

6. Friends Forever (3Q 2012—1 and 2 Thessalonians)

Biblical material: 1 Thess. 2:13–3:13; Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32; Matt. 24:9–22; 10:42.

Quotes

- Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend. *Albert Camus*
- The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares. *Henri Nouwen*
- A friend is one who knows you and loves you just the same. *Elbert Hubbard*
- Fear makes strangers of people who would be friends. *Shirley MacLaine*
- I don't need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better. *Plutarch*
- In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit. *Albert Schweitzer*

Questions

How do we deal with situations in which we suffer? Isn't God "on our side"? What of the sufferings of others...? How do we demonstrate the truth of friendship with one another? With God? How is it that we can be friends forever? How does this reveal what God is working towards in ending the controversy begun by Satan?

Bible summary

Here in 1 Thess. 2:13-3:13 Paul shows his friendship with the Thessalonians by his deep care for them in their suffering. He loves the way they accepted the message and held on to their trust in Jesus despite persecution. They are his pride and joy (2:20). He wanted to go and visit them several times, but was not able to. In the end he sends Timothy because he could not bear it any longer (3:1, 5). You can see his commitment and his enthusiasm in the way he writes, "How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith." (1 Thess. 3:9, 10 NLT). He prays he will be able to see them soon, tells them his love for them overflows, and encourages them to love one another in the same way.

Despite Paul's comments about the persecution from the Jews in Thessalonica, he still remains open to making friends with his fellow countrymen (see Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32). Paul sees the sufferings he and the Thessalonians endured as being part of the bigger picture (1 Thess. 3:1-5 and Matt. 24:9–22). However as Jesus commented, every act of kindness will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42).

Comment

"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one

and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.” 1 John 4:7-11 NLT.

This is the basis of friendship—friends of a friendly God. Once we were enemies of God, but now he has made us his friends.

“Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. Our message is that God was making the whole human race his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends.” 2 Cor. 5:17-19 GNB.

Sadly so many—even those within the church—refuse God’s offer of salvation, or fail to understand what it truly is. We make up our own versions of salvation, and then try to impose our theory on ourselves and those around us. Salvation consists of doing this or that, or not doing this or that! The result? A dry and dusty experience; a hardening of the spiritual heart; a desert place that is not refreshed and revitalized by God’s healing and living water of eternal life:

“For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:15 NIV). God’s healing is our salvation.

Most people think that they have to *do* something in order to earn God’s favour, to please him. I remember talking with a woman about her experience. She had tried *so hard*. Doing everything her church leaders told her she had to do. Making sure that her behaviour was faultless. As if she were trying to impress God, just as we try to impress those around us. The result? It made her life miserable, and she ended up hating God. Sad, tragically sad. For even in human relationships, the ones that last, the one that are meaningful, are not based on trying to impress. Only by being what you really are can you hope to have a deep and enduring relationship.

The same with God. He loves us just as we are. Not that he loves all the mess of sin that we have got into, but He still sees what we can be. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). He came here to this earth for that very purpose: to show us what he was really like (John 14:9), and to win us back to love him and to trust him. What God most wants is that love relationship based on mutual trust, and the Cross shows the ultimate trustworthiness of God.

Said Jesus, “If I be lifted up...I will draw all to me.” (John 12:32). The drawing power of God is his character that wants to love all of his unlovable, rebellious children. He offers friendship, and saving, healing love. Think about it! How do you form a lasting relationship with anyone? Can you call someone friend without spending time together, doing things together, sharing life together?

Same with God. You can’t call God friend if you don’t take time out together. He’s not interested in a long-distance relationship—he wants to be involved with you, be close beside you, the one you call first! So to have a lasting relationship with God, *you* have to put time into it.

A good friend came to me and told me that she'd 'lost her faith'--speaking in the same way as if she'd left her handbag on the bus. Suddenly she'd woke up one morning and realized that she didn't have a relationship with God any more. But in reality such a change doesn't come overnight. It comes from years of neglect, of taking God for granted, of forgetting to have him involved in your day-to-day life.

Think of those people who did have a good and lasting relationship with God—for example, Abraham, Moses, Job, see Hebrews 11 etc. They weren't perfect, but they knew where to go when they went off course. They realized that their failures were due to their failure to take time with God and to trust him completely. But despite their failures, they were still friends of God. That is the objective; that is what God wants. And it should be what we want: to be friends of the friendly God.

Ellen White Comments

We need to educate and train the mind so that we shall have an intelligent faith, and have an understanding friendship with Jesus. Unless we continually cherish friendship between God and our souls, we shall separate from Him, and walk apart from Him. We shall make friends of those around us, and place our trust in humanity, and our affections will be diverted from the true object of worship. We must not allow coldness to chill our love for our Redeemer. If we have fellowship with Him, we must ever set the Lord before us, and treat Him as an honored Friend, giving Him the first place in our affections. We should speak of His matchless charms, and constantly cultivate the desire to have a better knowledge of Jesus Christ. Then His Spirit will have a controlling power upon life and character. . . . If ever there was a time when men needed the presence of Christ at their right hand, it is now. . . . {SD 27}

Christ the Life Giver, Christ the Redeemer, Christ the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, points you to a nobler world. He brings it within range of your vision. He takes you to the threshold of heaven, and brings you to contemplate the glories of eternal realities, that your aspirations may be quickened to grasp the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. As you contemplate heavenly scenes, desire is kindled in your heart to have friendship with God, to be wholly reconciled to him. {ST, July 17, 1893}

The warmth of true friendship, the love that binds heart to heart, is a foretaste of the joys of heaven. {FLB 234}

Jesus says, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Love is not simply an impulse, a transitory emotion, dependent upon circumstances; it is a living principle, a permanent power. The soul is fed by the streams of pure love that flow from the heart of Christ, as a well-spring that never fails. O, how is the heart quickened, how are its motives ennobled, its affections deepened, by this communion! Under the education and discipline of the Holy Spirit, the children of God love one another, truly, sincerely, unaffectedly--"without partiality, and without hypocrisy." And this because the heart is in love with Jesus. Our affection for one another springs from our common relation to God. We are one family, we love one another as He loved us. When compared with this true, sanctified, disciplined affection, the shallow courtesy of the world, the meaningless expressions of effusive friendship, are as chaff to the wheat (Letter 63, 1896). {5BC 1140}