

## **A CURE FOR SELF-CENTEREDNESS**

### **1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13**

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We've spent a couple of weeks already in this letter. Paul is tracing his relationship with the Thessalonian Christians. He has been separated from them. In verse 17 to the end of chapter 3, he's talking about what has happened since that separation.

“But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you— certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that

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we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13, NIV).

We have seen already how warm in personal relationships this letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is. The gospel inevitably changes our lives. That’s what had happened at Thessalonica. The same kind of experience. Wherever the Spirit of Jesus is at work and wherever there is a hunger to reach out and to get ahold of God himself, you will see growth. You’re seeing it in the people you’re sitting with this morning. In this powerful letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, he’s talking about how to keep that growth going in your life and how to mature in Christ.

I would title the message this morning, from the verses we read in Thessalonians, “A Cure for Self-Centeredness.” In all modesty, I haven’t called it “the cure” but “a cure.” I suppose that you’ll appreciate what I’m getting at if I state my major themes this morning in a negative kind of way. I’ll state how you can go on being self-centered, and then I’ll contrast it with how the apostle Paul writes.

#### **I. One way to keep on being self-centered is to be aloof or distant from people.**

You being here and them being there—and not trying to bridge the gap between you and other people. One of the key illustrations of this is in the Gospels, in the story that Jesus tells of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man fared sumptuously every day. He had a beggar outside. He wasn’t mean to the beggar. He didn’t sic his dogs on him. In fact, the dogs licked the sores of the beggar. He didn’t deny the beggar food. He didn’t give him any, but at least the beggar somehow got hold of the garbage that was coming out of the house. He didn’t go out and physically abuse

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him in any way. The rich man thought it was simply natural that, day by day, he should exist in his condition and the other man should exist in his condition, and that the rich man should never try to bridge the gap between them and become friends or never try to help him in any way. Jesus said the rich man went to hell. Why did the man go to hell? The reason that comes to me is simply that he'd be terribly uncomfortable in heaven. Because the very king of heaven who lived in majesty and glory and all power and wealth left His palaces of glory to come to earth and associate and help beggars. The rich man would be terribly ill at ease in the presence of one of such majesty.

Jesus put human relationships above all things. Here is a man before us, in this letter to the Thessalonians, who is showing that same kind of spirit as Jesus. He was not isolated to himself, doing his own thing, but he had become vitally involved with other believers. He uses some very powerful words to describe his associations with the Thessalonians. He says, in verse 17, that he was “bereft” of the Thessalonians.

That word “bereft” is a word that means, in the original language, “orphaned.” That’s a rather powerful word to use in terms of separation from people. You’ve got to think back to the context of Thessalonians. Paul had gone into town and perhaps been there just a few months. Had he been just any other itinerant tent maker, I suppose he could have set up shop in town and sold a few tents, moved on to the next city. And it would have been absolutely unnecessary for him to have made any serious or deep acquaintances in the town. All he needed to know were a few people who gave him his license to set up his business and a few people to sell the tents to, and then he could have moved on. He could have gone through life as an itinerant sort of person, from here to there, never establishing deep relationships. But he comes into a town for a few

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months and when he leaves, to the people with whom he has become associated with, he says, “Leaving you was like being orphaned.”

What does this suggest to us about the Christian life, about a cure for self-centeredness? It suggests that, rather than keeping distance and aloofness from people, we’re to come very close. So close that within a short period of time, our feelings in our lives can so intermingled that when we depart from one another, it’s a great hurting and a tearing of the soul.

I think the letter to the Thessalonians is a powerful letter for us in Southern California, because we tend to be a rather mobile society. In fact, one of the joys, as well as the trials, of being a pastor in Southern California is that, constantly, people are coming and going. When we keep on the move so much—flying from here to there, moving constantly—one of the dangers that can happen in our experience is to build a certain aloofness around us which keeps us at a safe distance from people. We’ve become involved in our own world. Yet here is a body of believers at Thessalonica who, in their association with the apostle Paul, in a short period of time, has so inter-merged their lives that it hurts when they say goodbye to each other.

