

Faith, Love and Hope

1 Thessalonians

Sermons by
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FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE-DOWN

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE



1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

First Message

Bernard Bell

March 22, 2020

“The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men Gang aft agley.” So wrote Scotland’s national poet Robert Burns. Translated from Scots into English, “The best-laid plans of mice and men Go oft awry.” Many of you may be familiar with these words. John Steinbeck used them for the title of his novel, *Of Mice and Men*, in which the best-laid plans of George and Lennie go awry. Burns wrote this line in his beloved poem, *To a Mouse*. Not just any mouse; he wrote this to a very particular mouse, a “Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim’rous beastie.” To understand what happened to the best-laid plans of this mouse you’ll need to read the whole poem. Then this particular line will make a lot more sense.

Our best-laid plans have been turned upside down by a tiny virus. Events have moved at a dizzying pace: now that we are confined to home, the cancelation of the King City and Liberia trips last week seems rather mild! We are adjusting to this new normal and finding silver linings: the Chinese can hear the birds in Wuhan, the Italians are singing from their balconies, the Spanish in unison are applauding their medical workers every evening. And we are finding that we can continue in community thanks to the technology that some of you develop—thank you!

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. (1 Thess 2:17 NIV)

I cannot see you, but you can see me. I thank those who have made every effort to make this possible, to allow us to continue to gather on Sunday mornings, now virtually.

This sentiment of intense longing is made by Paul, Silas and Timothy in the first of their two letters to the church of the Thessalonians. Today we begin a new series in these two letters. Compared to Paul’s other letters they receive relatively little attention, except for a few verses about the rapture and the man of lawlessness which generate much speculation. We will discover that there is so much more in these two gems.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are letters or epistles. Actually, the Book of Revelation is also a letter, so make that 22. Most are written to specific churches, some to specific individuals. They are written into specific situations. But we live in a very different time, place and situation. To understand why Robert Burns wrote a poem on a particular day to a particular mouse we need to know the circumstances of his encounter with that mouse. In the same way, we need to understand the circumstances into which Paul wrote his letters: particular letters written at particular times to particular churches or leaders dealing with particular matters. So why did Paul write his first letter to the Thessalonians? The background is given in Acts 16–17, which Brian preached through a couple of years ago.

The apostle Paul knew what it was to have plans overturned. On his second missionary journey, with Silas and Timothy, he had wanted to enter new territory to preach the gospel to those who had

not heard. But they were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (Acts 16:6). They turned north, and “tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (16:7). They turned west again, and came to Troas on the northwest coast of what is today Turkey. Here Paul had a vision of a man begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (16:9). Paul saw a new plan in this Macedonian call: “we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (16:10). They sailed over to Macedonia, where they went first to Philippi.

Here Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace and brought before the magistrates under the charge of promoting an illegal religion: they “are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (16:20-21). Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten and thrown into prison. When the officials belatedly learnt that they had shamed and mistreated Roman citizens they were alarmed, and begged the two to leave town.

They journeyed deeper into Macedonia, to the capital Thessalonica. Here it was Jews who opposed them. They assembled rent-a-mob from the market-place and set the city in an uproar. The charge before the city authorities this time was “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here... They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (17:6-7). The authorities were disturbed, and Paul and Silas were sent out of town by night.

They continued to Berea, but Jews from Thessalonica followed them there, “agitating the crowds and stirring them up” (17:13). Immediately Paul was sent away to the coast, then to Athens. Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea, with instructions to join Paul as soon as possible.

What a tumultuous few months this had been. Thwarted by the Spirit of God and of Jesus from entering Asia and Bithynia, they were convinced that God was calling them to bring the gospel to Macedonia. But this preaching provoked riots wherever they went and they had to abruptly leave each city. The best-laid plans of mice and men had gone awry. What must Paul have been thinking when Silas and Timothy joined him in Athens? Was he licking his wounds? Was he in despair? Was he wondering how it had all gone so terribly wrong?

There’s a key little word in Luke’s narrative of these events: “brothers,” or better, “brothers and sisters,” for the word can be gender-inclusive. NIV sometimes translates it as “believers.” After release from prison in Philippi, “they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with *the brothers and sisters* and encouraged them. Then they left” (16:40). In Thessalonica it was *the believers* who sent them away by night. In Berea it was *the believers* who sent Paul off on his way and some escorted him to Athens. In each city there were some who had responded to the gospel, to this good news that there is another king, Jesus. In each city there was now a little church.

So how was Paul feeling when Silas and Timothy joined him? So intense was his affection for the Christians in Thessalonica that he felt orphaned from them, as a father torn away from his dear children. He wanted to know how they were doing.

...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... So when we could stand it no longer... we sent Timothy... to find out about your faith. (1 Thess 2:17–3:5)

Timothy brought back a good report:

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. (3:6)

Paul's immediate response was to write a letter to the church in Thessalonica. This is his first letter to a particular church, so this is a landmark event in the New Testament. Hear how he started this letter. I invite you at home to read along with me.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1 Thess 1:1-10)

I. Faith, Love and Hope

Paul begins with a lengthy thanksgiving. He is overjoyed at the good news that Timothy has brought back, and is eager to share his joy with the Thessalonians and with God. Specifically he gives thanks for “your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope.” Three Christian activities: work, labor and endurance, on the part of the believers. Three Christian virtues: faith, love and hope, anchored in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is these virtues of faith, love and hope which produce the activities of work, labor and endurance, as NIV clarifies: “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.” We'll look at each of these in turn.

1.1 Work produced by faith(fulness)

Work and faith. For us these two words don't easily sit together. Surely it's one or the other. Since we're saved by faith, to mention work alongside faith implies that somehow work contributes: works righteousness. But what actually is the faith of these Thessalonians? They are very young Christians; the church is only a few months old. So I'm sure there is plenty that they don't know or understand. But they do know two things: about God and about Jesus.

They have “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1:9). They recognized that their idols and what they represented are false. We all worship and serve someone or something, whether we acknowledge that or not. We all look to things that give us meaning and purpose in life, and we give them our allegiance. But they have accepted Paul's proclamation about God, the living and true God, and now they seek to serve him. Secondly, they have responded to the proclamation that there is another king, Jesus. Even if this is all they believe it is already enough.

Faith is responding to the good news of who God is and what he has done in Christ. Having responded we then seek to grow in understanding, which is a lifetime task. “Faith seeking understanding” is an ancient dictum of the church. We often turn it the other way around: understanding seeking faith.

