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DEPRIVED DOES NOT MEAN DENIED!

Today's Text: 1 Thess. 3: 1-13

Extracts:

Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, and that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; ... For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. For this reason, *when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour might be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress, we were comforted concerning you by your faith* [1 Thess. 3: 1-7]

On Monday, 26 May 1980, the then Nigeria's Minister of External Affairs, Abubakar Usman, was to lead a Federal Government delegation on a defence diplomatic mission to São Tomé (Equatorial Guinea), a distance of 781 km (488 miles) from Lagos, the then Federal Capital.¹Tunde (not real name), a young career officer in the External Affairs Ministry, was excited to have been selected to be on the delegation. It was an opportunity to earn extra pay (daily subsistence allowance) in US dollars. His passport was being processed and he had been promised that he would get it by Friday, 23 May 1980, just in time for the Monday morning trip. But, when he went to the Passport Office, nothing was ready. As he argued with some officers there, threatening to use his connections with high-up people in the new civilian government of President Shehu Shagari to deal with them, the boss of the passport office came out and told the young man that his passport would not be ready until early June. Consequently, he could not travel. He felt deprived. But, on that fateful Monday, the military aircraft, Fokker F-27, carrying the delegation crashed near Warri (present Delta State) and all 18 passengers on board died. Tunde went back the following day to thank the passport office for saving his life.

Tunde might have felt deprived for missing that flight but was he denied a fruitful career? We all face similar circumstances in our endeavours- at home or work, church or business. But should one setback be the end of our world? Are we denied a brighter future because we have been deprived for a season? In today's Bible verses, Paul assures us otherwise in his First Letter to the church at Thessalonica. Rather, it could be the doorway to a brighter future or unanticipated better outcomes. Let us find out.

¹ <http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=19800526-0>

1. Background: Paul is prevented from remaining in Thessalonica

You can imagine how Moses felt when God told him that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised land, that somebody else (Joshua) was going to complete that assignment [Num. 20: 1-12; 27:12-23]. Even when he prayed for forgiveness and the grace to enter there, God refused saying, “Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter” [Deut. 3: 23-26]. But did that diminish the place of Moses in Israel or in history? He lived until the age of 120 years and “his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour diminished” [Deut. 34: 7]. In the evening of his own ministry, after establishing the children of Israel’s control over the Promised land, Joshua said to the people, “Be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written *in the Book of the Law of Moses*, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left” [Josh. 23: 6]. The mission that God had given to Moses was completed but not necessarily by him. You can imagine Moses’ joy in heaven!

Most of us tend to think that the road to success is a linear curve, that is, it keeps getting smoother and faster but never slowing or declining. We are always comparing ourselves with others that we consider our role models. If we cannot beat their pace, we must at least match it. If life on earth were so, *why is the road to success always under construction?* Why does it have ups and downs? Why does it have set backs and unexpected challenges? That is why we are admonished never to give up for, according to the African tortoise, it is a good thing that he walks slowly because he could be going in the wrong direction!

The word of God says, “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small” [Prov. 24: 10]. But we know that the temptation to faint is strong. For example, some boss in your work place is standing on your pay raise or promotion. Some ugly man (or woman) in high places wants you to sleep with him (or her) if you want to enhance your career in that office. Your lecturer wants you to trade your integrity for higher grades. *As we approach end times, unspoken evil practices are growing. Are you going to allow Satan to use fear and discouragement to derail you from the high road of faith and trust in God by Christ Jesus? That is where Paul’s experience in Thessalonica becomes most helpful to us in dealing with the circumstances that we face today.*

During his third missionary journey, Paul came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue [Acts 17: 1]. He went in there to preach Christ but the Jews, out of envy, were not going to make things easy for him. They stirred up evil-minded people in the marketplace, raised an uproar and attacked the home of Jason, Paul’s host, to bring out his guests who had “turned the world upside down” and acting “contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king-Jesus” [vv. 2-6]. Even when Paul and Silas were smuggled out and taken by night to Berea, the Jews from Thessalonica came there to hound them out. So, the disciples took Paul away to safety in Athens, leaving behind

Silas and Timothy to join him in due course [vv. 7-15]. The story in Chapter 3 of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians follows that experience.

Paul had been deprived from remaining in Thessalonica to preach Christ but did that stop his work or its positive outcomes? The following suggest otherwise:

a) *It gave room for Paul to mentor Timothy*

Paul wrote, "When we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent **Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ**, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith" [1 Thess. 3: 1-2]. In other words, Paul's deprivation turned out to be an opportunity for him to mentor Timothy to continue with God's work in his own absence. Look at the words that Paul used to introduce Timothy to the Thessalonians. Timothy was a brother and minister of God. He was Paul's fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ. Those words suggest trust in and empowerment of the younger pastor by an established and respected authority. Why would the church in Thessalonica not listen to Timothy?