This letter has been speaking to me tremendously as a pastor. I trust it speaks to us effectively as a congregation as well. When I measure myself up against the apostle Paul, I find him deeply speaking to me and the Lord saying, “Do you love the people that you pastor? Would your heart be bereft or orphaned if the time came for parting?” Love among Christians must be that deep. The tendency of the devil is to pull us out from one another, to make us distant. You will see this in a marriage relationship. You will see this between parents and children. He seeks, perhaps as greatly, to do this among believers in the church. God’s will is for us to be losing some of that self-centeredness and independence and really come close to one another in love. “Bereft,” Paul says.

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Not only is Paul indicating that he's bereft or orphaned from the believers, but he also indicates, in verse 17, that now that he's apart from them with great desire, he longs to come to them and to see them. With great desire. The word which Paul uses for "desire" here is one that he uses most frequently to refer to desire in the bad sense. It's the same word from which we get the word "passion," sexual passion, sexual desire. Paul is saying, "The greatest drive in my life is not the sex drive. The greatest drive in my life is to see you and to be one with you."

Another great desire the apostle Paul had which will come out in this letter is his desire to see Jesus and to stand approved by Him in that final day and have people with him.

So often, when we talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we're forever measuring our relationship with God. How do we stand in relationship to God? But this portion of Thessalonians today is really probing us with the other part of the gospel, how do we stand in relationship to one another? Do I long with great desire to have fellowship with my fellow believers?

It'd be nice to understand Paul if he were talking to people who were 100 percent ok, who didn't have any problems or anything. But these were ordinary individuals, just like you and me.

Somehow, the love of Jesus, which begins to exist in Christians, is able to look past the differences or the failures of other individuals and come and seek that fellowship.

Paul didn't keep his distance. In fact, he indicates that not only was he an orphan and not only did he have great desire, but Satan hindered him. Satan does that in our life. Sometimes, we want to do something we feel is perfectly part of the will of God—but Satan hinders us. There are other times when we want to do something and the Holy Spirit doesn't allow us to do it. Read the Book of Acts, for example, chapter 16. Paul wanted to go to Asia, the Holy Spirit said no. He wanted to go north, to Bithynia, the Holy Spirit said no. It wasn't Satan hindering him. It was the

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Holy Spirit. But here Satan hindered him from coming back to the Thessalonians. When you're in tune with the Lord, you learn to distinguish the subtlety of the voices of when the Holy Spirit is talking to you and when Satan is talking to you. Satan hindered. What did he do? The word for "hindered" carries the idea of chopping up a road so that you can't pass through it. A road block. Satan does that. We have to learn to cope with that.

But Paul, in drawing close to the Thessalonians, says to them, "Not only am I orphaned, not only am I greatly desiring you, but my hope and joy and crown of boasting at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is you" (see 1 Thessalonians 2:19). Also a tremendous phrase to use. There are all kinds of things we may hope for and plan for and take joy in. There are all kinds of things we can hope in. But Paul's hope was very simple. He said, "My hope lies in other people. I don't want to meet Jesus just by myself. It's not enough simply that I be saved, but I want to meet Him with others." So where are my values? I want something that will survive the passing away of this world. I want something that will reach right on into eternity. I know what reaches into eternity is not things, but people. So I want people with me at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He says, "You are what I'm hoping for, you're my crown of boasting." The crown was a laurel wreath that maybe a winner in the Olympic Games would wear after he had won the contest.

Paul says, "I'm running a contest and the thing I want to wear is the fact that you're there."

