

## INTRODUCTION

**TEXT:** <sup>17</sup> 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, <sup>18</sup> because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> For you are our glory and joy.

- NEW TO COAH LUNCHEON – look forward to meeting you.
- Well, it's the week after Easter and it can feel a bit like going back to work the day after the Marathon. So much excitement, so much joy, and fun but now its just back to normal life, but that is missing the point of Easter. I wrote this in the CoaH newsletter this week but Easter is a day but the resurrection is a lifestyle.
- He didn't rise from the grave so we could have a once a feast and celebration in his name. NO! He rose to bring life. To walk with us. To fill our Mondays and our midweeks, our gatherings and our grind, our celebrations *and* our struggles. AMEN? Is everyone here OK to just tuck away the resurrection until next year or do we want "the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead to live in us NOW?"
- That was my takeaway from Easter. It was great! And There is much to celebrate. We had a record attendance of over 400 people. And most people got here early!!! That was an Easter miracle!!! But seriously, it was an amazing day. Across the City on a Hill Network, almost 900 people attended Easter gatherings! Across the city we are hearing many newer churches like ours hit their record attendance last Sunday. And one friend's church up in Medford had over 100 first time guests!
- Many churches had baptisms. We couldn't coordinate any for last Sunday but have 7-8 new Christians who will be baptized in the next month or so and there are others exploring!
- God is up to something. Let's keep pressing into seeking the resurrected Jesus and his kingdom! I heard a pastor say, "If the tomb is empty, anything is possible." What is God calling you to pray and believe him for today?
- Before we dive into today's passage, let's just catch our breath and remember where we've been.
- This is Paul's letter to the young church in Thessalonica — a church he helped plant but had to leave in a hurry because of persecution.
- We've seen that the gospel isn't just good news for your private life; it's the power that can change whole cities, starting with people like us. When Paul, Silas, and Timothy showed up, they didn't bring a life hack or a TED Talk — they brought the explosive news that Jesus is King, and it turned the city upside down.
- When the gospel lands, it confronts idols, calls people into a whole new life, and gives you a new identity: loved, chosen, called. We also saw that the gospel isn't something you keep — it's something you steward. Paul said: Speak boldly, because you want to please God. Speak faithfully, because you've been entrusted. Speak lovingly, because people matter.
- Today — Paul pulls back the curtain even more. We get a glimpse of his heart for these people. What we see isn't cold professionalism or "Sunday-only" relationships. We see something deeper: a gospel culture — a church family knit together by gospel love.

**BIG IDEA:** A gospel culture is not just built by preaching the gospel but by embodying the gospel — loving like family because Jesus first loved us.

- At City on a Hill, we don't just believe the gospel — we want to *live* it. We want to be a family where people learn to love and be loved, shaped by what we call Gospel Culture.
- The gospel isn't just what we teach — it's the good news of Jesus that sets us free. And when that good news really sinks in, it doesn't just change our theology — it changes the way we treat each other. Gospel truth creates gospel culture in a church.

•ILL - Ray Ortlund, "[Gospel culture is]...the shared experience of grace for the undeserving: the corporate incarnation of the biblical message in the relationships, vibe, feel, tone, values, priorities, aroma, honesty, freedom, gentleness, humility, cheerfulness – indeed, the total human reality of a church defined and sweetened by the gospel."

•We are going to see what this culture looks like in the Thessalonians church in 3 ways: A Gospel Culture...

- Loves Deeply, Not Casually
- Fights Spiritual Battles, not physical ones
- Celebrates People, Not Performance

### 1. A Gospel Culture Loves Deeply, Not Casually (v.17)

•v.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."

•Paul uses a ton of familial language in chapter 2. Back in verse 7 - gentle like a nursing mother. Vv. 11-12 - like a father who exhorted and encouraged them.

•And here, he calls them "brothers" or in context, it can be understood as "brothers and sisters".

Why use this type of language? Paul had a vested interest in them. He led them to faith in the same God, who gave them a Father. Paul told the Galatians that they "received adoption as sons, as heirs".

•ILL - John Stott, "He felt and acted toward them as if they were his own children, and indeed they were as he introduced them to Christ."

•So when Paul described having to leave the Thessalonians abruptly, he doesn't say, "We moved on." He says, "We were torn away." The word he uses literally means "orphaned."

•There are actually two ways you can read that. The way that probably makes the most sense to us is a child losing their parents — and that's heartbreaking enough. We get that.

•But in the ancient world, it could also go the other way. Parents could be "orphaned" — not by losing *their* parents, but by losing *their* child. Paul is saying, "When we had to leave you, it didn't feel like adults moving on. It felt like parents losing their kids. It felt like something was ripped out of our hearts." Paul's heart was broken by being pulled away from his brothers and sisters in Christ.