We can also read *faith as faithfulness*. The Thessalonian Christians have given their allegiance to king Jesus, and now seek to live out their lives in loyalty and devotion to him. The Thessalonian mob was right: the apostles were turning the world upside down by proclaiming “there is another king, Jesus.” To proclaim Jesus as king and lord meant that Caesar the emperor was neither the true king nor the true lord. All other persons and things to which we have given allegiance, consciously or unconsciously, are deposed by this proclamation that there is another king, Jesus. The world, busy in its pursuit of false gods, might dismiss this as upside-down, but we know that the gospel message turns us right-side up, as Shawn has repeatedly reminded us in his series on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the rightful ruler and lord. It is to him and to the living and true God that we give our allegiance, loyalty and devotion. We have two symbols of this allegiance: baptism and communion. Baptism is like the oath of citizenship, transferring our allegiance. In baptism we publicly affirm that our allegiance is now to Christ Jesus, that we now belong to his kingdom. Communion is like the pledge of allegiance: on a regular basis we affirm that we belong to Christ Jesus, that our loyalty and devotion belong to him. The work of the Thessalonian Christians is produced by this loyalty.

Paul continues, “we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you” (1:4). Loved by God and chosen or called by him. This is language from the Old Testament, where Israel was the object of God's affection and election. He loved Israel and called her to be his people, the people in and through whom he was at work. Israel was the apple of his eye. Here the same two terms are used—loved and called—to describe those who have accepted the gospel. Jews and Gentiles together in Christ through the Spirit are God's beloved and called ones. We are the ones in and through whom God is at work in Christ through his Spirit. We are called to live life a new way, the true way. We are called to a Third Way, neither Jew nor pagan Gentile, but the Jesus Way.

“Loved and called by God” was a familiar concept for Jews, though they would be offended by the claim that the locus of this love and calling was now in Christ Jesus. But to be loved and called by God was a radically new concept in the Roman world. Their gods

didn't love people and the people didn't love their gods. But God loves us and we love God in return. In this time of great fear, anxiety and uncertainty, it's good to be reminded of this: we belong to God's kingdom, to Christ's kingdom, and God loves us dearly. God has called us: he is at work in and through us. The work produced by faithfulness flows from our love for God who first loves us in Christ Jesus.

1.2 Labor prompted by love

The second virtue evident in the Thessalonians is love, love for one another. The Christians are now part of a community of love: love towards God and love towards one another. Paul addresses them as "brothers and sisters" (1:4); he does so fourteen times in this short letter, and another seven times in his second letter—a higher frequency than any other letter of his. In the Roman world sibling love was the strongest love. People competed to acquire honor for themselves and promote their family. But siblings promoted one another; they cared for and protected one another. We are all now siblings, brothers and sisters together in Christ. It is this intense sibling love that prompts our labor. Labor is a stronger word than work, implying some discomfort or hardship. We are willing to inconvenience ourselves, if necessary, in loving and caring for one another.

Our outreach to King City and Liberia is motivated by love. These trips are canceled, but we still have opportunities to labor out of love for one another. Our elders care and our deacons labor out of love for our body. This week's PBCC Coronavirus update sent out on Wednesday contained this invitation:

The PBCC leadership also wants to assist and encourage our entire church family in caring for one another as we walk together during this season... As we reflect on this invitation to participate together in the Lord's work...we can each personally respond.

So, as brothers and sisters together, let us consider how we might respond, laboring for one another out of our deep love and affection.

1.3 Endurance inspired by hope

The third mark of the Thessalonian Christians is endurance inspired by hope. It is clear that the Christians in Thessalonica are suffering. They "welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering" (1:6). It seems that some have died under this affliction. But Paul adds that they have received the word also "with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." How are they able to have joy in the midst of affliction? How are we able to have joy in the midst of our current trials of being confined to home, with our routines so disrupted? The Thessalonians had joy because they had hope. People can endure almost anything with hope. But without hope we wither and shrivel. Having turned from idols to serve God, they now "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1:10). Yes, they may die in the affliction, but death has been defeated. There has already been one resurrection, the most important resurrection of all, the one that really matters. Jesus is the one whom God raised from the dead. He will one day return and God will put all things right. This is the Christian hope: not a general vague hope that somehow things will work out, but the absolute confidence that this same Jesus whom God raised from the dead will one day return and that we are safe in him. It is this hope that inspires endurance. In the meantime, while waiting, the Thessalonians didn't down tools and wait. Instead they worked and labored. We are called to do the same as we endure the current hardships, which increasingly look like they are going to last a while. We endure: this doesn't mean we just grin and bear it. No, we bear

up under it because of the hope that we have.

2. Imitation

The Thessalonians have become imitators of the apostles and of the Lord. In turn, they have become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Notice the chain of imitation: Jesus to Paul to the Thessalonians to the rest of Macedonia and Achaia.

At the head of the chain is Jesus. He is the pattern of what it means to be truly human. He set this pattern in his faithfulness, love and hope, in his work, labor and endurance. He was faithful to God in contrast to the unfaithfulness of both Adam and Israel. He loved his disciples and his people. All his behavior was motivated by this faithfulness, love and hope. He endured opposition and suffering all the way to the cross, where he entrusted himself to the God who vindicates the faithful.

Next in the chain is Paul. He thought he was being loyal to God in persecuting Christians. But then Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, and his life was reoriented onto Christ. For Paul Christ was now everything. God called him into a life of imitation, imitation of Christ. Paul, too, endured great suffering and opposition in faithfully serving the Lord. Some of this suffering and opposition we've read about this morning, in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Paul urged the Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). And now the Thessalonian Christians have become imitators of both Jesus and Paul. They show the same virtues of faithfulness, love and hope, which inspire the same activities of work, labor and endurance. And the chain continues. They have become a model for the rest of Macedonia and Achaia. It is not just the gospel that has gone out from Thessalonica throughout these two provinces, but also news of their faithfulness, of how they are remaining true to God, to king Jesus and to one another in the midst of affliction.

The Western world prizes individuality. The modern world prizes uniqueness: be your own unique self, be true to yourself. But we are called to conformity, conformity to a pattern, conformity to Christ. This is God's great goal for us, that we become like his beloved Son. His Spirit is at work in us so that day by day we become transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18).