Paul says, "You're our glory and our joy" (verse 20). "Glory" perhaps speaks of the attribute of the quality that Paul seeks and "joy" of the emotion that he finds. What is our glory? I suppose the glory is something that makes us unique. If you're a weight lifter, your glory is your strength. If you're a scholar, your glory is your intellect or your wisdom. If you're Miss America, your glory is your beauty. If you're America, your glory is your democracy. And if you're a Christian, your glory is having others with you at the Second Coming of the Lord. A love that pushes out,

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that does not seek to be aloof or distant. That's a tremendous quality that Paul sets before us in our relationship to others.

#### **II. Perhaps another way that we become self-centered is doing things for the sake of our own convenience.**

Not only does the self-centered person want to be somewhat aloof and distant from people, but he essentially wants to do things that are convenient for him or for her. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5, Paul shows us the opposite of that kind of convenient sort of living. He says “Therefore when we could bear it no longer we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone” (verse 1). The least convenient thing that Paul could do was remain at Athens. One thing about Paul as a Christian is that he hated to be alone. He just knew that the Christian life was never designed to be lived alone. You can't live it in a monastery, separated to yourself. You've got to be in touch with other individuals. You've got to be there to confess your sins and bear burdens. You don't have the strength to live the Christian life alone. So Paul always had people with him.

I've gone through the Book of Acts and the epistles and discovered that probably over Paul's lifetime he had around two dozen men who were with him at different points in his experience. He had kind of a portable seminary with him all the time. Training persons to carry on his role and his work—never alone. “But in Athens,” he says, “for the sake of you Thessalonians—because you're undergoing tremendous pressure, because you were being inconvenienced in your faith—I became inconvenienced and I was willing to be there alone.”

And Paul hated Athens. It was such a city of paradox. A city that prided itself on its wisdom, yet everywhere you looked you found the ignorance of idols. There were more idols in Athens than there were people. Paul hated to remain alone in this city. But he leaves that aside in order to bring Timothy to the Thessalonians. The reason why Timothy is sent to these individuals is that

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they need to be established in the faith and to be exhorted. The reason they need establishing is the fact that afflictions have broken out against them. They're going through real tremendous periods of pressure in their life. Paul here is showing us his relationship as a father to these Thessalonian believers. He doesn't send Timothy there in order to find out their comfort or how well they're doing physically. But he sends Timothy there in order to find out something about their faith, to put the emphasis on the spiritual, where it should be—and that their faith would be strengthened. These Thessalonians are going through afflictions.

What are afflictions? Afflictions could be one of two things. Afflictions can be people that are contrary to us. Do you have any afflictions in your life?

And afflictions could be circumstances that are contrary to us. We're probably always wrestling with one of the two. Paul says, "I told you Thessalonians that afflictions would be a part of our lot" (see 1 Thessalonians 3:4). The gospel doesn't produce escapists—people who want to get away from trouble and live in a place where cool breezes blow everyday and drink lemonade and eat steaks, just an easy kind of fantasy life. But regarding real pressure breaking out against believers, he says, "When I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless" (verse 5).

What's Paul afraid of in relation to the Thessalonians? That the tempter had tempted them. When he uses that phrase at the end of verse 5, "the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain"—it doesn't show up in English, because we don't have the nuance of a verb to show it, but the word for "Satan had tempted you" is in the indicative mood, which simply means that that was a fact—Satan had tempted them. Paul had no doubt about that. But the phrase "our labor

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would be in vain” is in the subjective mood, which means that it was hypothetical, that Paul really didn’t think that had happened.

How do you filter that down and apply it to your life? There is no doubt that this week Satan has tempted every one of you. That has happened. That is indicative. That’s there. Satan tempts us all. But hypothetically, we may state, because the probability of its happening is so remote it can only be imagined, that our labor would be in vain. That’s not going to happen. That labor will not be in vain. You will stand. The Holy Spirit puts strength in our life to stand in the midst of affliction. The gospel of Jesus Christ knows nothing about a religion of convenience. It is inconvenient at Thessalonica to take bodily beatings for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is inconvenient to be a Christian in that culture, just like it’s inconvenient to be a Christian in ours. But again—where one’s eternal values are, that really counts. Paul is a person that is not self-centered, which is indicated by the fact that he doesn’t keep a distance between himself and people. He does things that are inconvenient for him.

