

February 28, 2016
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COLLECTING TROPHIES 1 Thessalonians 2:19-3:10

We do a lot of things because it's what you're supposed to do, even though it actually makes no sense. The thing that recently provoked this line of thinking was a receipt I got from a store. I bought some items there with a credit card. They have that little device that reads your card then pops up on its screen a place for you to sign using the stylus that is attached to the device. They gave me a receipt that had the signature I had just made printed out on it. The supposed purpose of this ritual is to make sure that it was actually me using the card and buying the items. That can be proven by the fact that I signed it, and ostensibly this would keep some crook from stealing my card and using it because he couldn't forge my signature.

However the signature I made on that screen and the receipt didn't look anything like my actual signature. I defy you to use that stylus on that glass surface and write something that even remotely resembles your actual signature. What I produced looked like some squiggly lines that could have been produced by my infant granddaughter, Leilani. Anyone could mimic that signature by just scribbling almost anything. There was nothing identifiable about it. In other words, my making that illegible, ridiculous signature was utterly pointless. The merchants know it doesn't do any good. I don't think it does any good, yet we dutifully go through this ritual every time I use the credit card. I might as well scrawl an X on that signature line for all the good it will do. We go through this ritual with everyone pretending it is actually meaningful, but knowing it's pointless.

I fear there are some things we Christians say we believe that bear some similarity to that charade because they are equally disconnected to what actually happens in the real world. We insist that we believe these things and that they are meaningful to us, but they have no relation to the realities of our lives. I hope that this talk will move us in the direction of making our stated belief come alive in our reality, rather than having it be that kind of charade that we all sort of wink at.

We are going to look at part of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians today, in 2:19-3:10. In these verses Paul speaks of his own life. Paul serves as a good example for us, for he was human, just like us. He had no supernatural abilities. He was just a man, and he experienced all the limits of human life plus a supersized share of the hardships of life. Yet he never wavered from his mission, he persevered with astounding consistency, and he exhibited an overflowing joy, a

zest for life and love for other people. Most of us tend to be roller coaster saints. We go up and down, sometimes violently, with the circumstances of our lives. We are joyful and enthusiastic when we are at a peak and life is rolling along ideally, but when the train plunges down to the bottom we fret, we get discouraged, we question God and we wallow in self-pity.

I recently read an interview with Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, the film director and producer, in which he spoke with *Christianity Today* about his recent film *The Revenant*. His films tend to focus on the hardships of life. He said, “My theory is that life is a relentless number of losses that we suffer. From when we’re born to when we die, we are losing. We are losing our innocence. We start losing our hair, our teeth, our health, and then we lose our life. For me, it’s about how you deal with that, how you transform pain...Pain should not be enjoyed, but pain is something you can transform.”

That may be a grim view of life, but if you summed it up it would be “life is hard.” That leaves us with only a couple of stark alternatives. We can either be defeated by life, wallow in our pain and self-pity and become bitter, or we can transform the pain. How do you transform the pain and hardship of life? Paul was able to do that. What made Paul so able to keep going, continue with endurance and fullness of life? Ultimately it was the work of the Spirit of God in him, but in this passage we will see a couple of important things that we can do that will also help us.

PAUL AIMED AT JESUS’ COMING

Paul dearly loved the Thessalonian Christians. In verses 19-20 he said they were his glory and joy, his crown of exultation, his cause for rejoicing in the presence of Jesus when he comes. The thing that motivated him was wanting to have something to glory in, something to rejoice about at the coming of the Lord. He reveled in the impact he had in their life and the chance to give that to Jesus.

The thought of Jesus coming back and of seeing him face to face was always in Paul’s mind. He knew Jesus promised to physically return to earth. The idea of his coming is noticeable from beginning to end in this letter. In 1:10 Paul expressed thanks that the Thessalonians waited for the return of Jesus. We see it here at the end of chapter 2. In 3:13 he prays that we will be holy in the day of Jesus’ coming. In 4:16 he said, “the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” The second coming shows up again in chapter 5. Paul said in verse 2 there that the day of his coming will arrive like a thief in the night, so we should be always ready for it. This theme runs throughout his letters.

In 1 Corinthians 7:31 he said, “this world in its present form is passing away.” In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 he wrote of the day Jesus returns, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not sleep, but we will all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.” Philippians 3:20-21 says, “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so they will be like his glorious body.”