The current crisis inconveniences us, but also presents us with many opportunities to imitate Christ, Paul, and the Thessalonian Christians, in their faithfulness, love and hope, which are ours in Christ Jesus, and in our work, labor and endurance inspired, motivated and produced by these virtues. We have many opportunities to be the hands and feet of Christ to one another and to the wider world. Parents at home with your children: your children are observing how you live through this difficult situation. May you so imitate Christ that you set them a model worthy of imitation, for they surely will imitate you.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, the eminent sociologist Rodney Stark wrote,

The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they *love one another*. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to "all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.¹

The Thessalonian church had embraced these revolutionary ideas. Rodney Stark, writing these words as an agnostic, embraced these revolutionary ideas: he became a Christian.

He wrote these words in a chapter entitled, "Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion." The epidemics that swept through the later Roman Empire provided plenty of opportunity for the Christians to love their neighbors near and far when the pagans abandoned them. In this epidemic may God give us the grace to see the opportunities not the inconveniences; may he give us the grace to imitate our Lord. We all are privileged have a part to play in this crisis. God has gifted each one of us with spiritual gifts through his Spirit, he presents us with different acts of service we can do unto the Lord, and he is at work in and through us, energizing it all. As Paul writes,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (1 Cor 12:4-6)

May we all be like the Thessalonian Christians. Through us may God's will be done, his kingdom come, a little bit more now on earth as it is already in heaven. This can happen in our current crisis. Indeed, dare I say, it's more likely to happen in this current crisis, as people become aware of the powerlessness of the things that they

have chased after, the things in which they have placed their hope. We have the privilege of being part of God's kingdom, of having embraced the good news that there is another king, Jesus. We have the privilege of being brothers and sisters together, who love, care and look out for one another. And we have the privilege of a sure and certain hope which enables us to endure this crisis with joy.

Let us close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. We petition God, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, [in your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ]. 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; 1:3)

1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 86.

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AS A MOTHER CARES FOR HER CHILDREN



1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Second Message

Bernard Bell

March 29, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

We are in day 13 of Shelter-in-Place. Again, measures that seemed extreme two weeks ago are now normal as much of the world is locked down. These are difficult days. You cannot visit loved ones in hospitals, nursing homes or retirement communities. Grandparents can't see their grandkids. Many of you are fearful and anxious. You feel out of control. Buying toilet paper is one way of feeling in control, but now you can't find any. Uncertainty further intensifies the fear and anxiety. This is all understandable. These are very human responses to our current situation. Where do you turn in your anxiety and fear? Children turn to their Comforter-in-Chief, to mom or dad. They get up into their lap for tender, loving care, for soothing, reassuring words: "It's going to be alright."

We have recently updated the signage on our church campus. I love the graphic that Mickey Cook designed for the cry room, or Baby Zone as it's now called. The image of a mother cradling a baby in her arms conveys safety and security, nurture and care.

Children turn to their parents for loving and soothing care. But where can adults turn in their fear and anxiety? I recognize that some of you have troubled relationships with your parents, that they were and are not safe people for you. Sadly many people also view God this way: he is not a safe place. Instead of a lap into which you can climb you see a frowning face and a big stick. He's the last place to go for comfort. But I always heard my mother begin her prayers, "Our loving heavenly Father." Hearing this so many times shaped me. So I do indeed think of God as my loving heavenly Father, into whose lap I can climb. He's a God I can trust with myself and my future. So I can say,

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still. (Ps 23:1-2, 4, *Scottish Psalter*)

But for some these are hollow words: you don't trust God.

Trust. An infant cradled in her mother's arms is a beautiful picture of trust. But trust is a difficult word at such a time as this. Whom can we trust? Which leaders are trustworthy? Who will tell us the truth? Which media is giving us the real news, not fake news? Which web sites can be trusted?

Karl Barth, the famous pastor and theologian, advised ministers to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. We recently gave up taking the newspaper, so now it's a news app in the other hand. Preachers seek to bridge the gap between the Scriptures and today. I felt this particularly strongly this week as I wrote the teaser for the e-bulletin on Wednesday. I had 1 Thessalonians open in front of me as I wrote, but it could have been the current news. Most of the terms I used in the blurb come straight from to-

day's Bible text but they ring just as true today as 2000 years ago.

I learnt two new terms this week: mental hygiene and sleep hygiene. We are learning to practice physical hygiene: by washing our hands for twenty seconds and doing so many times throughout the day. We are trying to not touch our face—this is hard! In the same way we need to practice mental hygiene. There are things we can do to prevent or counteract the fear, anxiety and stress that we feel. Exercise is good: we are still allowed out for that. Eat well. Sleep well by practicing sleep hygiene, limiting device use before we go to bed. And control our consumption of media, much of which makes us more anxious and stressed. There are many voices out there clamoring for our attention. Not all of these voices are benign. Some of the media does aim for the public good. But other media is driven by celebrities, sensationalism, shock-value and ultimately by profit. Which voices can we trust amid the clamor?

Let me add my voice briefly. It is going to be alright. But this does not mean it is going to be easy. We are still heading into the crisis; the worst is yet to come. But it is going to be alright, for two reasons. Firstly, our hope is in someone and something that cannot be shaken by this crisis. Just like the Thessalonian Christians, "we wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10). Notice he doesn't rescue us from the present troubles. The second reason for hope is that God is at work. He is at work in us, making us more and more like Jesus. And he is at work through us; we have many opportunities to emulate the Thessalonians in our work produced by faith, our labor prompted by love, and our endurance inspired by hope. We have many opportunities to act like the Good Samaritan towards our neighbor.

But it is not going to be easy. Hopes will be crushed. But these are hopes placed in things which are not sufficiently robust to hold up under this crisis. People are dying. Tragically people are dying alone, family unable to be with them. Anyone who says it is going to be easy is lying. One of the reasons Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians was that some of them had recently died under opposition. Paul doesn't deny their suffering, but he reinforces their hope.

So, it is going to be alright, but it is not going to be easy. But I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to trust God and his Word. He is with us and he is at work even now.

In the middle of the first century a new voice arrived in Thessalonica, one proclaiming the gospel of God. Paul proclaimed to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, and he proclaimed to the Romans that there is another king, one called Jesus. But Paul was just one of many voices. Some voices were itinerant speakers, traveling from city to city. Others remained in one place, teaching in a settled environment. The more philosophically-minded voices sought to inspire their students and hearers to a higher life, a well-considered life, a nobler life. But there were other voices, especially the itinerant teachers, who were self-serving, speaking out of less than pure motives. There were plenty of hucksters and shysters, quacks and

hacks, charlatans and frauds, con-artists and scam-artists. Unfortunately these voices have not gone away. Today they flourish in the media, online, in leadership, and, sadly, even in churches. The cynical public might say that they flourish *especially* in churches.

