

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5. From this text, we are going to learn an important principle relating to affliction.

The apostle Paul uses the word “affliction” twice in our text. The original Greek word he uses is θλίψις. Literally, it describes a pressure or a pressing together. When it is used figuratively, as it is in our text, it describes suffering brought on by outward circumstances.¹ It is trouble that inflicts distress or oppression or tribulation.²

You already know what affliction feels like. Afflictions are a big part of life.

What you may not know is how afflictions can be used by God and by Satan for entirely different purposes. For any given affliction, both God and Satan may be at work at the very same time with opposing goals.

Here’s □ the big idea I draw from our text: Through affliction, God tests us for our good, while Satan tempts us for our ruin.

Let me explain this before working through our text.

According to the □ first part of the big idea, God uses afflictions to test us. God’s goal for the testing is our good—to refine us, to complete us,

¹ Friberg.

² Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); hereinafter referred to as BDAG.

to make us more like Christ. And to the extent that we remain faithful through the affliction, allowing God to do his refining work, we will be rewarded when Christ returns.

James □ 1:2-4 provides an example of God testing or trying his people. It says,

ESV James 1:2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

According to James, God uses various trials or afflictions to test our faith. This testing produces steadfastness or endurance or perseverance. Afflictions are a necessary part of the process of becoming complete in Christ or Christlike. Afflictions are a normal part of Christian growth.

And this maturation is not only beneficial for this life, but also for all eternity. When Christ returns, we believers will appear before him to be evaluated and rewarded according to our faithfulness on earth. In □ Revelation 22:12, the Lord says,

NAU Revelation 22:12 “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.”

The “reward” here is not eternal salvation because eternal salvation is a free gift received through faith. In contrast, the reward is given according to works that have been done. The reward is earned. Scripture variously describes our reward with terms like hope and joy and glory and crown. These are enjoyed forever. That is why Paul can say in Romans 8:18,

ESV Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Handling suffering faithfully will be worth it.

But there is a second part to our □ big idea I draw from our text. Yes, through affliction, God does indeed test us for our good. But at the same time, Satan tempts us for our ruin.

Through affliction, Satan tempts us to believe that God is not good—that a good God would never allow such senseless suffering—that God has done us wrong—that God is holding out on us and cannot be trusted and should not be followed.

Or Satan may pursue another angle, tempting us to believe that our affliction is evidence that we ourselves are unforgiveable—that we are beyond the reach of God’s grace—that God has rejected us. So, why bother following a God who doesn’t even want us?

Through affliction, Satan is out to move us away from faithfulness to disillusionment and the deconstruction of our faith, and ultimately, to ruin.

Thankfully, the ruination of believers cannot involve the loss of our eternal salvation. Once we are adopted into God’s forever family through faith, we cannot be unadopted no matter how badly we may rebel against our heavenly Father or try to disown him.

But our ruin certainly can involve the loss of our faith, the loss of our witness, the loss of our joy, and the loss of our reward such that we find ourselves empty-handed and even ashamed before Christ when he comes.

In our text, Paul expresses his loving concern for the new believers in Thessalonica who are experiencing affliction, because he knows Satan is working through the affliction to try to ruin them. Paul begins in verses □ 17 and 18, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:17 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.

The phrase □ “torn away” testifies to the affliction they had been experiencing. You may recall that Paul and his ministry partners came under intense opposition after starting the church in Thessalonica. The affliction was so intense that Paul and his partners were run out of town. The phrase “torn away” comes from a Greek word that was used to describe parents torn away from their children.³ Indeed, Paul had become a spiritual father in leading the Thessalonians to new birth through faith in Christ.

Having been torn away, Paul knows that his spiritual children back in Thessalonica are now left to face much the same affliction by themselves. And he is concerned for their well-being, especially their spiritual well-being. He does not want them to become disillusioned by their affliction.

He explains that he has wanted and tried to return to see his children face to face to establish and exhort them to remain faithful in hardship.

³ Green, Gene L., *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), p 150.

But consider carefully who hinders Paul and his partners from doing it. Paul says, □ “Satan hindered us.”

This is sobering. The apostle Paul himself wants desperately to encourage his children and he tries repeatedly to do so. But Satan thwarts him. The original Greek word translated “hindered” is a military term used to describe an enemy destroying roads to prevent passage.⁴

Imagine how helpless and anxious Paul must have felt with his children now by themselves in a vulnerable position, and Satan prowling around like a roaring lion seeking to devour them.

This flies in the face of cocky modern preachers who like to make a show of ostensibly rebuking and ordering Satan around.

Are they better than Paul?

Why couldn't Paul prevail? Did God want the new believers to get creamed? Didn't Paul have enough faith?

