft of you, brethren, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face; because we wanted to come to you -- I, Paul, again and again -- but Satan hindered us. 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. {1 Th 2:17-20 RSV}

I wonder where the idea ever arose that Paul was stern and cold? You cannot read this letter without sensing the warmth of his heart and the depth of his love. At the time he wrote this letter, he was ministering alone in the city of Corinth. He was feeling the loneliness of that moment. Being far away from loved ones is a very unpleasant experience. Forgetting the danger that had driven him from Thessalonica, and the cruelty he had experienced there, he longed to be with them again. He even tried to go to see them again but was prevented by Satanic interference.

Already in this chapter we have seen three sources of opposition to the apostle:

- Opposition from the state (Verse 2);
- Opposition from society (Verse 14); and here,
- Opposition from Satan.

While this might look like three enemies, it is really only one. Other Scriptures indicate that the state and society are often the channels of the devil's attempts to hinder the spread of the good Word of God. This is what Paul was encountering here.

Have you ever experienced a frustrating time in your own life when again and again you tried to do something you knew was right and found it hard going? You met opposition and hindrance, perhaps even from your own family. That is Satanic hindrance, the psychological manipulation of minds to arouse opposition and plant obstacles in your path.

When my wife and I were in Northern Ireland a couple of summers ago, we spent some time in a wonderful church there. The young pastor and his wife were beginning to teach Body Life and Spiritual

Warfare. Where once it had been a lifeless church, now it was alive and growing, filled with young people and young couples. But while we were there, we learned that the best friend of the pastor and his wife had suddenly turned against them. He began to spread lies and slanders about them throughout the congregation, upsetting the whole church. It was for them a terrible time of pain and suffering. We have learned since that God has cleared it all up. The pastor has been vindicated and this whole thing has been exposed. But what caused it? It was Satanic opposition, the devil with his clever ability to work through people to stir things up.

The Bible is the only book that explains the persistence and malevolence of evil. Why do we struggle so in this life? What are we up against? Jesus told us that it is the devil. "He is a liar and a murderer" {John 8:44}, said the Lord. He deceives and he kills. The Satanic mind is responsible for the murderous violence, the widespread deceit and false philosophies that we are confronted with today. Paul himself tells us, "We do not wrestle with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness," {cf, Eph 6:12}. No other book tells you that it is not people who are your problem, but rather the spiritual forces of evil that prevail in the world.

Paul suggests in his writings there are three things we need to know about Satanic opposition:

First, and perhaps most important, it is permitted by God. The book of Job says that Satan had to come before God and get permission from him to afflict Job's body. This man lost everything -- his family, home and wealth; and he suffered terribly from boils which covered his whole body. But God had allowed it. The end of the book reveals what was accomplished by that suffering, but it was all hidden for the moment from Job's eyes. So, too, it is hidden from our eyes. But the Bible reveals there is a malevolent power of evil at work. There are demonic beings, master manipulators, that are able to lead people about, putting thoughts in their minds and planting obstacles in the path of the gospel.

God permits this for this reason: these things are used by him. That is the second fact we must remember. Opposition is his method of training. Affliction, suffering, pain and heartache are often God's way of getting our attention. Many of you have gone through that. You paid little attention to him until you suffered a time of great heartache. Then you began to hear what he was saying to you. God uses opposition to train us, and not only that, to give us an opportunity to overcome trouble, to rise above it.

The third thing, as it is made clear in this passage, is, it underscores the value of these believers. Paul writes in Verse 19, "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." Whatever else those words may mean, they are saying that Paul considered the spiritual maturing of these believers in Thessalonica and other places his most important work. He is saying, "I have invested my life in you and your growth into mature, whole people. This is the most important thing in the world. When the Lord Jesus comes, I will glow with pride that you have achieved the changes in your life that I so long to see brought about."

My wife and I read every morning a fine devotional book which has been assembled from the writings of Dr. J. I. Packer. The other day he quoted a psychologist on the six marks of maturity. Americans love to take self-examinations, so here is one for you on what it means to be grown up, to be whole, balanced, sane and able to cope with life:

1. The first mark of maturity is the ability to deal constructively with reality, to face facts, to not cover up reality or call it something else, but to deal with it as it is. Mature people do not kid themselves.
2. The second mark is, adapting quickly to change. We all experience change, whether it be physical, at work, in the family, or whatever. I am amazed at how much some of you have changed through the years while I remain exactly the same! Immature people resist change. It makes them nervous. But the mark of maturity is to adapt to change because change is inevitable.
3. The third mark is freedom from the symptoms of tension and anxiety. The worried look, the frown, the ulcers, the palpitations of the heart -- all come because you are upset, anxious and worried. Maturing means you have begun to see that God is in control of this world. He is working out purposes that you do not always understand, but you accept it. He will take you through the deep water, not drown you in it. Maturity means you are learning to trust.
4. Fourth, it means to be satisfied more with giving than receiving. Some of you have recently learned that the joy of Christmas is not getting presents but giving them. To see the joy in someone else's

face when they get something they either need or want. That is a sign you are growing up. You are discovering the true values of life.