Was Paul one of these voices? Was he trustworthy? Were his words true? Or was he a fraud? In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul feels the need to defend himself and his voice, to differentiate himself from all the false voices.

We saw last week that Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the fledgling church was doing. Timothy brought back good news about their faith and love. But he also brought back some troubling news. The Thessalonian Christians were facing opposition and trouble; they were suffering. This was to be expected because Paul had experienced the same when he was in the city, and he had warned them this would continue. It seems that part of this opposition took the form of non-Christians questioning Paul's motives and integrity, suggesting to the church that Paul was motivated only by self-interest. Having deceived and manipulated them, he had now skipped town, never to be seen again. He was a fraud. If this was indeed what was being said, then Paul was relieved to hear Timothy's report that "you have pleasant memories of us and long to see us" (3:6). So far they are not succumbing to all the doubts cast by the opponents. But in his letter to them, Paul takes the time to address the challenge. After his lengthy and profuse thanksgiving in chapter 1, he gives a defense of how he behaved when he was among them in Thessalonica before he had to leave town abruptly at night. He gives a defense of his voice, that it is a trustworthy voice.

First Paul describes how he did not behave; he contrasts his voice to all the other voices out there (2:1-7a). Then he moves on to how he did behave; why his voice can be considered trustworthy (2:7b-12). We can learn a lot here about how Christians in any sort of leadership should and should not behave. This isn't just for pastors and ministers, but also for small group leaders, for those who work with youth and children, and others. What we see here is also valuable for secular leadership, and is especially pertinent to our current situation.

1. How Paul did not Behave (2:1-7a)

The first part of Paul's defense is to describe how he did not behave when he was present with the Thessalonian Christians. I invite you at home to read along with me.

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you. (1 Thess 2:1-7a NIV)

Repeatedly Paul urges the Christians to think back and remember his time in Thessalonica: "you know...you know...you know." They know that he had suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi,

where he and Silas had been beaten and thrown in jail. *But* that did not deter him from continuing to preach the gospel in the next city, their city. He had the courage to proclaim the good news to them also, even in the face of strong opposition. How did he have this courage? How, having suffered such outrageous treatment in Philippi, could he stand up in Thessalonica and proclaim the good news? Because of God. Since it was the gospel of God that he was proclaiming, God gave him the courage to do so. And this preaching was not in vain: the Thessalonians had responded to the good news and a church was born. It's a very young church, only a few months old when Paul writes this letter.

Next Paul defends his voice; he defends the motives behind his gospel appeal. He contrasts himself and the false voices: "not...nor...nor...but" (3-4). On the negative side he lists three characteristics of the false voices: error, impure motives, trickery.

Paul's appeal did *not* spring from error. False voices do speak error. Some speakers are themselves deluded and believe the errors they spread. They may be sincere but they are misguided. Other false voices know that they are peddling falsehoods; they are frauds driven by a motive other than the truth, whether profit or fame. And for some speakers it's hard to tell whether or not they believe the nonsense they spout. Paul was neither delusional nor peddling delusions when he preached the gospel.

Nor did Paul have impure motives. What multitude of devious devices are covered by this blanket statement of impure motives! There are people seeking to expose the impure motives of politicians, media, and, sadly, Christian leaders.

Nor did Paul use trickery. The word here was originally used to describe fish bait. You know how this works! A bright shiny object or a tasty tidbit is dangled in front of the fish. The fish takes the bait but it's the classic bait-and-switch! The fish is hooked. Clickbait on the internet works the same way. Part of practicing mental hygiene is to be alert to such practices. Part of wisdom is being able to discern the hook hidden within the bait.

On the contrary, Paul spoke as one "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel." He knew that he was entrusted with a precious treasure, and was answerable to God for what he did with this treasure. Here he makes a second contrast: he was seeking to please *not* people *but* God (4b). The world is full of people-pleasers. Many speakers simply want to please and entertain the crowd. But Paul sought to be a God-pleaser. God sees deep into our hearts; he knows our motives. Paul wanted to please God, who one day would say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. In you I am well pleased."

Paul gives a third set of contrasts, again using a "not...nor...nor...but" construction (5-7a). Again he lists a triplet of false motives. The false voices use flattery, mask their greed, and seek human praise.

They use flattering words. They're not interested in the truth, just in people's response to them. They speak to those who want to have their itching ears tickled (2 Tim 4:3).

The public persona of these false voices is fake; it's just a mask hiding the underlying greed, whether for money, praise or fame. Again, the internet is full of such speech and such people. Websites seek eyeballs: they want viewers, the more the better, and however they attract the eyeballs doesn't matter. Clickbait is a pretense. Sensational headlines are a pretense.

Thirdly, the false voices are looking for human praise. They want people to like them. Energized by the praise and adulation of the

crowd, they say whatever will generate this. They surround themselves with sycophants who praise their every word.

But Paul was secure in God, knowing that he was answerable to God alone. Therefore he didn't have to look to people for approval. He could have demanded praise and approval. He and Silas were apostles of Christ. They could have pulled rank. They could have thrown their weight around. They could have insisted on privileges befitting their station. Too many leaders, Christian or otherwise, do so. I am grateful that I came to PBC while Ray Stedman was still there. People used to come to Palo Alto on a Sunday morning to see the Big Man. I was asked once to point him out. The visitor was obviously having trouble spotting the Big Man. Looking around the auditorium, there was no obvious candidate. So I pointed out Ray. He looked just like a regular member of the congregation, wearing his old pale blue cardigan. Nothing to distinguish himself as the Big Man! Ray was a humble man. He did not throw his weight around; he did not pull rank.

Paul has defended his proclamation of the gospel against charges of insincerity, delusion, impure motives, trickery, flattery, hidden greed, and pursuit of human praise. But what was he actually like among the Thessalonians? He says of himself and Silas, "Instead, we were like young children among you." The metaphor of infants could be used a number of ways. Here I think Paul is implying innocence. They were innocent of the scheming manipulations of the false voices. An infant or young child has not yet learnt the devious games that adults play!

2. How Paul did Behave (2:7b-12)

Having defended himself by describing how he did not behave, Paul moves on to describe how he and Silas did behave.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (2:7b-12)

Paul did not seek to take advantage of the Thessalonians. Instead, he likens himself to both a mother and a father. "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you." Wet nurses were common in the Roman world and the resulting attachment was often stronger than the maternal bond. Some of my fellow missionary kids had an *amah*, with whom they became more bonded than with their busy mother. A wet nurse literally gives of herself to the child of another. How much more care therefore would she give to her own children. Maternal instinct is a caring, compassionate instinct. Indeed, the Hebrew word for compassion is derived from the word for "womb." Paul and Silas had become attached to these Christians; they were full of affection for them. Therefore, they were delighted to share with them not only the gospel but also their very selves, to give of themselves self-sacrificially.