Paul viewed life through the lens of the reality that Jesus was going to come back and it could happen at any moment. He ordered his life so as to be ready for that day. The primary motivating force in his life was to look forward to that day and to be prepared for it. He put his hope not in making this life as enjoyable as possible for as long as possible, but in the joy he would have when Jesus came back.

Paul believed that the rewards he would receive in the presence of Jesus far outweighed anything he might enjoy in this life. To him what would happen at Jesus’ coming was immeasurably more important than anything else in this life. In 1 Corinthians 3:12-14 after saying Jesus Christ is the foundation for our lives he wrote, “If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.”

Paul always aimed at that reward. At the end of his life after saying he had finished his race and kept the faith he wrote in 2 Timothy 4:8, “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” Those who long for Jesus’ appearing will be anticipating and working for that reward.

This raises questions. Isn’t grace the point of our relationship with God? So how does earning rewards fit with that? If there is no sorrow in God’s eternal kingdom how can it be that some people will earn more rewards than others? If some people sneak through like somebody barely surviving a fire, isn’t that person going to have a lot of regret as he sees what others have? What are these rewards?

I don’t have definitive, conclusive answers to all those questions because God hasn’t said exactly what those rewards will be and how they will work. So I can’t say for sure how that system will work. But I have a few thoughts that might help.

We can take a clue from Paul's comments that the Thessalonians were his glory and joy at the Lord's coming. We have just watched Toby and Anna become parents. There is a part of being a parent that is daunting. It is the most demanding and stressful thing most of us will ever do, and it never stops. Once you are a parent you will be one forever. Why would anyone sign up for that? In part it is because when that child is born it opens up areas of our hearts that we didn't even know existed. There is an entirely new and enormously expanded capacity for love and for joy that we've never experienced before. You can tell someone this and they can accept what you say and believe it to be true. But when it happens it's like your eyes are opened. You not only know it is true, you *feel* it throughout your entire being. You feel it in such a powerful way you can't even express it. I have been a parent for more than 30 years and you would think by now that would have gone away. After all, my job as a dad is over. Laurie's description of our role is we have moved from being in the game, to being on the sideline coaching, to now being in the stands mostly just cheering the kids on. And yet I experience that joy and that love as much now as ever, and with the arrival of Leilani, our first grandchild it's just gotten another boost.

I believe at least a part of our reward in the presence of Jesus will be something like that. We will be rewarded with a capacity for joy and love for Jesus that is so expanded it practically will cause our heads to explode. And we will enjoy that expanded capacity forever! The person who has not built with gold, silver and precious stones will still have joy in the presence of the Lord, but it will not be to that same vastly expanded degree. He won't be sad about that because he won't know the difference. He'll still have joy, it just won't be at the same level.

How does that work? We recently went through Valentine's Day. Laurie told me not to get her anything as a gift, and I told her the same thing. But I wanted to do *something* for her because I want her to know how much I love her. Obviously diamond jewelry would always be a big hit, but we don't have the money for that and we had agreed we didn't want to spend large sums on Valentine's gifts, as we have other more pressing priorities. I had an idea. Laurie has had a favorite body lotion that has been discontinued. She's running out of it and can't replace it. I knew that the company that makes her favorite perfume also makes a body lotion with the same scent. I knew that it would be ridiculously expensive lotion, but that Laurie would love it. I could get that for her. But that meant I had to go to a store that I seriously do not enjoy. It's the store where they sell cosmetics, perfumes and beauty supplies. This is not a place I like to frequent. It is not a guy kind of place. I do not belong there. I feel totally out of place and self-conscious when I go in there with Laurie. If I have to go in by myself I view it as being like a commando raid,

get in, accomplish the mission and get out as quickly as possible with as little notice as possible. I executed the raid successfully. Laurie was thrilled with my gift. Her reaction to the little gift was way out of proportion to it. I think that was in part because it told her that I was paying attention to her needs and wants. But I got a burst of joy from her reaction. Because I love her I get a huge kick out of seeing her happy and joyful. I believe part of our reward will be something like that. We will get huge satisfaction and joy from Jesus' delight over what we've done for him, even though it may be the farthest thing from diamonds.

