

Orphaned from the Church

Ps. 42, Ps. 137:1–6, 1 Thess. 2:17–20

Our text for exposition and application this morning is 1 Thessalonians 2, beginning at verse 17. Our text begins: “But we, brethren, *having been taken away from you* for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.” Here, the apostle Paul describes the pain in his heart at being separated from his dear Christian brethren in Thessalonica. As I read this text in the original Greek the other day I was absolutely floored as I pondered the word that he uses. In the original the verb translated “having been taken away” is actually the verb form of the word *orphan*.¹ Paul’s forced separation from the Thessalonian Christians felt to him like being orphaned. He uses a very strong word: *to be orphaned from*—to be cut off from family, to have no family. He says literally, “Brethren, we were *orphaned* from you for a time.”

This is the only occurrence of this verb in all the Bible—both the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) and the New Testament. But there is no doubt about its meaning, for it is the verb form of the noun *orphan* (ὀρφανός). An orphan is a child whose parents are dead—a child who will be raised perhaps by a family member, but perhaps will be committed to an orphanage. According to one website the first orphanage was established in the United States in 1729. By 1850, 56 orphanages in America were up and running, responding to health epidemics and the rapid increase of poor immigrants. That number continued to grow through the start of the 20th century. And they weren’t the easiest places to live. There’s a reason Annie calls it a “hard-knock life.”² Now, orphans who cannot be cared for by a family member most often go into foster care.

The word ὀρφανός is used in the Bible. James teaches that “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit *orphans* and widows in their trouble” (Jas. 1:27).

The word ὀρφανός is used in the Septuagint at Exodus 22:21ff., where God says, “You shall not afflict any widow or *fatherless child*. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children *fatherless*.” The words “fatherless child” and “fatherless” are translations of ὀρφανός, orphan.

Clearly, Christians are to have compassion on the weak and vulnerable among us, including orphans, caring for them as we are able, and taking them into our own homes and raising them as our own if the opportunity presents itself. It is not an easy calling, but it can be very rewarding for a committed Christian.

¹ ἀπορφανισθέντες, from ἀπορφανίζω, to make an orphan of

² <https://lifesong.org/2020/03/still-orphanages-america/> accessed 2-3-24

Consider with me three points this morning: (1) a deep-seated longing, (2) a dangerous enemy, and (3) a joyful future. First,

1. A deep-seated longing

Paul writes, “We, brethren, having been taken away (orphaned) from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.” Notice how the apostle Paul expresses deep-seated longing, using such emotionally-laden words as “orphaned,” “heart,” “more eagerly,” “great desire.” Clearly, Paul was emotionally involved with this church. He loved this church. He had a deep-seated longing to be with them. For Paul, evangelism wasn’t just a job. Yes, he had a solemn calling to preach the gospel. As he wrote to the Corinthians, “necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). Paul loved to preach. He loved to tell people about Christ. He realized how precious the gospel is, and how there’s no salvation without it. But for Paul, preaching the gospel wasn’t just a job. Preaching involved dealing with people—communicating with real people, people who were more than just converts to be won, but people whom he would come to love. He would get involved in their lives, share their joys, sorrows and struggles. He would pray for them. He would be elated at their spiritual victories, when they had successfully put into practice what he had taught. And he would be downcast and full of concern when they experienced spiritual failures—when they had given in to temptation. Those who confessed Christ with his church were his brothers and sisters in Christ. They were dear to him. He loved them. He understood that loving the church was his Christian duty. But it was something that came very naturally to him. He loved people. He cared about them.

When Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” he replied, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40).

Here are the two great commandments: love God, love people! Note the word that is used: “love” (Ἀγαπήσεις, from ἀγαπάω). The exact same word is used for our duty to love God (Ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου) and our duty to love our neighbor (Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου). *Jesus doesn’t use a lesser word for the love we are to have for our fellow man.* We should love God above all, but we should show the love we have for him by loving our neighbor. And what closer neighbor is there than our brother or sister in Christ? We are to love them with the same unselfish love that we owe to God. We should love the church as we love Christ!

Paul loved the church in Thessalonica that way. He loved his fellow Christians with deep-seated longing, feeling “orphaned” when he could not be with them, loving them in “heart”—with a heartfelt love, “eagerly,” with “great desire.”

Do you love your fellow Christians in that way? Or is your total focus on yourself—your needs, your desires, your success? May God grant us all a deeper love for the church he purchased with his own blood! Second, we see

2. A dangerous enemy

Paul writes: “Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.” Here Paul identifies the enemy: Satan. Satan (ὁ Σατανᾶς) is the adversary, the accuser of the brethren. In Revelation 12:10 we read of the judgment of Satan: “the accuser of our brethren is cast down, who accused them before our God day and night.” Satan is “the enemy of God and all of those who belong to God.”³

The reason that Paul had to flee Thessalonica and was prevented from returning was Satan, the adversary of God.

