



## Paul's Crown and Joy

In his epistle to the Roman congregation, the apostle Paul describes what might be termed a road. The first section for a Christian is tribulation, followed by another section called perseverance. When the saint has successfully traveled the road through this tribulation and has exhibited the requisite perseverance, then he has demonstrated "proven character." This proven character now has hope, because he has seen that if he perseveres through the difficulties, God always grants him spiritual victory. In this whole process he can now really exhibit the "love of God poured out" within his heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5). Certainly the apostle Paul had demonstrated all aspects of traversing this road to the brethren in Thessalonica who

heard him preach and were converted to Christianity. The tribulation and his perseverance were obvious, his character had clearly been exhibited in the midst of great persecution, his continued hope shone through, and his love of these brethren was evident even in his writing this letter.

- **Bereft for a time** — Paul was only able to preach in Thessalonica over a period including three Sabbaths, after which he and Silas were sent away to Berea. From thence he went to Athens, and then on to Corinth. Thus he was not able to be in the physical presence of the brethren, and to know from face-to-face contact how well they were doing spiritually. "But we, brethren," he therefore writes, "having been bereft of you for a short time — in person, not in spirit — were all the more eager with great desire to see your face" (1 Thessalonians 2:17). Spiritually he was in fellowship with them, but the physical separation was of concern to him. He earnestly wanted to be in their presence to encourage and strengthen them.

- **Satan's hindrances** — Because of the difficulty of communication compared to modern days, the apostle has to explain why he had not yet come to encourage them. "For we wanted to come to you," averred the apostle, "I, Paul, more than once — and yet Satan thwarted us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18). No details of how Satan hindered Paul from getting to Thessalonica are available. But somehow the prince of darkness had enough power to have stopped the apostle more than once! There is definitely a spiritual war going on.

- **Our joy** — Material things do not last forever; people are eternal beings and do last forever. Real joy, then, is derived from a systematic means of deepening relationships with people. Ultimate joy, superadding to the thought, is derived from deepening relationships with people who are going to heaven. The apostle, conscious of this, comments, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?" (1 Thessalonians 2:19). The apostle Paul plowed in the hope of having a crop of souls saved for all eternity. What joy he had in seeing that his toil and suffering not be in vain, that these people were pulled out of paganism or Judaism into the truth of life in Christ Jesus. What a picture he has, that these saints would be his crown of tremendous happiness.

The Lord, speaking through the prophet Daniel so long ago, stated, "And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). Certainly there would be few who would be able to match the apostle Paul in those categories. But he always gave credit to the Lord for giving him the grace to accomplish what he did in his lifetime, and his concern was always for the eternities of those he taught. "For you," he emphasizes to the Thessalonian brethren, "are our glory and joy!" (1 Thessalonians 2:20).

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