Unfortunately we have a tendency to intellectually accept that this is true, but not live like it. As I mentioned in the opening, there is sometimes an unreality to our belief. The joys, sorrows and demands of this life are very tangible and very immediate. They are so immediate that they can and do totally overshadow something that is intangible and off in the future. Because of this our natural default is to intellectually accept the idea of Jesus' coming and the reward of that day, but to have it stay in the intellectual arena without impacting our actual choices and priorities in daily living. If we can keep in mind the positive effects of looking toward the coming of Jesus it can help us. Let's remember that either by his coming or our going we are going to see Jesus, and that could happen at any moment. Consider what the focus on Jesus' coming can do for us even in this life.

It helps us to make good choices

What I'm talking about is delayed gratification. The immediacy of this world screams at us to do whatever we think will make us feel good right now. But all of us understand the importance of delayed gratification. Having an important longer term goal out in front of us that controls our choices helps us make good decisions in the near term. I do not like exercising and I do not like flossing my teeth. Every time I do those things I have to use discipline because something says to me, "this is annoying, unpleasant and no fun. Let's just skip it." For me it is every single time. But I have something that drives me. I know that exercise makes me healthier and even can help keep my brain sharp. As for flossing, there is the long term idea that I'd like to keep my teeth and I know flossing helps with that. I have a shorter term motive though. I hate going to the dentist, even to just get my teeth cleaned. I know that flossing makes that torturous procedure go faster and easier. I remind myself of that and I become anxious to floss. It would be easy to not decide every single day to exercise and floss, but I know if I don't I will end up out of shape, in poor health, with my teeth falling out. Keeping my eyes on the goal helps me make the hard but good choices on a daily basis.

Having that vision before us of being with the Lord Jesus and receiving those rewards in the long haul enable us to make good choices in the short run. The world tells us to make fitting in and gaining approval important because rejection, ridicule, being on the outside all hurt. The world tells us to make sure we feather our nest as luxuriously as possible the priority. The world tells us to join it in the mad dash for immediate pleasure. Christ calls on us to stand firm in him, even if it is not popular, to serve him not just seek comfort, to say no to pleasure that he says are illicit. Having the vision is what helps us stand firm and follow him rather than the world.

It gives us strength to endure hardship

In Paul's and the Thessalonians' cases we catch a glimpse of this in this passage. Notice in 3:3 Paul sent Timothy to them to encourage them so that they might not be "unsettled" by the trials they were going through. The word translated "trials" was from a root that meant "to oppress" or "to harass." They were being oppressed, they were suffering as Paul did. But notice he then says, "you know quite well that we are destined for them."

This is part of the deal. Paul is reminding them that following Jesus will be opposed and will be hard in this world, but it is worth it. Yes, the easy way would be to not follow Jesus. That would make life easier for sure, but what you would lose if you didn't follow him would be incalculable. Having the focus on the coming of Jesus enabled them to endure. This was true even of Jesus. Hebrews 12:2 says "for the joy set before him he endured the cross." He had his eyes on the goal and that enabled him to be strong and do the hard thing.

Laurie and I were recently amused by the thought of our son in medical school. We recalled that he didn't exactly pound the books when he was in high school. You've heard of the 3 R's of education, well Toby says in college he had the 3 F's. By that he meant fun, football and females. He got pretty good grades, but he kept the studying to a minimum. In a number of classes he didn't even bother to buy books. Now this same seemingly study-averse guy studies non-stop. What both he and Anna are doing is hard. Money is tight. The demands on both of them are great. The material he is required to master is exceedingly difficult. How is it they are able to push through all this? At the end he is going to be a doctor. He is going to do something he has a passion for and, assuming our country isn't a socialist nation by the time he graduates, he will make a very good income. This is the same principle at work. It is the great goal ahead that gives us the motivation and endurance to keep going.

It gives joy in the midst of the struggle

I may have to go through something that is not in itself joyful. If it is true that life is hard, and I believe it is, then we are all going to experience a lot that is not joyful. But if it is part of our destiny, it is part of doing something great and meaningful, then there is joy despite the hardship.

We were talking recently about weddings. I recalled how much went into our kids' weddings. There was tremendous money, a lot of preparation and work, and a lot of stress. Why put ourselves through it? Because it was worth it. It was so wonderful that even the spending and effort was joyful.