**III. He also gives indication that he’s not a person who becomes lost in his own problems. I suppose that’s another mark of self-centeredness.**

People on the two ends of the spectrum become lost—lost in the pride of what they may have attained or what they may have, and become caught up in a braggadocios type of a spirit and be a super-egotist. On the other hand, the person who becomes a soloist in his problems—and there is no real world that exists outside of the trouble that he or she is going through. A mark of self-centeredness is a self-pitying type of spirit, which we find easy to allow to accumulate in ourselves. (“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.”) There are probably other people, besides Jesus, who know the trouble we’ve seen. Maybe they even know something worse. Paul here, as he writes this letter, is going through experiences where he is

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troubled. We find indications of his trouble in the letter to the Corinthians, when he autobiographically reminisces concerning his experiences at Corinth. He's writing the Thessalonian letter, after all, from Corinth. He says, in 1 Corinthians 2:3, "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling." "I was with you in weakness"—what does that mean? I think it means something physical. I think it means that Paul's saying, "I was sick—physically sick—when I got to Corinth. And not only was I physically sick, but I came in fear and much trembling."

What does he mean by that? I suppose that one thing that he could mean is that, after his rejection at Athens, he came to Corinth really wondering if the gospel was going to express itself in power there in that city. I think there may be another thing to fear and trembling. By this time in his life, Paul had been whipped within an inch of his life, at least five times by a cat-of-nine-tails. He had been physically abused.

I think when he says "fear and much trembling," he just didn't want another beating. I wouldn't be surprised if his night-times were filled with nightmares about what was coming next physically. I like the Scriptures of the apostle Paul and other men because they show that these guys were not super-human beings, that they could go through real hurts. They could have real fears and even real doubts. They could be expressed. Concerning the marvelous truth of the gospel somehow, because of the resource the Holy Spirit provides in our life, we get the strength to get past our fears. But Paul was a very frightened and potentially intimidated person at Corinth. He says in chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians, in essence, "A thorn was given me in the flesh to harass me, a messenger from Satan to keep me from being too elated. I contend with weakness, hardships, persecutions and calamities. I've gone through a lot." But he does not become lost in his own problems.

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How do you keep from becoming lost in your own problems? Paul shows us how he was kept from becoming lost in his problems. He let somebody get through to him. Another believer. He says, “Timothy has brought us the good news from you. 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” (1 Thessalonians 3:6). Somehow, in the midst of a very despondent situation, Paul hears the good news that somebody loves him. And that always cheers us up. Somebody loves you! Paul had said, in chapter 3:1–5, that he had sent Timothy to find out about the Thessalonians’ faith. But when Timothy comes back, he says, “I’ve not only got good news to tell you about their faith, but I’ve got something to tell you that you didn’t ask for—they love you.”

How much we need to say that word and receive it in experience! How much that’s needed within Christian experience, in a church where we barely know one another. God wants us to get past a relationship where we simply touch one another as molecules rubbing past one another down the aisle on the way out. But to come to a deep level of inter-relatedness, where we’re able to say, “I love you.” And when we hear those words coming from another believer, in all sincerity, it becomes that which gets us through an hour of trial. The believer, thus, has the heart of God who is ever wanting to get through the message into our consciousness that “God loved the world and gave His Son for you” (John 3:16).

Paul says, “Since you stand fast in the Lord, we live” (see 1 Thessalonians 3:8). That is, “I really live for the sake of you people. If they would take you out of my life, along with the other believers, then I would really have to close down!” Again, an assessment by which to measure our relationship to other people, how near to other people we are—if they were taken out of our experience, we would feel that way.