5. The fifth mark is, to relate to others with consistency, helpfulness and mutual satisfaction. Maturity is learning to get along with other people, to be a help, not a hindrance, to contribute to the solution and not to be always a part of the problem.
6. Finally, maturity is sublimating and redirecting anger to constructive ends. Maturity is the ability to use the adrenaline that anger creates, not to lose your temper and add to the problem, but to correct a situation or to contribute to changing the nature of the difficulty. That is maturing, and that is what the apostle longed for in these believers in Thessalonica.

As this passage makes clear, his concern involved him also in a very deep commitment.

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's servant in the gospel of Christ, to establish you in your faith and to exhort you, that no one be moved by these afflictions. You yourselves know that this is to be our lot. For when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction; just as it has come to pass, and as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you [there is that Satanic interference again] and that our labor would be in vain. {1 Th 3:1-5 RSV}

Twice in this section the apostle says there came a time in Athens when he "could bear it no longer." That does not mean that he was anxious and fearful. Rather, he had not heard from them for so long that he felt he must take some action to find out what was going on in Thessalonica. To his own personal deprivation, he decided to send Timothy to them while he remained alone in Athens and then went on to Corinth.

In 1960 I spent the summer in the Orient. In company with Dr. Dick Hillis I was scheduled to speak to six hundred Chinese pastors on the island of Taiwan. This was a difficult assignment as my messages were to be interpreted into two different languages, Mandarin and Taiwanese. It is hard enough speaking through one "interrupter," but with two, by the time one sentence has been interpreted you have forgotten what you just said. But I was comforted by the fact that Dick Hillis, a veteran missionary, was with me. The day before I was due to speak, however, he got a telegram saying that his mother was ill in California and he had to return home. I have never forgotten the depression and loneliness that came over me. I am sure that is how Paul must have felt as he was left alone in Corinth, that cultured, degraded center of Roman life.

He had to face the city by himself, but he was willing to do it in order that these Thessalonian believers might grow in their faith. So he sent Timothy to them.

He had three things in mind, he tells us:

First, "to establish them in faith," i.e. to teach them the great realities their faith rested upon: the coming of Jesus, his life and ministry, his death upon the cross, his resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and thus the availability to them of a new resource in God that the world could not know anything about. The Thessalonians needed to be established in that truth, and that was Timothy's mission.

Secondly, they needed to be exhorted to steadiness, to not panic when things got tough. They should never forget that suffering and affliction could be surmounted. They had a resource to lean upon which they did not have before, so they did not have to fear. God would take them through everything and use it for their benefit.

Paul had already laid the foundation for this when he was with them. He had told them that the human race was contaminated with a terrible pollution that the Bible calls sin. As you know, the great plague of our day is AIDS, which is an acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. I think that sin, too, is an acronym. It stands for Self-Inflicted Neurosis. Sin is a problem that arises from within. That is what Jesus said: "Out of the heart proceed murders, adultery, fornication, lying, etc.," {Matt 15:19}. Sin is an internal contamination which we inherited. And the bad news that comes with that is, "the wages of sin is death" {Rom 6:23a}, as Paul wrote in Romans. Pain, suffering, anguish and alienation, all forms of death; that is the bad news. But with it always comes good news: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is

eternal life through Jesus Christ his Son," {Rom 6:23 KJV}. We cannot evade the painful results of our sinful choices, but we can find love, joy, and peace even while we are working through our just desserts. There is a simple chorus that says it well.

Something beautiful,
something good,
All my confusion
He understood.
All I had to offer Him was
brokenness and strife,
But he made something beautiful
of my life.

That is the good news! That is what Paul had taught the Thessalonians, and what Timothy needed to remind them of, so they would remain steadfast when afflictions struck.

The third reason Paul sent Timothy to them was that he himself needed to know what was going on. Timothy would bring him back word, and now he had returned with such a good report that the apostle is filled with joy, as he reports in Verse 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 -- for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith; for now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we render to God for you, for all the joy which we feel for your sake before our God, {1 Th 3:6-9 RSV}

To Paul's great relief, his work had not been in vain. It stood solid and sure. Their faith was intact; their love was evident; and, best of all, their trust in God was secure. They held cherished memories of the apostle and longed to see him. He is filled with thankfulness and joy at this good news. That is always the effect upon a father's heart when he receives good reports of his children in the faith.

It is how the Apostle John felt, as he tells us in his third letter: "I have no greater joy than this, than to hear that my children are walking in the truth," {cf, 3 Jn 1:4}.

I can testify to the truth of that.

My wife and I have been observing a young man, near and dear to us who is going through a possible disintegration of his marriage. It is a painful time for him. His home is broken, his children have been taken away, but that very suffering has brought him to an awareness of his own contribution to this problem. He is seeing himself in a new light and is becoming aware of his mistakes. Though our hearts ache for him, we are also filled with joy because we see that he has found a new plateau of relationship with God. In the midst of his agony he is being filled with joy. He has even told us he is glad this has happened because it has brought him to his senses, and he has discovered the joy of knowing God.