PAUL INVESTED IN PEOPLE

There is an obvious theme in this passage that runs throughout it. The Thessalonians were his joy and his glory. In 3:1-5 Paul was so concerned for their welfare that he sent his buddy Timothy back to them to make sure they were doing all right. In verse 8 Paul said "now we really live, since you are standing firm in the faith."

Last year as you know Laurie and I got to have the great blessing of going on vacation with all of our kids, Michael and Carissa, Toby and Anna. It was a blast. One day we were all sitting out by the pool looking out on a magnificent view of the ocean. It was a glorious, warm, sunny day. It was relaxing, beautiful and great fun. Laurie said to me, "Now this is living." What made it joyful was the people we love.

That's pretty much what Paul said here. He learned that the new believers in Thessalonica whom he loved dearly were standing firm despite being subjected to great opposition and abuse, and he said, "now this is living." This is really being alive. That's because what he cared about most of all was people. The apostle John said much the same thing in 3 John 4. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Remember what Paul said was his great joy in the presence of the Lord Jesus was people he had invested in. The greatest thing you can give to the Lord when he comes is people, people you have cared about, impacted with your love, told about Jesus and his grace. This is because it is what Jesus cares about! He went to the cross to save people. He loves the world that much.

What is created in the image of God? Only human beings are created in God's image. Not animals, jobs, money, houses, fame or anything else. What that

suggests to me is that the most meaningful, life filling thing we can do is invest ourselves in people.

That's consistent with what we all experience and know. Let's imagine that you develop some ability so that you are the best in the world. Perhaps you develop a world class singing voice, or you turn out to have Super Bowl quality skills as a quarterback, or you can hit a baseball better than anyone since the Babe. Then let's imagine that you never sing in front of people, or you never play a football game before a crowd, or no one ever sees you hit except for a handful of people at practice. Will you get so much enjoyment out of your ability that this is all you need? It doesn't matter than no one ever sees you perform because you get such fulfillment out of your skill. Does that seem likely to you? It doesn't to me. In fact I know it doesn't work that way. I got a kick out of writing a couple of novels. I hope the handful of people who have read them enjoyed them. But honestly, it would be a lot more fun and fulfilling for me if hundreds of thousands or even millions read them.

We all want our lives to make a difference. Make a difference with what, impact what? We want to make a difference with people. That's what life is about. Jesus died on a cross for people. He didn't die for anything else because nothing else was worth what he sacrificed.

I recently saw a video of Leland Melvin, a former astronaut talking about what it is like to return to earth after extended time in space. The first thing he said was what a joy it was to see his family and his friends. The people are what life is all about. We all know it, and when we lose sight of this truth we impoverish ourselves. Life is about loving God and loving people. Everything else is just window dressing.

Let's not be foolish and think that investing your life in people will always be easy, rewarding or fun. We can easily think that pouring our lives out for people will be meaningful and joyful. But meaningful and joyful are not the opposite of hard and sometimes painful. Consider Paul. It was costly for him to care for these people. He sacrificed a lot for them and for the others that he ministered to. He used the Greek word *kopos* to describe his efforts in verse 5. The root of that word meant "beating" or "weariness as though beaten." His loving them involved working to the point of deep weariness.

Paul also labored on behalf of the Christians in Corinth. He was the key to many of them finding salvation in Christ. They returned the favor by later informing him that he wasn't good enough for them anymore. They criticized him, saying he

wasn't a very good speaker, he wasn't a charismatic leader, he was kind of an unimpressive guy. They wanted someone with more pizzazz. That must have felt great.

At the end of his life Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:16, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, everyone deserted me." Well that must have felt just great. This guy gave his whole life to serving people. He suffered beatings, shipwrecks, opposition, imprisonments and injustice, not to mention all manner of hardships like simply not having enough money or food. Then when he was on trial no one came to support him. He was all alone.

Every wise parent knows this. It starts at the very beginning of parenting. You're going to pour yourself out for this little child. What kind of gratitude do you get? They spit up on you, poop on you, and let out blood-curdling screams if they are uncomfortable and you don't fix it instantly. They could care less that you are exhausted and need a few hours' sleep. It does get better. At least they sleep. But then comes that day when you are at the store and because you are concerned for their well-being you deny them the piece of candy that they have decided they must have or life is not worth living. The melt down that follows is epic. Thank you so much for that lovely demonstration, oh beloved child. This is just awesome. But it does get better. Later they become teenagers. They no longer spit up on you, poop on you or throw epic tantrums in stores, at least for the most part. But now they become ashamed of the fact that they have parents. Apparently they'd like their friends to believe they magically just popped into existence out of thin air as a fully developed teenager. After all that you get to pay for college and for weddings, then they have the temerity to go off and live their own lives as independent adults, lives that you are only peripherally involved in.