It doesn't make any sense.

Until you consider that God is at work too, testing through affliction. God can and does use evil to bring about good.

For example, in the Old Testament, Joseph was horribly abused by his brothers, who sold him into slavery and then covered it up by deceiving their father into thinking Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

We can be confident that Satan was at work, tempting Joseph to give up on God because of his senseless and unjust affliction.

⁴ Ibid, 152.

But God used the abuse to bring Joseph into a position of leadership in Egypt from which he would save the people of Israel from starvation. After many years, when reunited with his abusive brothers, Joseph puts it all in perspective. As recorded in □ Genesis 50:20, he says,

ESV Genesis 50:20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Joseph insightfully puts his finger on the simultaneous working of evil and good in his affliction, with God ultimately redeeming evil for his good purposes.

Back in □ verses 19 and 20 of our text, Paul explains why he wanted to return and fortify his children against the wiles of Satan.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Here, Paul envisions himself and the Thessalonian believers appearing before the Lord at his coming.

By the way, every one of the five chapters in the letter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the Lord’s coming, hence the title of the series: “Living Like He’s Coming.”

Paul envisions the Lord’s coming because that is when all believers will appear before to the Lord Jesus Christ to be evaluated and rewarded according to our faithfulness on earth. That is our judgment day, when the Lord’s assessment of our faithfulness will be revealed.

For the believer, this judgment has nothing to do with gain or loss of eternal salvation. Through faith in Jesus we are already saved and that cannot be undone.

This judgment has to do with gain or loss of reward in heaven. Paul alludes to this in □ 2 Corinthians 5:10, where he says,

ESV 2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

At the judgment seat of Christ, each one of us who are believers will receive from the Lord what we are due for what we have done on earth. To the extent that we have remained faithful through affliction, we will be rewarded. Paul affirms this in □ 2 Corinthians 4:17, saying,

ESV 2 Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

Ironically, the affliction itself becomes an opportunity for us to experience greater glory in heaven. In a strange way, a scar is a score when we remain faithful. Handling affliction faithfully is a highly leveraged investment in eternity because the affliction is momentary; the weight of glory is eternal. There's no comparison.

And Paul desperately wants the very best for his spiritual children in Thessalonica. Back in □ verse 19 of our text, Paul envisions himself as the proud spiritual father, rejoicing over the faithfulness of his children at the coming of Christ, such that his children become his hope, his joy, his crown of boasting at Christ's coming.

This is Paul's way of imploring the Thessalonians to faithfully see through affliction, living with Christ's coming in view.

Paul continues in □ 1 Thessalonians 3:1-3, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, 3 that no one be moved by these afflictions. . . .

Paul himself could not get back to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy to do what he could not: to establish and exhort the Thessalonians so that they would not be moved by the afflictions they were experiencing.

The original Greek word translated □ “moved” is σαίνω. In this case, it is to be carried away emotionally by circumstances so as to be deceived or deluded.⁵

Paul does not want them to be duped by Satan into thinking that their affliction is shockingly inconsistent with a good God or surprisingly contrary to what God’s children should experience. Paul reminds them in □ verses 3 and 4,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:3 . . . For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4 For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

Afflictions are not evidence that God is missing or that we are missing out on God’s best. Afflictions are a normal part of the Christian life.

⁵ Friberg.

This contradicts some modern theologies that promise prosperity and the absence of trouble as the fruits of faithfulness.⁶

Paul rounds out our text in □ verse 5, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

The □ “tempter” is Satan. Paul is afraid that, through affliction, Satan may successfully tempt the Thessalonians to become disillusioned, to deconstruct their faith, to walk away from the Lord, to conclude that living the Christian life is just not worth it.

If they were to succumb to such temptation, Paul says □ “our labor would be in vain.”

The original Greek word translated “labor” is κόπος. It carries not only the idea of work, but particularly the pain or affliction associated with the work.⁷ It seems that Paul has in view the affliction that he and the Thessalonians have already experienced in living out their faith.

If Satan succeeds in tempting the Thessalonians, then their affliction will have been “in vain.” “In vain” means empty, without content.⁸ In affliction, succumbing to Satan’s temptation leads to emptiness. Considering the context, the emptiness in view is at the coming of Christ.

⁶ Green, Gene L., *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), p. 162.

⁷ Vine, W. E., Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996); BDAG.

⁸ Kittel, Gerhard, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–).

Paul does not want his children to come up empty at the coming of Christ. He does not want them to experience the loss of reward.

We don't talk about this much in Christian circles, but coming up empty at the coming of Christ is a possibility.