•In fact, he says vv.17-18a we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you

•Paul sounds like a college freshman trying to fill a word count for an essay. He could have just said, "I tried to get back to you." But he uses more flowery language. WHY? Because when you love someone and you can't get to them, you don't say that as briefly as possible. Your words flow from your heart.

•v.18b I, Paul, again and again. Like the persistence of a 5 year old asking for chicken nuggets for dinner.

•Paul isn't content with preaching truth at a distance to the Thessalonians. He longs to be *with* these people. Because the gospel doesn't just produce better sermons. It produces better relationships. It produces gospel-culture marked by a deep and profound love.

- APP - Are you building "Sunday-only" acquaintances or "everyday" gospel friendships? In a gospel culture, you don't just say "I'll pray for you" — you actually pray, actually show up, actually carry each other's burdens. You cast the cost aside and you pick up each others burdens.
- A few weeks back we had a prayer time where we confessed our sin out loud and then I asked you to then confess your sin to the person next to you. Best I can tell, many of you actually did that. I had someone share with me recently that they didn't even know the person next to them but they did it.
- LISTEN – this is gospel culture... a space where we can do something as personal as confess our sin because the love of Christ is operating here and we can know that we can share what we are struggling with and the person next to us isn't going to "gasp" and shake their heads at our sin.

•"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)  
That's gospel culture. It **Loves Deeply, Not Casually**

## 2. A Gospel Culture Fights Spiritual Battles, Not Physical Ones (vv.18)

- v.18 "Because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but **Satan hindered us.**"
- Paul doesn't say, "Well, it got hard, so I guess God closed the door." He says, "We fought and prayed and longed and tried again and again—but spiritual warfare was real."
- The only thing that kept Paul from getting back to them wasn't a scheduling conflict. It wasn't bad weather. It was straight-up demonic opposition.  
Every time Paul tried to make a move, he was blocked.

Now, how exactly did Satan hinder Paul?

Honestly — *we don't know*. The text doesn't tell us. And maybe that's the point. Sometimes the enemy's work is obvious, and sometimes it's frustratingly behind the scenes.

- And Paul isn't blaming Satan for circumstances. The devil isn't behind everything but that doesn't mean he isn't behind anything.

•Eph 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the **spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**

- Do you hear what Paul is saying here? There is *very real* opposition against your walk with Christ — against our church, our mission to make Jesus known.
- It's not just physical — though it shows up in circumstances, temptations, conflict, and spiritual attack. Building a gospel culture means expecting opposition and recognizing it for what it is: warfare from an enemy who hates the gospel taking root in a community.
- Simply put: if we are serious about not just believing the gospel but *living it* together, we will experience spiritual warfare. You are at war. We are at war.
- Now, some Christians historically have refused to pick up weapons in human wars — even in something as clear as the fight against Hitler in World War II. But passivity *is not an option* in the Christian life. You might not like the language of battles and soldiers — but the New Testament doesn't flinch.
- Spiritual forces are real. They're not just coming after missionaries overseas. They're coming for *you* and *me*. We have friends — missionaries we support — who are right now being expelled from a Muslim-majority country after two decades of faithful ministry. They're leaving behind new believers who risked everything to follow Jesus. The battle is real there — and it's real here.
- We see that and think, "Yep! That's Satan hindering the gospel." What if the reason we don't see it here is not because it isn't present but because we're spiritually complacent/desensitized
- ILL – I shared a few weeks ago about a period of spiritual renewal God has had me in. It has been a sweet time. I felt a closeness with Christ and a greater sensitivity to the Spirit. But about a

week after I got home from the church planting conference I went to, something happened. I honestly can't remember what it was. It wasn't a huge thing or I would remember but it was evil and I sensed it. And I felt the Spirit say to me, "You didn't think you were going to push on Satan's kingdom, and he wasn't going to push back?"

- We don't fight with the weapons of this world. We move forward in the resurrecting power of Jesus — sharing the gospel, loving enemies, serving the marginalized, and living out a gospel culture.
- And Satan hates all of it — so he fights. Sometimes directly — through suffering, temptation, and opposition. But more often, he fights indirectly — by numbing us. Good things. Endless scrolling. Netflix. The news cycle. We get consumed with what presidents, billionaires, and influencers are doing — but we can't seem to find time to pray.
- And that's just as much satanic opposition. It doesn't feel evil. But the effect is the same: We're distracted from God. We're distracted from the gospel. We're distracted from the most powerful weapon we've been given — prayer.
- ILL – I preached at CoaH FH a few weeks ago. It was the same day that I shared about what God is doing in my life and invited everyone to confess. One of the things I confessed was that at that point I couldn't recall a time in recent memory when I was so burdened for those who are far from Christ that I shed a tear or lost sleep or missed a meal to pour out my heart to God for. Pastor Steven shared the next Sunday that a CG leader named Katie texted him that her group were deeply impacted and they decided to write down names of lost friends and fast and pray weekly as a CG for these people to come to know Jesus.
- This is the fruit of a gospel culture... when Jesus' family is broken-hearted by the things that break Jesus' heart. When Jesus' family pray like he prayed. Ask the Father to move like he does.
- A gospel culture recognizes the real spiritual battle. It sees the real struggle and isn't satisfied with complacency and comfort while others are lost in darkness and suffering. Gospel culture fights spiritual battles, not physical ones.
- Has Satan been hindering you and maybe you just haven't been acknowledging it? You can today. **A Gospel Culture Fights Spiritual Battles, Not Physical Ones**