Last year the Dastycks invited us to go to a Padre game with them. The fellowship was wonderful, the game was terrible. Prior to the game they took us to a condo that is owned by Michelle's father. It overlooks Petco Park. Inside it is akin to a baseball museum. There is a beautiful display of baseball memorabilia, with balls, bats, jerseys, and other items mostly in the San Diego Padre genre. There glass cases filled with autographed baseballs. I loved looking at all the stuff. But it also made me think, "I should have started collecting stuff like this a long time ago." Laurie and I have friends who have been professional athletes and coaches, and through them we have met quite a number of famous sports personalities. I kicked myself because I did not take advantage of those opportunities. I now have one autographed baseball that a friend gave me though I didn't ask for it. Gary and Cathy Martin recently encountered hockey great Wayne Gretzky at the Torrey

Pines golf tournament and got him to sign an autograph, which they gave me. I now have an impressive autograph collection consisting of one baseball and one golf tournament program. I slap myself on the forehead and say, "I could have had a V8." Oops, no, I mean, "I could have had a cool autograph collection."

Then I started thinking about that. What if I did? What would that get me? Satisfaction? I reflected on the fact that recently Laurie and I got fed up with the travesty that is our garage. We said, "That's it. We're cleaning stuff out of the garage." We warned the kids, if they wanted it they'd better claim it, otherwise it was gone. In our project we had to deal with trophies. There was the big trophy I and some friends won for winning a hockey championship. There was a trophy for a championship church softball team. There was a championship trophy for a church basketball team. Then there were boxes of trophies that Toby had won playing hockey. They're all gone. We didn't keep a single one. They don't mean anything. Investing in people requires that we ask, "what is the point of all that I am doing and amassing?" In the end, if it is not serving God and it isn't serving people, it will amount to a big fat zero.

Author Gordon MacDonald and his wife boarded a plane and were seated near the back. He watched as a woman carrying one small child came down the aisle followed by another child and another woman. The group was seated right in front of MacDonald. One woman sat in the aisle seat with the smallest child on her lap, the other child sat in the middle seat and the other woman in the window seat. MacDonald figured it was two women with their little kids. He prayed that the kids wouldn't be too noisy or annoying. His prayer received an emphatic "No" in answer. There was a lot of turbulence on the flight, so the kids were upset and crying. A lot. It was a miserable flight. The woman in the aisle seat did all she could to comfort and distract the child in her lap while the woman in the window seat played with the child in the middle seat trying to pacify her. He decided the women deserved medals for their efforts. Then it got worse. The little girl in the middle seat got sick. Pretty soon she was losing everything from every part of her body. It overwhelmed her diaper and the stench became overwhelming. He could see over the top of the seat that the effluent from the little girl got all over the seat, the floor, the clothes of the woman in the window seat. That woman did her best to clean up the mess and comfort the child. When the flight mercifully ended everyone tried to clear the area as fast as possible, fleeing the horror. A flight attendant came up with some paper towels and handed them to the woman in the window seat. She said, "Here, maybe these will help with your little girl." The woman said, "Oh, this isn't my little girl." The attendant asked, "Aren't you traveling with her?" The woman said, "No, I've never met this woman and her

children before in my life.” That woman graciously cared for people she’d never met before. She invested in people.

CONCLUSION

SEE LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF JESUS’ COMING

Let his coming give meaning to everything you do. Doing it to his glory means it can be something you glory in at his coming. Let his coming give hope in every situation. No matter how dark the day may be, the light of his coming means nothing is hopeless. Let his coming be the measure of everything you do. What will this thing mean when Jesus arrives? If you knew Jesus was coming tomorrow, would you do this today? Would you stress about it?

MAKE YOUR LIFE BE ABOUT LOVING PEOPLE

Make pouring in to people the point of everything you do. Put people before things, people before pleasure. It is people that will fill your life with meaning and joy, everything else will fade away.