Yes, Satan is a dangerous enemy. He is the same as the devil (διάβολος, Rev. 20:2). We are warned: “your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8)—but we are not to fear! The next verse goes on to say, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith.” The Bible assures us: “greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). He is a deadly enemy. “He was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). He is out to kill us. He knows his final end: the pit of hell. Jesus warned of “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). But we are to fight the good fight of faith, clothed in the whole armor of God. It may be a bloody fight, but “the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Rev. 19:6).

This week I read a remarkable story shared by Voice of the Martyrs. A pastor was leading a prayer meeting at his home in Shiraz, Iran, when secret police arrived and arrested the pastor, his wife, their 17-year-old son and four other church leaders. The seven Christians were blindfolded and driven to an intelligence prison for questioning.

After days of interrogation, they were moved to a public prison and ordered to keep quiet about why they had been arrested; the guards rightly feared the spread of the gospel among the prison’s 6,000 inmates.

But the pastor and the other believers felt compelled to obey a higher authority. “It would have been comfortable just to be quiet and not talk about Jesus,” he said. “Things would have gone better for us in prison.”

³ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon: σατανᾶς

Despite repeated warnings not to talk about their faith in Christ, the believers shared their testimonies and the gospel with fellow inmates who were Muslims. One thing became very clear: They were going to need Bibles.

The seven Christians began writing memorized Bible verses on any paper they could find and encouraging one another by sharing the verses.

Eventually, the prisoners were allowed to call their families and friends. They asked them to write down chapters of Scripture in English and give them to an imam who visited prisoners regularly. Neither the imam nor the guards could read English, so they could not read the “letters.” The Christians who could read English then translated the Scripture into Farsi so other inmates could read the Bible.

After several months, the believers had complete, handwritten copies of some books of the Bible to read and share. And as they continued to receive new chapters, they started making additional copies. While Bibles were highly restricted outside the prison, inside, God’s Word was spreading.

The pastor continued sharing the love of Christ and the truths of Scripture with Muslims in his cell. But as the guards saw prisoners responding to the pastor’s evangelism, they grew increasingly frustrated and finally moved him to a part of the prison that the inmates called “Hell.”

There, in the prison’s basement, 200 violent prisoners were serving life sentences or awaiting execution by hanging. The pastor knew he didn’t have long to share the gospel with each inmate; many were executed after only a few weeks there. He rejoiced when several prisoners placed their faith in Christ.

“People who were serving a life sentence gave their life to Jesus,” the pastor said. “We know the gospel is in the heart of that prison.”

After *three years and five months* behind bars, the pastor was released.⁴

Satan is a deadly enemy. He hates the church and wants to do everything in his power to try to destroy it, but Christ is omnipotent. He will build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Third,

3. A joyful future

Paul continues: “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.” Look at the high praise Paul heaps upon the church: it is the Christian’s hope, joy and crown of rejoicing and glory. At present the church is disheveled and weak. We are far from perfect. But God is sanctifying his church through testing, and when he is finished, it will be “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but . . . holy and without blemish.”

⁴ Prayer letter received from Voice of the Martyrs on 2-1-24

Many American Christians have a weak view of the church. They have imbibed the pervasive individualism of the surrounding culture. I was talking to a young man the other day. I asked him if he has been attending church. He said he “does church” every day. What he meant was that he practices his faith in private. He doesn’t need the church—or so he thinks. He doesn’t want spiritual accountability. He wants to maintain his independence.

Now all of us should practice our faith in private. After all, the Bible says we should pray without ceasing. But it also says that God’s people should assemble. In fact, we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. We are to practice our faith together. Christ loved the church, and so should we. The Lord’s people should meet together on the Lord’s day, confess their faith together, worship together, pray together, sing together, be taught by a minister of the word together, observe the sacraments together. The church is the body of Christ. We should no more want to be orphaned from the church than to be orphaned from Christ!

When David was on the run from Saul, who was pursuing him, wanting to kill him, he longed for public worship. “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, ‘Where is your God?’ When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.”

