



PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13

Third Message

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We are nearing the end of the third week of Shelter-in-Place with at least another four weeks to go. We feel the physical absence of family and friends, of teachers and students, of classmates and playmates, of work colleagues. Modern technology allows us to stay connected, but we miss physical presence. We look forward to the day when we can see one another face-to-face in the flesh, not just on Zoom or one of the other video conference or video chat services. We look forward to the Sunday when we can once again assemble together for a service, for the church is a gathered people. We're experiencing Absence and yearning for Presence.

I know that some of you are experiencing too much Presence. Your kids are all home. Excessive Presence is provoking family tensions. You're looking forward to some Absence. This is a difficult time for all.

Presence and Absence are poignant realities for me. At the age of 5 I went to boarding school in Malaysia far from my parents who were missionaries in Thailand. It took several days to get there. From our house in rural Thailand, it was a two-hour bus ride to the train station, then a several-hour train ride to Bangkok, where families gathered from all over Thailand. Then we would say goodbye to our parents and younger siblings. I can't imagine what this was like for them; the pain of sending their young children away for many months. Next came a 28-hour train ride down to Malaysia, changing to a local Malay train for several more hours, and a two hour bus ride into the mountains. Finally we arrived at our mission school in a jungle clearing at 5000 feet. We would be absent from our parents for four months, then make the long trip home again. This trip was much easier because we were all excited that we were going to see our parents again. We were journeying from Absence to Presence. But after two months home we would make the sad journey back from Presence to Absence—a whole railway carriage full of homesick children who were not going to see their parents again for four months.

At ten I started boarding school in England and the Absence intensified. I was at a boys school, my sisters at a distant girls school. During the holidays we lived in a hostel, but that wasn't really home. It was some twenty teenagers all away from their parents. Plane travel was just becoming cheap enough that we could see our parents in the summer, though sometimes this was one parent coming to the UK. This resulted once in a two-year absence from our mother. Again, I can't imagine the pain of these absences for our parents. My sisters and I were fortunate. Thanks to the astonishing generosity of some people we saw our parents more than some of our friends who had multiple two-year absences. Those just a few years older had three- and four-year absences.

My parents bridged the absence by writing letters every week. Since my absence continued the rest of their lives, they wrote me for over forty years. These letters conveyed their presence. And my father sent me books every birthday and Christmas: mostly books

about Biblical studies which had benefited him and which then benefited me. These too conveyed his presence and helped shape me.

In nearly forty years in Thailand they never had a phone, though the last two years in Bangkok they lived next door to a house with a phone. So the one time I called was when Sue and I got engaged; I called next door and they were fetched to the phone. But my sisters and I got married on three different continents, so we were not all able to be present at each others' weddings. So Presence and Absence have been a reality for me not just these past three weeks but throughout my life.

Presence and Absence were also poignant realities for Paul. He, Silas and Timothy had to leave Thessalonica at short notice at night. Then Paul had to leave Berea quickly, leaving behind Silas and Timothy. They were finally able to join him in Athens. But he missed his new friends in Thessalonica and longed to see them. He keenly felt Absence and longed for Presence. Our passage today is all about Absence and Presence. It is therefore a poignant passage for us today, also feeling Absence and longing for Presence. I think we will hear today's text quite differently than if I had covered this material even just a month ago.

Paul's emotional treatment of Absence and Presence divides into three paragraphs.

1. Absence (2:17-20)

But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. (1 Thess 2:17-20 NIV)

You can hear the anguish in Paul's voice as he writes to the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. So great is the pain of his hasty departure that he says "we were orphaned from you," like children torn away from their parents. I wonder if this is how my parents felt: orphaned. Perhaps you feel this way, with children, parents or grandparents far away. Even if they are only a mile away you can't visit them.

Though Paul is absent in person from the Thessalonians, they remain present in his heart. He has an intense longing to see them face-to-face and has most earnestly made every effort to get back to Thessalonica, trying again and again. But he has been unable; his path has been blocked, an action he attributes to Satan, the adversary.

These Thessalonians are clearly very special people to Paul. He describes them as his hope, his joy, his crown. He looks ahead to when they will be reunited, not just together, Paul and the Thessalonians, but standing together in the presence of the Lord Jesus. So there is a

second Absence: the Lord Jesus is now Absent, but will one day be Present. The word translated “coming” means Presence; it refers to an arrival resulting in Presence. Some day Jesus will return to earth. It will be a day of Presence ending the long period of Absence. On that day Paul and the Thessalonians will be together, and together they will be in the Presence of the Lord Jesus. On that day Paul will beam with pleasure on the Thessalonian Christians and say to Jesus, “Aren’t they wonderful!” They are Paul’s “crown of boasting.” The crown here is the victor’s wreath. The Thessalonian Christians are Paul’s victor’s wreath in whom he will glory when they all appear before the Lord. They are the evidence that he has fought the good fight, that he has run the race, that he has faithfully discharged the commission given to him. On that day the Lord will beam with pleasure on them all and say, “Well done, good and faithful servants; in you I am well-pleased.”