Mentoring is an integral part of succession planning. Nobody is indispensable. Leaders can fall sick or drop dead unexpectedly. Yet, some people keep everything to themselves, fearing that sharing the secrets of the business with others, especially subordinates, can breed competition or sabotage. But, in the work of God, we are all labourers. In the words of Jesus Himself, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. That is why it is only the Lord of the harvest who can bring labourers into the harvest [Matt. 9: 35-38].

b) *Paul enabled the disciples to know that the word of God cannot be chained*

Paul wrote, "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love... we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord" [1 Thess. 3: 6-7]. How could Timothy have known that he could do the work if Paul had not given him the chance? You can imagine his joy when Paul expressed so much satisfaction with the outcome of his work. The opportunity (which includes learning from mistakes) enabled Timothy to know that he had strengths that he could never have discovered if he had not been given the chance to do it. Paul's faith in him had not been misplaced. That strengthened the young man to believe Paul that he could do all things through Christ Jesus that strengthens all of us [Phil. 4: 13]. He came to appreciate that, even though Paul had been deprived, the word of God could not be chained. The faith among the Thessalonians was strong, with or without Paul coming by himself.

c) *It gave Paul the opportunity to spread the gospel to Athens*

While his companions were in Thessalonica, Paul was left alone in Athens [v. 1] but he did not sit down there idle. It provided him with a rare opportunity to preach Christ to the Athenians who “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” [Acts 17: 21]. By pure coincidence, Paul stumbled on one of the objects of worship with the inscription, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” He used that chance to introduce the Greeks to the true God, the maker of the universe. Even though some of his hearers mocked him, they desired to hear more and others believed and followed him [vv. 22-34]. Are many not called but few chosen [Matt. 20:16]? Such few could have missed salvation but for Paul’s sojourn in Athens.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that even though on the surface Paul was deprived from remaining in Thessalonica, he was not denied the fruits of his work there. The word of God spread to the people with or without him. So, what lessons can we learn from his experience?

2. Lessons for our own walk through life

The following lessons, among others, need to be noted:

a) *Roses have thorns!*

Many of us love roses without realizing that roses have thorns!² We cannot enjoy any benefits unless and until we can use them. That involves a process of maturation. That suggests hard work and pains. Even Jesus who came in flesh to save mankind from sin and condemnation had to pass through crucifixion. The One through whom God created everything said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” [Jn 5: 17]. Therefore, we have to appreciate that work is hard and it does not always produce desired results. We have to be ready to see failure as postponed success!³

For example, David was anointed king of Israel as a teenager [1 Sam. 16:13] but he was not crowned until he was thirty years old [2 Sam. 5:4]. For over thirteen years, he ran from cover to cover to avoid being killed by King Saul. Abraham was 75 years old when God promised him descendants [Gen. 12:4] but he did not have the child of promise, Isaac, until he was 100 years old [Gen. 21: 5]. Paul was sent on appeal to Rome to face trial before Caesar. After surviving a tempest and other hardships along the way, he arrived Rome only to be told that formal

² http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_4/PDFs/15_Roseshavethorns.pdf

³ http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/Failuremeans.pdf

charges had not been filed against him [Acts 28: 20-31]! What do we learn from those examples? ***It is that when you are deprived of a position or prize or whatever, you should see it as an indication that something bigger is ahead of you. You should go for it!***

b) *Persecution is the road to higher ground*

Sometimes, you cannot explain or understand why you are being persecuted. You may have spoken the truth or done the right thing. Yet, the reward you get is persecution in the form of ingratitude or rejection or derision or even physical punishment. But the truth is that God is preparing you for bigger things by taking you out of your comfort zone. For example, until Stephen was stoned to death, the early believers were all staying around Jerusalem. After his death, here is what followed [Acts 8:1-4]:

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

Jesus wanted the believers to go “into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” [Mk 16: 15]. He wanted them to become witnesses to Him “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” [Acts 1: 8]. It took persecution for them to move to such higher grounds. ***It may take persecution and hardship for us to get better qualifications or jobs or work on our relationships with others.***

c) *Your “depriver” may actually be your best friend!*

Sometimes, we are under the impression that that person obstructing our progress is our mortal enemy. It is logical for us to fight him/her back with as much venom as we can raise. The likelihood, however, is that such persons may be what God is using to propel us to His chosen place for us or to take us away from harm. That is why Jesus has taught us to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us [Matt. 5: 44].

For example, when Joseph’s brothers fell on their faces before him after their father’s death, he said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ***you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.*** Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones” [Gen. 50: 15-21]. Saul was David’s mortal enemy who did everything to prevent David from becoming the

king of Israel. Yet, one of the first things that David did on becoming king of Israel was to ask Ziba, a servant of the household of Saul, “Is there not still someone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?” That was how he made Mephibosheth, the lame son of Jonathan, to eat continually at the king’s table [2 Sam. 9: 1-13].

Yesterday, today and tomorrow represent all the time that we may have. Of the three, only today is visible. Our regrets are in the past and our hopes are in the future. To avoid regrets (which we cannot change), we should ensure that our hopes will not be drowned in regrets in due course. So, today is all that we have. That is why Jesus has taught us not to worry about tomorrow “for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” [Matt. 6: 34]. Therefore, *we should use today to focus on opportunities and contributions, not on deprivations and entitlements. That way, the Lord will direct our ways to opportunities and make us increase and abound in love to one another and to all, so that He may establish our hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints* [1 Thess. 3: 11-13]. That is Paul’s message for us this week.

3. Conclusion: Jesus forgave His killers while He was still on the cross!

Jesus was crucified at 9.00 am [Mk 15: 25] and died on the cross at 3.00 pm [vv. 33-37]. That is a tortuous time period of six hours. Passersby blasphemed Him; the chief priests and Roman soldiers mocked him [vv. 27-32, Lk 23: 36]. In spite of His deep agony, He still said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” [Lk 23: 34]. His suffering was real but He bore it all because He knew that “the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” [Lk 24: 7].

How about you? Do you know your destination? Do you know that it is appointed to us to die once and after that, judgment [Heb. 9: 27]? The world can deprive you of joy, peace or comfort but it cannot deny you salvation. That will depend on the choices you make. *If you have a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ, you can afford to turn the other cheek and weather every persecution. Like Jesus, you can also say, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”*

They can only deprive or delay you. They cannot deny you what God has planned for you. Hang in there and hold on. Help is on the way!