Spurgeon comments: “Painful reflections were awakened by the memory of past joys; he had mingled in the pious throng, their numbers had helped to give him exhilaration and to awaken holy delight, their company had been a charm to him as with them he ascended the hill of Zion. Gently proceeding with holy ease, in comely procession, with frequent strains of song, he and the people of Jehovah had marched in reverent ranks up to the shrine of sacrifice, the dear abode of peace and holiness. Far away from such goodly company the holy man pictures the sacred scene and dwells upon the details of the pious march.”⁵

Some say, “I’ll come to church, but I won’t get too close. I’ll keep God’s people at arm’s length. I don’t want to get contaminated.”

To be orphaned *involuntarily* is one thing. This is what happened to Paul. The enemies of the gospel wanted to kill him. It wasn’t safe for him to stay in Thessalonica. But to be orphaned from the church *voluntarily* is spiritual suicide.

The church’s main duty is to meet together. The church meets on the Lord’s day, week in, week out. That’s what the church does.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Logos Bible Software)

If you were providentially hindered from worshiping with God's people, would you feel like a spiritual orphan?

We have to love God with all our heart. We are to love God's people as we love ourselves. That's how Jesus described the first and second great commandments. To love God and *not* love his church is unthinkable!

Families are not always perfect. But it's always better to have a family, than to have no family.

When I was in junior high I started to become aware of status. The school I attended had a lot of families from a richer town nearby. Some of my friends in the school orchestra had parents who were professional people—doctors, dentists, lawyers, judges. My dad had had three years of college while he was in the Navy during World War II. The Navy sent him to college. But he never finished. The war ended before he finished. He did not have a college degree. Later on, I found that what he did actually was very remarkable. During his long career with Detroit Edison Company, he had done essentially the work of an electrical engineer. The fact that he did not have an engineering degree was no impediment to his success. He could do the work, and that was all that was important. But I didn't know that at the time, and when I talked with my friends and found out that they had parents who were professional people, I felt a little foolish saying, "My dad is a Sunday school teacher. He picks up poor children, the children of poor, dysfunctional families, and brings them to church." In my youth and inexperience I didn't recognize how important that was. Fathers of my classmates were professional people. They made a lot of money. They lived in nice homes. Our home was pretty plain, run-of-the-mill. Somehow, I thought that making a lot of money was more important than impacting the lives of vulnerable children, showing them a father's love and care. I'm not proud to admit that my values at that point in my life were twisted. I thought that making a lot of money and having lots of status were more important than helping vulnerable children. My values were not informed by Scripture; they were formed by the world's values.

Sometimes we judge the church with the world's values. Our fellow church members might seem pretty ordinary. They have faults. They are not perfect people. They do not measure up to the world's idea of success and achievement. Moreover, we see them all the time; we see them warts and all.

As we look at them, they seem pretty ordinary, not possessing the gifts that would impress outsiders. Wouldn't we like to attend a church made up of successful people, professional people, a church that attracted newcomers because it was made up of such accomplished people?

How we need to begin to look at the church with the eyes of Jesus! To look at the church and see its potential, to see what it is destined to become by the grace of God! The church is a family. It is also a body—the body of Christ.

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Do you look around at the ordinary people in church and feel ashamed? Are you ashamed to invite people because the people that are here are so ordinary? They are not smooth and suave and always have the right wardrobe, the right words to say for the occasion, the right professional degrees. Are you worried that if you invited friends and they met your fellow church members they might say something awkward, something that might be a turnoff. Would you want them to leave as soon as the service was over, so they would not be offended by your fellow church members? Are you ashamed that our church building is plain and somewhat run-down—not like an impressive cathedral.

People with problems, people that stick their foot in their mouth, people that have not mastered all the social graces.

Christianity has regard both for the individual and for the collective. Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, *and thy house*” (Acts 16:31). It is individual: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and *thou* shalt be saved.” (“Thou” is singular.) God requires us as individuals to put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But “and thy house” is plural, referring to the jailer’s wife, children, household servants and their children. Under the familial culture of the time, the Philippian jailer—as the covenant head, putting his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—was committing his whole household to the true faith, much the same as when Joshua proclaimed, “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” The covenantal head was the spiritual leader, and he was setting the tone for his whole household.

So it is with the church today. We come to Christ individually, but also as families. Christian parents present their children to the Lord in baptism in the same way as believing parents under the old covenant presented their children to the Lord in circumcision.

The gospel is for individuals, but it is also for the family of God, the church. Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ we confess our faith together in worship: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

If the apostle Paul loved the church so much, Christ loves it more! How important is the church to you?

The fellowship that we enjoy with the church here on earth is a foretaste of the fellowship that we will enjoy with the church triumphant in eternity future—forever. Throughout eternity we will continue to learn about Christ. And what we learn will continue to amaze and delight us. He who saved us from our sins by his own blood will invite us into his heavenly abode, never to depart, never to be orphaned. Amen.