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Paul, when he's writing to the Philippians, says, "I hold you in my heart" (Philippians 1:7). I think that's what he does with the Thessalonians. He was there, in the day before they had wallet photographs, when you're away from people, you know you can pull out a picture and look at it. Paul says, "I couldn't pull any photographs out of my wallet, so I had to pull them out of my heart. I remember what you're like. And I love you."

"We live since stand fast in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8). Paul allows people to get through to him in the midst of his despondency. Often, that's a rough thing to do. When we are so down a person might come along and give a good word to us and we may appreciate it, but it may not always get through, because there's just something inwardly about us—often the mechanism doesn't trip to release us into love. But God designed our souls to be responsive to the encouraging words of someone else, that it would be of value.

Paul also indicates that, in coming out of his despondency and not being so overly absorbed in his own problems, he has developed the ability to pray for others. He says, in verse 10, "Praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith." Keeping involved in the needs of other persons is often the way by which we come out of our own despondency and our own problems and troubles. Paul says that, when he comes to these believers, he wants to mend or supply what is lacking in their faith.

The word here is a very interesting word—"supply." It's used in Mark 1:19 of two men—James and John—who are mending their nets. The same word "mend" is the word "supply." To mend a net means you bring something together which is deficient, so that it becomes a useful instrument. That's what the Thessalonian believers were like. They had something that needed to be mended in their faith. They weren't yet fully complete people. But even though they weren't perfect, Paul isn't kept from loving them. He prays that he might see these imperfect people, that

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he might supply what's lacking. There's always an additional grace and fruit of the Spirit which may be supplied.

So Paul, in reflecting his lack of self-centeredness, his concern to be close to other people, his concern to not do things which are convenient for himself and his concern not to be lost in his own problems, shows us an antidote to self-centeredness in our experience.

**IV. Then, as Paul continues to review his relationship with the Thessalonian believers, he comes in this section to a fitting close by praying for these believers.**

We find his prayer in verses 11–13. The prayer has essentially three petitions in it.

**A.** The first petition is in verse 11. He prays that God the Father and Jesus may direct his way to them. That is, he turns to the Lord in prayer for matters of simple direction in his life. It's not just simply something he will decide on his own. But he prays that he may really come to them submitting a decision to the Lord. It's again a matter which we learn to do in the kingdom.

**B.** A second thing that Paul prays for is that these Thessalonian believers will increase and abound in love to one another. Not only that they'll increase in love and abound, but that the Lord will make them increase and abound. That's about like saying, "You can never get enough of love. And since you can never get enough of love, then keep on getting all you can get."

"Increase and abound one toward another."

Why? Verse 13, the third petition:

**C.** "So that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God." The Lord wants to do a work in the believer's life which will make them the maturing kind of Christian that really rejoices at the return of the Lord. Notice he uses the phrase "may God make you abound in love," and "may God establish you in holiness." So often, in reference to love and holiness, we associate this with something we do. "Love one another!" or, "Be holy as God is holy!" Before

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we start talking about the human activity of love and holiness, Paul says, “It comes from God—may God give you love. And may God give you holiness. When you begin to sense that love and holiness are a gift from God, you don’t have to labor at it to get it, then Paul, in chapter 4, can go on and say, “Brethren, love one another and live rightly.” But he doesn’t do that until we’ve reckoned, first of all, that it’s a gift from God in our life.

God, when He gives gifts, do you know what kind of gifts He gives? I think He gives seeds. God is not in the habit of giving us finished products. He’s in the habit of giving us seeds. So the Lord gives you a gift, a seed of love. And He says, “Go out with that seed and put it to work in your life and water and nurture it and love abound one to another.” Same way with holiness. Do you want to be holy? It was so exciting when I saw how holiness comes in my life. I’ve heard a great many lectures and impassioned appeals for holiness. But Paul says, “How does holiness come? Holiness comes through love.” Abound in love so that you may be blameless in holiness. You can’t be a holy person unless you’re a loving person. If you’re a holy person without love, do you know what happens? You get judgmental, vindictive, criticizing people. Holiness proceeds out of love. Great love toward one another produces great righteousness toward God.