They gave of themselves in toil and hardship to pay their own keep. They could have pulled rank as apostles, expecting the church to support them. But they worked to provide their own support.

Presumably Paul worked as a leather-worker, as he was perhaps already doing in Corinth when he wrote this letter. In both cities, his workshop would have been his primary venue for evangelism and discipleship, for sharing the good news and nurturing the young Christians.

Paul also compares himself to a father with his children, using another triplet of words: encouraging, comforting and urging. Encourage and comfort are verbs of empathy. A loving parent shows empathy towards his or her children. Paul understood the situation in Thessalonica. The young Christians were facing opposition. He understood because he too had faced that opposition in Thessalonica, and not for the first time. Therefore, he could empathize because he had been there before. In a time of crisis like this, we look to our leaders for empathy. We want some word of encouragement, comfort and hope amidst all the bad news.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, died at the beginning of this month. We don't associate him with compassion and empathy. But he represents a past generation of CEOs. Empathy is now in vogue among executives. Leaders are expected to have emotional intelligence. EQ is as important as IQ.

But empathy alone is not enough. As a father to his children, Paul also gave direction: "urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." A good father has aspirations for his children. Sometimes these might be the father's own failed aspirations, which is a terrible burden to place on a child. Paul had aspirations for the Thessalonians: that amidst their suffering and the opposition they live into what they really are, God's people. God has called them into his kingdom to live differently, to live life the Jesus Way. God has aspirations for us in this time of crisis.

A word here to those of you who work with our young ones, whether children, Middle School or High School, and also to school teachers. You have a very important role in the lives of your charges. You can no longer meet in person, but modern technology allows you to stay connected. I'm delighted to see the Sunday Morning family Resources on the PBCC website under Children's Ministry. Children and youth are at an impressionable age. You have the privilege of helping to nurture them, supplementing but not replacing their parents. You can provide an empathetic leadership, encouraging and comforting, but also an aspirational leadership, directing them towards a well-considered life, a life lived for God in Christ through his Spirit. Thank you for being a safe and trustworthy place for your students and youth.

At the age of 12 my mother was invited to join a group of girls who met weekly in a church with a deaconess, Miss Smith. She also joined Christian Endeavour, the forerunner of modern youth ministry. Her group leader was Agnes Grey. She left school the week she turned 15 and went to work, but continued in both these groups. She talked about these two women for the rest of her life—for 75 years! So I grew up knowing the names of my mother's two youth group leaders. This is a tremendous legacy. As a nursing mother cares for her children, so these two single women cared for my mother whose own mother was unable to care. Not only did they care and nurture, they also inspired their young girls to participate in ministry.

We have many faithful ministry leaders who have left and are leaving a great legacy, serving in Sunday School, with Middle School and with High School. Thank you all.

3. Imitating Jesus (2:13-16)

Paul is so overjoyed at how the Thessalonians have flourished under his maternal care and paternal empathy and inspiration that he bursts into thanksgiving again:

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. (2:13-16)

God's word is at work in these believers, shaping and transforming them. The evidence of this transformation is how they are responding to their current difficulties, to opposition and suffering. Paul returns to the language of imitation that he used in chapter 1. Previously he praised them: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1:6). Now he praises them for imitating the churches in Judea. I'm sure they wished they weren't imitating those Judean churches, for they were suffering at the hands of their fellow Jews, even unto death. And those churches were replicating the suffering of the Lord Jesus, who also had suffered unto death. I'm sure Paul would say to them, "It won't be easy, but it will be alright." As for those persecuting them, God will deal with them in his own good time; leave it to him. Meanwhile their suffering will continue and more may die. But God is present with them in Christ through his Spirit. He is at work in them and through them.

I cannot promise you that this coronavirus crisis will quickly be over. It is going to get worse. What I can say is, "It won't be easy, but it will be alright." God knows this. He has not forgotten us. When his people thought he had forgotten he reassured them,

**"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!"** (Isa 49:15)

His eyes, ears and heart are open to his people. He sees, hears, and feels our condition. He can be trusted. He is "the father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3). And he has aspirations for us: that we live into the opportunities of this time as his people empowered by his Spirit to live the Jesus Way: loving God and loving neighbor. May we be generous with our loving care, loving our neighbor as did the Good Samaritan.

Let us close with the *prayer for Generosity*:

Lord, teach us to be generous,
to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to look for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your holy will.¹

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thess 3:16)

1. Frequently attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (16th century), but probably written in the late 19th century.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE



1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13

Third Message

Bernard Bell

April 5, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

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 five 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 other's 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.

I. 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. 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 fellow-

ship, 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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1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Fourth Message

Bernard Bell

August 16, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Life Together. We miss it. Restrictions on gatherings have now entered their sixth month with no end in sight. We long to see one another in person rather than in little Zoom boxes. We miss Life Together. We miss seeing one another face-to-face, in the flesh. But families are also finding that they have too much life together. Couples and families are not used to spending so much time together in the same space. They want a break from each other! So, Life Together is invigorating, but Life Together can also be taxing.

Christians are a gathered people: gathered to God in Christ through his Spirit to be his people, to be a new family made up of lots of very different people who were not family before. And we are gathered into local churches which meet together regularly, albeit now virtually. As a gathered community we learn how to live life together in a way that is pleasing to God.

On his second missionary journey, Paul and his traveling companions, Silas and Timothy, crossed over the Aegean Sea into Europe for the first time. They preached the gospel in Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Berea. They couldn't stay long in each city, only a few weeks, because their preaching about Jesus provoked riots and they had to leave in a hurry. But in each city a new church was formed: new followers of Jesus learning how to be family, learning how to live together in community. Though Paul was quickly physically-distanced from these new communities, he had a long, close attachment to them, especially Philippi and Thessalonica. In our New Testament we have three of his letters to these two churches.

Earlier this year we looked at the first half of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. We saw how pleased he was with this young church, how thankful for "your work produced by faith (fulness), your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). Faith, Love and Hope: that's the title of this series. We saw the depths of Paul's affection for these young Christians, "as a nursing mother cares for her children...as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging" (2:7, 11-12). He longed to see them again face-to-face, but was prevented from doing so. Instead, he sent Timothy, who returned with a good report. But this only intensified Paul's longing to see them in person to "supply what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). "What is lacking in your faith": it's not that they were lacking in doctrinal understanding. Rather, there was some shortfall in their faithfulness to Jesus their Lord, in how they were living their daily lives, how they were living life together. Paul wanted to make some repairs so that they would be better-equipped for this new life together as the people of God in Thessalonica.