Some of you may be wondering, "Well, how big of deal can this be? After all, everybody who has believed in Jesus is going to heaven."

Let's think about this.

Evidently, coming up empty at the coming of Christ is a big enough deal for Paul to agonize over it on behalf of his spiritual children.

Evidently, coming up empty at the coming of Christ is a big enough deal for Satan to try to make it happen for believers.

And Paul is not the only apostle to write about it. In 1 John 2:28, the apostle John writes,

ESV 1 John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

John presents a stark contrast for his own spiritual progeny he calls "little children." At the coming of Christ, he wants them to have confidence. The Greek work is *παρρησία*. It describes a joyful sense of freedom from fear.⁹ It is a fearless confidence, a cheerful courage, a settled assurance.¹⁰

⁹ Friberg.

¹⁰ Thayer.

At the coming of Christ, such confidence will be enjoyed by those believers who abide in Christ; that is, those who remain faithful, those who stay close, those who keep walking with the Lord, even through affliction.

But for those believers who do not abide, those who become disillusioned by things like affliction, those who allow themselves to be duped into deconstructing their faith, those who walk away from the Lord, they will “shrink away from him in shame at his coming.”

It’s a sobering thought, but it makes perfect sense. That’s why Paul is so concerned for his spiritual children in our text.

Let’s say that I experience affliction, and as a result, I become disillusioned and deconstruct my faith. I walk away from the Lord. I am so bitter that I renounce my faith and even mock Christianity. And let’s say, as a fallen spiritual leader, I take a lot of people down with me.

When the Lord returns, how would I feel?

Would I not shrink away from him in shame at his coming?

What would the Lord say to me as I stand before him? Would he say, “Well done my good and faithful servant?”

I think not. Hearing “well done” is not some kind of participation award that everybody gets, regardless.

In that moment, I would feel ruined. I would experience loss of reward. This is the “in-vain” emptiness Paul is warning against.

Would I go to hell? No. I have been saved once and for all.

Would I be ashamed forever? I think not. Scripture tells us that the Lord will wipe away tears and suffering in heaven (Revelation 21:4). So somehow my shame is confined to judgment seat of Christ.¹¹ And the tears wiped away may include my tears of shame.

Will heaven still be good for me? Yes. It will be glorious. But not as glorious as it could have been.

Thankfully, Paul's fears relating to the Thessalonians are not realized. Timothy reports back that they are standing fast in the Lord through affliction. As such, at the prospect of Christ's coming, they have every reason to experience a joyful sense of freedom, a fearless confidence, a cheerful courage, and a settled assurance.

It's what every parent wants for their children.

And it brings us back to the □ big idea that we need to keep in mind: Through affliction, God tests us for our good, while Satan tempts us for our ruin.

Yesterday, I officiated the memorial service for Linda Gregerson. Linda and her husband Tom attended Moon Valley for some 15 years.

Linda experienced affliction. She had reasons to be disillusioned and walk away from God.

In 2004, Linda's husband, Tom started doing things that seemed odd or out of character. It took a long time to figure out what was wrong, but in 2008, he was diagnosed with Frontotemporal Degeneration, a

¹¹ Randy Alcorn, "Do You Think Loss of Rewards in Heaven Will Be Permanent?" at <https://www.epm.org/resources/2014/Jun/18/do-you-think-loss-rewards-heaven-will-be-permanent/>.

neurological disease similar to Alzheimer's that gradually affects behavior, personality, language, and motor skills. Later on, Tom also contracted ALS. So, for the better part of 7 years, until Tom's passing in 2011, Linda had her hands full.

She had been losing Tom mentally for some years before finally losing him physically at the age of 61. And yet, during the entire time, Linda was a patient, faithful, sacrificial caregiver.

Shortly after Tom's passing, I sat down to talk with Linda. She was not bitter about losing Tom in such a painful way. She explained that God had been involved in every detail of her life—so much so that she never felt alone. She trusted God to provide.

Later on, Linda was saddled with being the guardian of two of her very young great grandchildren—a daunting assignment to say the least. Linda was undeterred by the challenge. She loved and served them sacrificially.

But before these great grandchildren were old enough to live on their own, Linda got cancer that ravaged her body. Linda had been a healthy, vivacious, avid hiker. When I saw her last, she was bedridden and barely recognizable. She was weak and puffy. But she recognized me and was able to speak. I held her hand and asked her if she was afraid.

She said, "No. God can do whatever he wants with me. I'm good with it. I am just so grateful."

Linda shows us the way to handle affliction.

Let's pray.

Lord, in the affliction we face, help us to remain faithful to you, recognizing that you test us for our good, while Satan tempts us for our ruin. Amen.