### **3. A Gospel Culture Celebrates People, Not Performance (vv.19-20)**

- What's Paul's trophy? What's his success story? Maybe it is his missionary journeys? Maybe it is the fact that he planted dozens of churches, helped 1000's of people come to faith in Jesus, and raised up countless leaders to be local pastors and deacons and missionaries?
- I mean Paul has been rightfully called "the greatest missionary in the history of the church." And that would be an incredible trophy to hold up, right?
- **vv.19-20 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> For you are our glory and joy.**
- When Paul pictures meeting Jesus face to face, he's not handing Jesus a list of accomplishments. He's pointing to people he loved, disciplined, prayed for, wept over. In a gospel culture, people are the prize. Not stats. Not programs. Not perfection. People.
- Now some of you are uncomfortable with the language of boasting. Isn't boasting wrong? Isn't the church about humility? Paul, you must have misspoken, right? This feels like the wrong thing to say, doesn't it? Shouldn't our hope, joy, glory our boast be in God alone?
- When we think of boasting, it's usually about making ourselves look great. And the Bible clearly says "don't do that. Paul had to tell the Corinthian church to not boast a ton! In fact, even how you and I are saved by God leaves no room for taking credit
- **Ephesians 2:8–9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

- But the Bible DOES tell us to boast in the right thing. The New Testament tells us to boast "in the Lord", "in the cross", "in the fruit of changed behavior", and "in your weakness"
- So, that's the key. We somehow boast in God by boasting about others in a way that you and I don't get the credit for
- That word "crown" — it's not talking about a gold king's crown. It's talking about a victor's wreath — the kind they tied together with leaves and placed on the heads of champions in the ancient Olympics.
- Picture it: today, if you win the Super Bowl like the Patriots used to, you get a ring. You hoist the Lombardi Trophy. You pop champagne in the locker room. That's how you celebrate.
- But back then, you won... and you were handed this simple wreath. And what did winners do with it? They would lift it up, walk into the temple, and lay it before the gods, saying, "Everything I've accomplished, I accomplished because of you. Everything I have, it's for you."
- And Paul says, "That's how I feel about you." When Jesus returns, when I stand before Him, you are what I want to hold up. Not accomplishments. Not achievements. Not numbers or awards. But People. Souls. Friends. Family.
- ME – I know how Paul feels. I cannot tell you how often I speak about you to others. Yes, I boast. But I boast in what God is doing in your life. I see how much you love Jesus. How you deal with suffering with faithful endurance. I see how you seek to live out the gospel in your workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. I see how you sacrificially serve each other. And I cannot help but boast in what Jesus is doing in you. I CAN'T DO IT. TRUST ME...I KNOW.
- APP - So how does the Gospel help us boast in each other well? The Gospel creates a culture that celebrates life change.
  - There are so many stories of changed lives at COAH.
  - When someone in your CG confesses sin and really is seeking to change, celebrate it!
  - The Gospel has healed marriages, freed people from addictions, killed self-righteousness, and restored people by the power of Jesus.
- This world is full of criticism and cynicism. But gospel culture honors people and celebrates what God is doing. It does not dwell on what he isn't doing.

## CONCLUSION

- People move to cities like Boston to make an impact, to find their purpose. We do this through going to the right schools, finding the right job, achieving the right things, making the most of our lives.
- There is no greater joy and purpose that we can enter into than knowing Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and helping others do the same. This is a gospel culture.
- Jackie Hill Perry, "He is so much greater than the greatest thing and much more glorious than the most glorious glory the eyes could see. Knowing this, He becomes the aim of all our doing."
- That's my hope today... We ultimately build a gospel culture by fixing our eyes on Jesus and following him. ARE YOU IN OR do you find comfort and complacency in your heart?

FEW MINUTES TO PRAY – repent, ask Jesus

•COMMUNION – died to not just bring you to God but to build a gospel family that moves out into this broken world with the resurrected power of Jesus.

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