Paul says all of this, “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (1

Thessalonians 3:13). Paul is the first writer in the New Testament to use the word “coming” in reference to Jesus. It’s the word that comes from a verb and preposition which are joined together, which mean, “to be alongside.” That’s the meaning of “coming”—“to be alongside.”

When Paul introduces the word in Thessalonians, which is perhaps the first or maybe the second of the books written in the New Testament, when he introduces that word, he’s doing something very gentle with the believers. He’s saying that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ must not be

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perceived by believers as something which suddenly jerks them to a consciousness of His presence. But it's almost gentle—His being alongside you, with you. So you may be ready to meet Him.

As I look at this “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints,” I’m tempted to ask several questions. Where is the Lord coming from? We read, in Acts 1, that He goes up on a mountain and, when He blesses His disciples, He ascends up into heaven. Where is heaven? Where did Jesus go to? If God made the heavens and the earth, then heaven—the atmosphere around the earth or the abode or dwelling place of God—if God made the universe, then He doesn’t so much dwell within the universe, although His presence is everywhere. But since He made it, He existed before it was. Therefore, He must exist outside of it.

So when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth, where is He coming from? Jesus comes from the dwelling place of God to be with us. How far is it? That’s immaterial with God. It doesn’t matter how far the distance is, whether it’s a geographical distance or a spiritual distance. If you are with Him, you can be there. The Lord comes from His dwelling place to be with us.

Why is He coming? There are many reasons why He comes. But Paul, in Thessalonians, has really only given us one reason why the Lord is coming. That’s at the end of chapter 1. At the end of every chapter, in these first three chapters, Paul comes to talk about the Lord’s coming, if you notice. At the end of chapter 1, he says, “We are to wait for his Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead—Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Why is Jesus coming? To deliver us from the wrath to come.

What is “the wrath to come”? The “wrath to come” is God’s wrath. It’s God’s final judgment upon the world. Who is to be saved from God’s wrath? We who believe. The child of God, who believes and trusts in God.

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It's interesting how the word "wrath" and "affliction" may be used. A Christian can go through man's affliction. He is in the world and that's his lot—to go through suffering. He can take it. But there's one suffering and exercise of judgment that no human being can take. That's the wrath of God. So for those of us who wait for His Son, God—through Jesus—saves us from the coming wrath.

Why is He coming? Because He deeply loves us. Because we have loved Him. Because He has loved us. Did God love you first or did you love God first? God loved you first and then you loved God. Would God have loved you if you had not loved Him? In a sense, yes, and in a sense, no. God loves you and you love God. Why is God coming? To save you from the wrath.

How is He coming? Paul tells us that the Lord is coming with all His saints. Most commonly, the word "saints" refers to believers. Paul uses the word seventy-six times in his epistles. Out of those seventy-six times, there are only two possible times when it can refer to angels. This is perhaps one of them. Angels could perhaps be included in this term. It's interesting that in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, when they wanted to interpret the word for "angel," they used the word "saint." For example, Zechariah 14:5 says, "The LORD is coming with all his saints." Meaning angels. And Jesus says, in Mark 8:38, "...coming with all his holy angels." And when He comes, He's going to send His angels out to gather His elect from the ends of the earth.

Yet the term "saints" has to be thought of as something more than angelic beings. Because Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, says, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." That's a staggering phenomenon to think about, how God is going to bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. How Jesus will bring those with Him, and yet, at the same time, He is going to cause their bodies

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to raise out of the ground so that there is a completion of the child of God. He's coming with His saints, and when He comes with them, they will rise.