But Paul doesn’t want to have to wait until the Lord’s return to be present with the Thessalonian Christians. Unable to return to them physically, he does the next best thing.

2. Presence through Envoy (3:1-5)

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain. (3:1-5)

Paul can contain himself no longer; he is fit to burst. His intense longing for the Thessalonians has to find an outlet. Since he can’t himself visit and be present with them, he does the next best thing. He sends Timothy to represent his presence.

Timothy is a young man from Lystra, a city that Paul passed through on his first missionary journey. On his second journey, Paul and Silas passed through Lystra again, and they invited Timothy to join them on their travels. What an experience this must have been, to join two senior leaders of the church. Paul calls him not only his Christian brother, but also co-worker with God in the gospel. It’s now time for Timothy to be entrusted with more responsibility as a co-worker. Paul sends Timothy to Thessalonica as his trusted envoy.

Paul charges Timothy with two tasks. First, he is to strengthen the Thessalonians and encourage their faithfulness so that they not waver in their affliction. Paul had warned them that they would be persecuted and suffer. Timothy is to represent Paul himself in encouraging the Christians to persevere through this adversity. Timothy’s second task is to find out about their faithfulness, their loyalty to Jesus amidst this affliction. Paul knows that the tempter has been testing them, and is fearful that they might have given way and his labors been in vain. He can’t just phone them or have a video chat. So he sends Timothy to strengthen their faithfulness and to report back to Paul how they are doing in their faithfulness to Jesus and this new life in his kingdom.

Thessalonica is only 200 miles from Athens, but Timothy can’t simply hop on a plane and be there in an hour. It would take him many days whether by land or sea. Meanwhile Paul is left alone in

Athens, eagerly awaiting Timothy’s return, eagerly awaiting news of his beloved brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. He moves to Corinth, where Timothy returns to him.

3. Presence through Letter (3:6-10)

But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. (3:6-10)

Timothy has just returned from Thessalonica, bringing back good news. Everywhere else this word is used to describe the gospel about Christ, as in verse 2. Timothy reports the good news of their faithfulness and love. The Christians are full of love: they have pleasant memories of Paul and want to see him just as eagerly as he wants to see them. They feel his absence just as intensely as he does. And they are remaining faithful, standing firm in the Lord. They are remaining loyal to Jesus and to his kingdom. They are living lives of faithfulness. They are living life the kingdom-way, behaving according to the lifestyle of God’s kingdom, Christ’s kingdom. Behavior is an essential part of faithfulness. Therefore Paul is encouraged in the midst of his distress and persecution. Now Paul can breathe again, he can “really live”; his anxiety has been relieved. He need worry no more about them.

His anxiety has been replaced by joy, lots of joy. In his joy he bursts forth into thanksgiving: how can he possibly thank God enough for this good news of how well the Thessalonians are doing? But great though his joy is, it is not enough. Still he wants to see them: “night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again” (10). The desire for Presence, to see them face-to-face, has not gone away.

In fact, his desire has intensified. Previously, he “most earnestly made every effort to see your face” (2:17). Now he is “most earnestly as possible pleading to see your face” (3:10). His “most earnestly” has intensified to “as most earnestly as it is possible to be.” His own efforts have changed to pleading with God. Why is Paul more eager than ever to exchange Absence for Presence, to see the Thessalonians face-to-face?

He wants to see them to “supply what is lacking in your faith.” He wants to restore the shortcomings of their faithfulness. What has happened? Though the report which Timothy brought back is good news, it is evidently not all good news. Though, in general, the Thessalonians are doing well in their love and faithfulness, there is something lacking. There are some shortcomings in their faithfulness, in their loyalty to Christ and his kingdom. Paul wants to repair these shortcomings, restoring the Thessalonians to their former complete faithfulness. And he wants to do this in person, face-to-face, present with them.

We need to remember that this is a very young church, only a few months old. When Paul was present with them in Thessalonica, he had instructed them in how to live the Christian life. They had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. They had accepted the good news that there is another king, Jesus. Serving

the living God and switching allegiance to Christ's kingdom is not simply a matter of believing in the mind. It is also about behavior, about daily living. Paul instructed them about how to live as citizens of Christ's kingdom. But he had left town in a hurry, cutting short his instruction. In the time that Paul has been absent, they have strayed a little from his instruction. It is time for a refresher course, for some course-correction to get them back on track. Paul would much prefer to do this in person. This is why he has such an intense longing to see them, to be present with them. But the Lord has not opened the way for this, despite his prayers, his pleading with God. So Paul does the next best thing: he writes them a letter, this letter, the document that we have been reading these three weeks.