That is what Paul is feeling as Timothy reports on the trials and testings of the Thessalonians.

The apostle closes this section with a wonderful revelation of how to pray about situations like this. He states that he has been,

... praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. {1 Th 3:10-13 RSV}

Do you ever wonder what to pray for when you, your family or your friends are going through deep struggles and sorrow? There is a verse in Romans 8 that reminds us that at times we do not know what to

pray for as we ought but the Spirit helps us! That is God's promise to us. Here we have a good example of how the Spirit helped the apostle to pray for exactly what these people needed.

There are three things about prayer in these verses we may note:

1. First, he prayed "earnestly." He did not get down beside the bed at night and say, "Bless my friends in Thessalonica."

Many people pray like the man who said, "Bless me and my wife, our son John and his wife; us four and no more."

But Paul prays earnestly. He thinks about what these people are going through, sets the problem before God, and reminds him of his promises. He takes time to think deeply on their needs.

2. And he prays frequently -- "night and day," he says. Morning and evening, while he is working on his tents, whatever he is doing, his lips are moving in prayer because his heart is concerned for them. They are seldom out of his thoughts and whenever he thinks of them he prays.

3. Finally, he prays specifically. He has some very definite things to ask for, five of them actually, which he lists:

- First, that he might see them face to face." He wanted to get back to Thessalonica to have again the joy of seeing these dear friends; and so he laid that request before the Lord.
- Second, he wanted to minister further to them "that we may ... supply what is lacking in your faith" They needed to know a great deal more about the Christian view of the world and of life. When you understand how to look at the events of your life the way the Word of God does, then you are being realistic. All the confusion and illusion disappear and you start seeing things the way they really are. Paul wanted to open their eyes to further truths from God.
- Then he prayed to overcome Satanic hindrance: "Our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you." Are you finding it difficult to get to where you want to go? Here is how to pray: Pray that God will open a way for you, either physically or spiritually, to the goal you have in mind. Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened." That is how Paul prayed. He knocked on this closed door, asking that he might get back to Thessalonica. Later accounts reveal that God answered that prayer and he did return to these believers.
- Fourth, he prayed that their love might increase. According to the New Testament, this is the mark of a successful church. I meet frequently with pastors from all over the country and they often talk about success in the ministry and how to measure a successful church. But their measure of success is often that of numbers, or the size and ornateness of the church building. There are some famous church buildings in this country that are advertised all over the land, and people travel far just to see them. But in the New Testament success is gauged by how much people learn to love each other, forgive one another, listen to one another, support and pray for one another and reach out to those in need around them. That is what Paul prayed for the Thessalonians.
- Finally, he prays that they might continue to live righteously until the Lord comes: "that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." The coming of Jesus is no further away from you and I than it was for these believers in Thessalonica since it is no further away than the end of your life. He comes for us, if we know him, when we die. Paul is therefore praying that the rest of their lives might be marked by "unblamable" living. That does not mean sinless, as we have already seen. Unblamable means they were dealing with what was wrong, not covering it up or pretending it was not there. They dealt with it in their own hearts with the spiritual resources that God provides, and were thus enabled to turn from evil and walk closer and closer with God.

Paul knew that Jesus Christ will some day enter into this world of time again. The Scripture anticipates it. We are perhaps nearing it right now. It could occur before the end of this century. It is no further away than our own personal death, but it may be even sooner than that. Paul hopes that all believers will live in the expectation that the Lord's coming will find us living the way we ought to live.

I have observed that most Christians pray that God will prevent things from happening, whether it be injury, death, suffering or heartache. Unfortunately, there are people who teach us that we have a right to be kept from all trouble. But the New Testament shows us that afflictions are needed in our lives. God does sometimes grant our requests and removes problems -- and it is not wrong to pray for this if we also understand that he has perfect freedom to say "No" -- but what he tells us to pray for is not that these things be prevented, but that they be used in our lives.

In the week before Jesus was crucified he said to Peter, his most troublesome apostle (the one who suffered most from hoof-in-mouth disease), "Peter, Satan has desired to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you," {cf, Luke 22:31-32a RSV}. I have always been interested to see what it was he prayed for. He did not pray, "Do not let it happen. Stop Satan from getting hold of him." What he said, rather, was, "I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail," {cf, Luke 22:32a RSV}. That was uttered before that tragic night when Peter denied his Lord. That denial was Satan sifting him, but Jesus had prayed, "Father, though Peter must go through anguish and heartache, I pray that when it happens, his faith will hold firm, that you will take him through, and use it for good in his life."

As we come to the close of the year this is what our prayers ought to reflect. Anything can happen in this coming year -- heartache, tragedy, joy, glory. But whatever happens, let us pray that it will deepen our faith, increase our love, open our blinded eyes to truth and reality, and result in spiritual stability in this troubled, rootless world in which we live.

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