Still unable to visit them, Paul wrote them this letter, probably sending it with Timothy. The last two chapters contain his remedial instruction addressing some areas in which they were falling short in their faithful living. This is what we will look at these next four Sundays. Lest we be too harsh on the Thessalonians, we must remember that this is a very young church, that Paul has started his letter with three chapters of affectionate thanksgiving and praise, and that his

instruction is course-correction rather than rebuke. Remember, he is very fond of this church.

We resume Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians at the beginning of chapter 4.

1. A Life Pleasing to God (4:1-2)

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. (1 Thess 4:1-2 NIV)

These "other matters" to which Paul now turns are the remedial instructions addressing the shortfalls in faithful living that Timothy has reported. During the few weeks that Paul was present in Thessalonica, he had instructed the new Christians not just about the right things to believe, but also the right things to do. We have a tendency in the American evangelical church to privilege believing over doing, faith over works. We even hold them to be in opposition: faith or works, not both. What matters is to preach the gospel of God's grace in Christ, so that people will profess faith in Jesus and be saved. Saving faith in Jesus is the end. But saving faith is not the end; it's only the beginning. Confessing Jesus Christ as Lord is the entrance into a lifelong journey of learning and practicing how to live in faithfulness, how to live in loyalty and devotion, to the one to whom we have now given our allegiance: even Jesus Christ our Lord. This is a life of ongoing transformation, of being formed into God's likeness in Christ through the work of his Spirit in us. The Thessalonians have made a good start: they are living lives pleasing to God. Paul urges them to do so more and more, to keep pressing on in their spiritual formation.

In our call to worship we heard these well-known words from Romans 12: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Do not conform but be transformed. Or, as J. B. Phillips famously translated this: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within." Christian life should be counter-cultural. We are called to be different.

Paul addresses two aspects of Life Together. The first is negative: what *not* to do in the realm of sexual ethics (4:3-8). The second is positive: what *to* do in loving one another (9-12). Both called for radically different behavior in the first century. Both are still hot-button topics today: sexual ethics and brotherly love.

2. Holy Sexuality (4:3-8)

Concerning sexual ethics, Paul writes,

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control

your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. (4:3-8)

“It is God’s will.” When I was reading this passage with a group earlier this year we had a long discussion on this verse about finding the will of God. Christians often place enormous pressure upon themselves to find God’s will, his one perfect will, and they live in fear that if they make one wrong choice they may miss out on his perfect will for them forever thereafter. But God has the same will for every one of his people. It’s simply one word: sanctification or holiness. Paul uses the word three times in this paragraph, though NIV translates it in three different ways: sanctified (3), holy (4), live a holy life (7).

Sanctification: this is a very demanding will. Holiness is nothing less than our total dedication to the interests of God. Some of you are familiar with the text at the front of PBC Palo Alto that reads: “You are not your own, you are bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20). This is a hard word for a society that values individual freedom, personal choice and autonomy. This calls for surrender of our own will, but herein we find our true freedom: “whom to serve is perfect freedom.” The one to whom we surrender our will is the one who has created us and therefore knows better than anyone what it means to be human: he is the designer of humans. The one to whom we surrender our will is the one who entered into our human story as the one perfect human and therefore knows better than anyone what it means to be human: he is the true human. It is in surrendering to God in Christ through his Spirit that we find our true humanity, because what we surrender is our false self that is self-centered and inward-turned. Surrendering our false self and putting on true humanity as we are formed into Christ is a life-long process. It doesn’t happen instantaneously.

Under the heading of sanctification, Paul lists three specific items under the heading of sanctification: avoid sexual immorality, learn to control your own body, and don’t overreach and take advantage of a Christian brother or sister.

Sexual immorality (*porneia*) covers all sexual activity outside marriage. The Jews of the first century had a high sexual ethic. They understood holiness because God had called Israel to be a holy people, to live life differently from the surrounding peoples. God told them: don’t behave like the Egyptians from whose land you have come; don’t behave like the Canaanites into whose land you are entering; behave in a different way: be holy as I am holy, says the Lord. But Jesus upped the ante; he intensified the law to probe behind behavior into the desire of the human heart: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28).

Roman Gentiles did not have a high sexual ethic. Sanctification or holiness was an unknown concept. As in many societies there was a double standard. It was accepted that men follow their urges, thereby showing their virility, their manliness. They saw no need to control their bodies. But reputable women were expected to be chaste. So the Christian sexual ethic called for a radical change of behavior for Gentile men. They had to learn to control their bodies,

and no longer follow their own passionate desires. This was radically counter-cultural. Evidently some Christians in Thessalonica were struggling with this radical change in behavior.

Tragically, whatever the sexual misbehavior in the Thessalonian church, it was damaging life together: someone was wronging and taking advantage of a Christian brother or sister. We don’t know what “this matter” is in v. 6, perhaps adultery, but presumably the recipients of the letter knew what Paul was referring to. Someone, or a pair, were acting in their own self-interest, indulging their own desires, to the harm of community life together, to the harm of their brother or sister. This is against fundamental principles of sanctification in the Christian life as God’s people.

Again notice that Paul places these three commands under *sanctification*, holiness. We cannot have a serious conversation about Christian sexual ethics without agreeing first on the need for spiritual formation, that Christians are called to the life-long process of sanctification. The spirit of this age is self-indulgent: indulge your desires, express your individuality, especially in the realm of sexuality. We should not be surprised that non-Christians engage in sexual immorality: they don’t know God, and holiness is an unknown concept. But the Christian sexual ethic is counter-cultural today, just as it was in the first century. It presupposes submitting our desires to the process of sanctification.

We are all creatures of desire. We are not like Buddhists who believe that desire itself is wrong. Desires and affections are part of what it means to be human. But when we come to Christ we find that our desires and affections are disordered. One aspect of spiritual formation into Christ is the re-ordering of our affections, the channeling of our desires in a way that is healthy for us and promotes flourishing of all around us in Life Together. Again, the Christian life is not just about what we believe, having the right doctrine. It is about how we live life every single day, conformed not to the pattern of this world, but to Christ.