Almost certainly he sends this letter with Timothy. So Timothy goes back to Thessalonica, gathers the brothers and sisters together, and reads the whole letter to the gathered assembly. Timothy represents Paul's presence to them. They hear the physical voice of Timothy but he is speaking the words of Paul. Paul is present to them even in his absence.

Though clearly it is Paul who wrote this letter, he adds the names of Silas and Timothy. The name of Silas is not surprising since he is a fellow apostle, one of the senior leaders of the church. But the addition of Timothy is significant. He is not an apostle. He is from the next generation. In sending Timothy to Thessalonica, in adding his name to the letter, and in sending him back with the letter, Paul is raising Timothy into leadership. They will have a long, close, fruitful relationship. Paul will later call him "my beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (1 Cor 4:17), and "my true child in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2). But despite this father-son language, Paul considers him a co-worker. Paul lists him as co-author of six of his letters, and he is the recipient of two more. We see in this chapter the emergence of Timothy as Paul's trusted associate. Paul trusts Timothy to speak for him, he trusts him to answer any questions the Thessalonians might have about the letter, and he trusts him to have a hand in the spiritual formation of these beloved brothers and sisters.

In chapters 4 and 5 Paul addresses the shortcomings in their faithfulness, in how they are living lives loyal to King Jesus. He begins his refresher course with these words,

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. (4:1-2)

He will go on to address matters such as sexual ethics (4:3-8) and life together in community (4:9-11). We will look at this material in August when I cover chapters 4-5.

But note that before Paul begins this refresher course, he has written three chapters full of praise and thanksgiving, telling the Thessalonians how pleased he is with them. So, when they get to chapter 4, they will hear the correction within the context of much affirmation. Correction is much easier to receive when it comes wrapped in a warm blanket of affirmation and appreciation.

A word to you parents who are suffering an excess of Presence—your kids' presence; who are struggling with the tension of being cooped up together. Please remember to give your kids plenty of affirmation and appreciation even as you try to correct them and control the tension.

Before Paul commences the correction in chapter 4, he finishes off his affirmation with a benediction.

4. Prayer (3:11-13)

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (3:11-13)

Still Paul is longing to be present with them, praying that God the Father and our Lord Jesus would clear the way for him to come.

Presence and Absence. God has made us for his presence. His desire and goal is be present with his people. He made humanity for his presence, placing Adam and Eve in his sanctuary. But Adam was unfaithful, and God expelled him from his presence. He called Israel to be a people for his presence: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. He had them make him a tabernacle and later a temple where he could dwell among them. But Israel was unfaithful and God removed his Presence, the glory cloud from the temple. After a long Absence, he sent his Son into the world, who for us humans and for our salvation became human. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us: Immanuel, God with us.

But on his final night with the disciples, Jesus told them that he was going away. He was present but would soon be absent. But he said, "I will not leave you as orphans" (John 14:18). He would ask the Father and he would send a comforter to represent his presence with them. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence with us. Presence: God is present with us in Christ through his Spirit. The Holy Spirit is also described as an earnest, a deposit, a guarantee ensuring us of the return of Jesus. Jesus will come back and be present. This returning Presence is a major theme of 1 Thessalonians.

On that day, when Jesus returns, we will come before him. I look forward to pointing you out to Jesus and saying, "Aren't they wonderful!" Speaking for all the elders and pastors, you are our hope, our joy, our victor's wreath in whom we glory.

In the end, when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, we will be in God's full presence:

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev 21:4)

There will be no more Absence, only Presence.

We feel our absence from one another and long for presence. We look forward to again being present with one another. In the meantime we do the next best thing: we connect remotely. Technology has made it so much easier than in the days of my childhood. I encourage you all to continue taking advantage of this technology to connect with one another.

One of the positive things amidst the ongoing toll of this coronavirus crisis is to see the efforts of people to connect to one another even while maintaining social distance. The Italians standing on the balconies singing to one another. The Spanish standing on their balconies every evening and applauding the medical workers—a practice which has now spread to other countries. This is not a time for competition, but a time for cooperation. We're seeing the world come together. We see people and companies cooperating to help.

And churches are doing everything they can to maintain connection, to promote a sense of togetherness.

The Father has given us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to be his Presence with and in us. The Spirit draws us together in fellowship, even across distance, just as he drew Paul and the Thessalonians together across their distance, in their Absence from one another. The Spirit draws us together in participation with God in Christ, and in participation with one another.

Now we will take advantage of technology to share communion together. Communion remotely is an oxymoron. It is not ideal, but we are not in ideal circumstances. We are doing the next best thing. Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper, in which he is present to us in the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.
(1 Thess 3:12-13)

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