What's the truth of Scripture? When we die, do we soul sleep for a few millennium until the Lord comes? No. To be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). So since we're present with the Lord, and He's coming back to earth, if we're dead before Christ returns, we come with Him. Somehow, if there's something I don't understand physically, because no one has ever done this before, our coming back with Him is going to be united with a body. And somehow, the greatest act of creation will pale in insignificance with Jesus reuniting the dust of the earth with the souls and the bodies of men. Have you ever tried to think about how the Lord could collect all this dust? We sometimes talk about "Should you be buried or cremated?" If you're buried for two hundred years, you're still dust! But somehow, all those who have been lost at sea or whatever are gathered together in a moment. You talk about God creating the world and that being a miracle. Look at this! God's recreation of us.

What's Paul trying to say, however, to believers? He's coming with His saints. Paul's saying to believers, "When Jesus comes, He's going to empty out all heaven to meet you." All the angels and all the saints are going to be there. There's going to be nobody in heaven for a little while. They're all coming to meet you. That's how valuable you are in God's sight. Paul is saying to the believers, "Look at the Second Coming of the Lord. It's going to do something in you. God thinks that much of you, that He's going to give you that welcoming reception."

I hope I've begun to put before you how early Christians saw the Second Coming. It was not something which terrorized them to death—missing the rapture. It was something which so filled them with joy and hope and faith and belief, that they were singing about it, praying for it, and wishing it would happen any day. To be with the Lord and all His saints. Is Jesus coming *for* the

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saints or *with* the saints? Paul says, “Jesus is coming *with* the saints *for* the saints. And so we shall ever be with Him.”

Then we’ll be glad concerning what He does from that time on. Whatever He does, I’m going to be there. And you’ll be there, a child of God. The great promise of the Scripture. God draws people to himself who are willing to let the ego be replaced by himself on the throne. As we learn to love one another here together, that’s going to make eternity all the better. But if we really don’t care for one another now, then probably heaven is going to be kind of miserable. We may make it, but God wants us to draw together so we become ready to celebrate. It’s a great reunion that we’re going to experience with saints of all the ages and all over the world, when He comes again to receive His own.

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22–24, NIV).

### **Closing Prayer**

I think, Lord, of Your words today in John 14, where You indicated You were going away to prepare a place for us. While You were gone, You told us to prepare a place for You. Lord, we’re thankful that those things are happening right now. That You are preparing a place for us, that that’s the work You do that we don’t have anything to do with. We also, Lord, want to prepare a place for You in our hearts. A great deal of that work rests upon us. I pray that, as we have shared today from the Scripture, these words will be at work in our life, that they’ll simply not have been an exercise of going to church. Much needs to be done yet in our relationship

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toward one another in this body. We are like the Thessalonians. We need to increase and abound in love toward one another. We need, somehow, Lord, as rapidly as we move to slow down long enough to really make a concentrated attempt to really know and care and share with other believers. Lord, do that work in our lives. Cause us to increase and abound in love, that we might also be blameless in holiness. Make us a loving, as well as righteous, people. I never know when I speak, Lord, who there might be in the service who is outside of Your safety and Your kingdom. But I know that You know, because You faithfully have recorded the names in this congregation in Your eternal Book—those who have believed. So You who search the heart know who has received You and who has not. I ask today for those who have not, that there would be an opening in their individual hearts to receive You and to be ready to meet You at that festive gathering with the saints. There are many also, Lord, layers of relationship within this body in respect to You. Probably there are some here who have simply gotten inside the door of the kingdom. But they remain pretty close to the door. I ask, Holy Spirit, by Your gentle influence, that there would be a tug on that individual's life to come on in and really be a part of Your body and of Your work. Not simply to know Your salvation, but to know Your heartbeat and know Your innermost thoughts. Who of us here this morning does not need to be in a closer relationship with You? All of us need to draw near, because we can never get enough of You and of Your righteousness and love. Draw us to Yourself. We pray this in Your name. Amen.