In the second half of the paragraph (6b-8), Paul gives three reasons to avoid sexual immorality: the Lord will punish such wrongdoers, God has called us to holiness not uncleanness, and such behavior rejects the sanctifying work of the Spirit in us. Notice the Trinitarian shape of these three reasons. We confess Jesus as Lord. As Lord, he cares about how we behave in allegiance to him, and he will one day return and judge. Our indulgence of desire makes a mockery of our confession of Jesus as Lord. Secondly, it makes a mockery of God’s purpose for us: he has called us out of impurity into holiness. Thirdly, it makes a mockery of the Holy Spirit whom God has put within us not only to give us understanding in the realm of belief, but also to transform us into Christ-likeness in the realm of faithful living.

3. Life Together (4:9-12)

Paul’s next paragraph is more positive: he turns from how *not* to behave in Life Together to some instruction about what such life in community should be.

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of

outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.
(4:9-12)

“Your love for one another”: this is the single Greek word *phila-delphia*, meaning love of brother or sister. Sibling love was highly valued in the Roman world. Men and families competed with one another to acquire greater honor and position in society. But siblings promoted one another. Family loyalty was very important.

The early church had a much more expansive view of sibling love. In Christ God has created a new family and redrawn the family lines. All those who respond to the proclamation that “there is another King, Jesus,” and give him their allegiance are adopted into God’s family through his Spirit. This family is being assembled from every nation, language, tribe and land. Male and female together as siblings. Slave and free together as siblings. Jew and Gentile together as siblings. Greek and Barbarian, even Scythian, the barbarians beyond the barbarians, as brother and sister together. The first-century world had not seen anything like this. It started in Antioch where Jews and Gentiles were first equals in Christ. Antioch, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, a cosmopolitan city full of Jews and Gentiles, didn’t know what to make of this: Jews and Gentiles *together*. They called them Christ-people, Christians. This was not intended as a compliment but as an expression of strangeness, a label for a people of very distinctive behavior. What was this distinctive behavior? That two very different groups, Jews and Gentiles, were now bound together as one new family.

Concerning such brotherly and sisterly love, the Thessalonian Christians had no need for Paul to instruct them further, other than to say, “do so more and more.” They were a shining example. Would that one could say that of the church today. But one cannot. Many churches are still segregated. The church is segregated because the white church would not accept blacks as brothers and sisters. The church of Western Europe, starting 600 years ago, created the construct of race to justify treating others as less than brothers and sisters, even as less than human. Not so the Thessalonian church. Not so the first-century church. They loved one another across all the cultural and societal boundaries, across all the hierarchies, across all the divisions. They were one in Christ Jesus. They were family. They were a community of *philadelphia*, loving one another as brother and sister.

We want to learn from the early church. PBCC did not set out to be a multi-ethnic church—there are plenty of churches that are doing that, including here in the South Bay. But we have become a multi-ethnic church—primarily a dual-ethnic church. I am delighted that the complexion of our church family has changed over the past twenty years. I am pleased that so many non-white people feel welcome here, feel at home, feel part of the family. I look forward to us becoming even more reflective of the community in which we live as a church, both this local community of Cupertino and the wider community of the South Bay.

The whole country and many churches are now participating in the national conversation about race and racial justice. How do we treat one another as equals when we have such a long history of not doing so? We are doing our own little part. Five weeks ago, on July 12, we had our first Conversation on Race. On August 30 we will have our second Conversation.

Paul is delighted with the brotherly love of the Thessalonian church, which is a model for all churches. But he doesn’t rest there. He does have aspirations for the church, in vv. 11-12. He wants them to aspire to something; he wants them to have ambition. The root

idea of the word translated “make it your ambition” is “love of honor.” He wants them to pursue behavior that brings honor and praise. This was language the first century understood. The Roman elite constantly strove for public recognition, to climb up the socio-political ladder, rendering public service in the endless quest of honor and praise. Silicon Valley is full of such people, striving to be seen, to be praised and honored. We all want to be seen, to be praised and honored. We want to be noticed. Social media users seek fame, however fleeting. YouTube has created many stars. In the current election campaign candidates clamor to be noticed, to win our vote.

So what ambition does Paul urge upon the Thessalonian Christians? What does he want them to strive for? Again he gives a list of three items: live quietly, mind your own business, and work with your own hands. This doesn’t sound very glamorous. For Christians oriented to performance, results, growth and success, this is a let down. This too is counter-cultural not only to contemporary society but also to much contemporary Christian society, to church business. So what is Paul recommending in these seemingly humble activities?

Firstly, live quietly. This doesn’t mean live silently without speaking. I prefer to think of this word as “non-agitation.” Live in a state of serenity. Don’t be disruptive. Don’t be all worked-up inside. With the pandemic, with Black Lives Matter protests, with the ramp-up to the election, it can be very challenging to live in a non-agitated manner. We can be externally silent, but deeply agitated inside. Christians are to be a serene people.

Secondly, mind your own business. Tend to your own affairs. Don’t meddle in the affairs of others. Don’t be busy-bodies. Get on with the task which God has given you, however ordinary and unexciting that might be.

Thirdly, work with your own hands. Paul engaged in manual labor even during the short time that he was in Thessalonica (2:9). He wrote this letter from Corinth where for 18 months he worked as a tent-maker in the workshop of Priscilla and Aquila. This is not a very glamorous job, but Paul was strategic. No doubt both Christians and non-Christians visited the shop. Non-Christians he would tell about Jesus. Christians he would instruct in Christian teaching and counsel in practical matters of daily life. Like Jews in general he saw value and dignity in ordinary work, whereas his rivals, the super-apostles of whom he writes in 2 Corinthians, thought this beneath their dignity.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. We don’t know what news Timothy had brought back that prompted this reply from Paul. It was a significant problem for Paul will address the matter again in chapter 5 and again in his second letter.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. These three things don’t attract much attention. They won’t get written up in the Christian press. But God sees such faithful presence and he is well-pleased. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, now OMF, said, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.” I grew up in OMF, familiar with this statement from an early age. It is deeply-embedded in my thinking. Similarly, Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

Many people want to do great things for God, but God cares about us doing little things. He sees the little things that we do, and we have honor in his eyes.

During this pandemic, when our movements are restricted, you

may wonder what you can do. You can be faithful in the little things: love your children, love your neighbor, reach out to someone, be kind, be gentle, be generous. Do those things which are mentioned in Romans 12. Be a faithful presence in the world. When I think of faithful presence, I think of someone like Don Burgess, who for over fifty years has been a faithful presence with the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico—the little people living deep in the canyons of the Copper Canyon area.

In our conversation on race many are wondering what we can do. We want to do something to make a difference. We want to fix the problem. But racial injustice took centuries to create and it will take a long time to reverse. In the meantime there are little things we can do. We can listen, we can learn, we can lament, and we can love. We can work on overcoming the tendency to fear the Other. We can work on reaching out to people who look different from us. We can be a faithful presence.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. Paul gives a two-fold purpose for this behavior: “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (12).

Outsiders. The talk of racial justice has raised again the language of Insider and Outsider. It's a natural tendency to divide up the world into insiders and outsiders, us and them. The Jews did this, distinguishing themselves from the Gentiles. The Greeks distinguished themselves from the barbarians, and the Scythians beyond them. The lines are redrawn for the church. The insiders are those who are in Christ. The Thessalonian Christians have been very good at extending *philadelphia*, brotherly love, throughout the whole province of Macedonia, to all who are in Christ in this new family. The outsiders are those who are not in Christ, but here Paul is saying that they are watching. They are watching how those on the inside are living. What they need to see is that those on the inside are living counter-culturally, and that this is deeply attractive, so that they will want to come inside. This is how it worked in the early church. The counter-cultural behavior of the early church was, on the one hand, deeply-puzzling to those outside because they hadn't seen anything like it, but also deeply attractive. Yet so often the contemporary church in the West arouses cynicism or apathy or disgust

because it is so indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. We have been squeezed into world's mold. But we're not attractive when we've been conformed to those outside.

The second reason Paul gives is “so that you will have need of no one.” Probably what was happening is that there were members of the community who were not working with their own hands, who were not minding their own business, who were busy-bodies, who were disruptive. They were taking advantage of community members. Now there are people that the Christian community is to support: widows, orphans, just as God called OT Israel to look out for widows, orphans and strangers in their midst. We will always have the needy in our midst, whom it is good to support. But that was not evidently the problem here. Christians who should have supported themselves were taking advantage of others, putting their own interests first. But we are to act for the good of the community.

Paul wrote this to the Thessalonian church 2000 years ago in a very different setting, but I find it very relevant for today.

I close with the *Prayer for Generosity*:

Lord, teach us to be generous,
to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to look for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your holy will.¹

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)

1. Frequently attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (16th century), but probably written in the late 19th century.

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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS



1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Fifth Message

Bernard Bell

August 23, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

The current pandemic has brought months of enforced isolation. One of the tragedies of this isolation is that loved ones have been dying in hospitals and nursing homes, unattended by family and friends. Care-givers and health-care workers do what they can, but it's not the same as the comfort of family. This happened to our next-door neighbor, who entered an assisted living facility last Fall. During lockdown Sue would drop off things for her, and chat through the window, each on their cell phone. In June she was diagnosed with COVID and died in hospital two weeks later.

Family and friends who have lost loved ones are themselves isolated in their grief, unable to receive visitors to wrap them in a comforting hug. We have been unable to gather around to weep with those who weep, to mourn with those who mourn. We have been unable to hold services for those who have passed. A few funeral and memorial services are held on Zoom and YouTube. But it's just not the same. And now the fires are isolating us further because we don't want to be outside, given the air quality.

Our Scripture reading was drawn from John 11, the death and resurrection of Lazarus. When Lazarus died, many Jews came to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany "to comfort them in the loss of their brother" (11:19). Finally, four days later, Jesus came. Martha went to meet him, and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (21). Then Mary hurried out to meet him and said the same thing, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (32).

"If only you had been here!" If only we could have been there! How often have these words been said during this pandemic? These were words that Paul was saying 2000 years ago. "If only I could be there with you!" How he longed to visit Thessalonica to see the young Christians face-to-face. Unable to visit, Paul had sent Timothy to see how they were doing. The report he brought back only intensified Paul's longing: "If only I could be there with you!" "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess 3:10). "Supply what is lacking in your faith." Paul wanted to give them remedial instruction in areas in which they were falling short in their faithfulness to Jesus, their Lord and King. And he wanted to do it in person. But his way was still blocked. He couldn't be there.

Furthermore, Timothy had reported that some of the Christians in Thessalonica had died. How Paul longed to be there with the saints to comfort them in their grief. Instead, he had to do so by letter. In the two sections of the letter that we will look at today and next Sunday, Paul provides two words of comfort. He ends each section with the same words, "Therefore encourage (or comfort) one another" (4:18; 5:11). Yet these two sections have generated much speculation about end times, about the so-called Rapture and about the timing of Jesus' return like a thief in the night. They have generated fear and fascination rather than comfort. Can we read them in such a way that they are the words of comfort that Paul intended for his beloved Thessalonian brothers and sisters?

Our passage today is the last paragraph of 1 Thessalonians 4:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For 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. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13-18 NIV)

Paul writes concerning those who sleep, a common metaphor in both Testaments for God's people who have died. Why have these people died and why are the living grieving them? The prevailing view used to be that Paul had so raised expectations of the imminent return of Jesus that they were taken by surprise when believers died before Jesus returned. But the current view is that these are Christians who had died under the tribulation and hostility of opponents of the gospel. This makes more sense. Paul has several times mentioned their affliction and suffering. He has praised their faithfulness, their loyalty to Jesus in the face of opposition. He has praised their endurance in the face of this hostility, "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). And he has hinted already that some have died in tribulation (2:14). Those who have died are martyrs, killed for being faithful to Jesus. They are "the saints, who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed."

We grieve when someone dies, because death tears the fabric of life. Death severs the deep connections among family and friends. But we all must die; we are all mortal. Some die in good old age, some die young. We die because our bodies wear out. We die from disease or illness or accident. But we all die. The pandemic and now the fires have made us more conscious than ever of death.

Much more problematic is the death of the righteous at the hands of the wicked. Such death tears not only the fabric of life but the moral fabric of the universe. Evil triumphs over good. Evil kills good for being good. The cry over such injustice has been rising from the ground ever since Cain killed his brother Abel. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants" (Ps 116:15), we heard in our call to worship. But why? How long, O Lord? This is the martyr's cry, and the cry of those who grieve their unjust death. What comfort can Paul give?

It is alright for them to grieve. When he saw where Lazarus was laid, "Jesus wept." And the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" (11:35-36). Humans are relational creatures, and we grieve because death

severs relationships. But there are two ways of grieving: as those with hope and those without hope. My parents are buried in a public cemetery in Edinburgh, first my father then my mother. Walking around the cemetery, looking at the gravestones, I've been struck by the contrast between the older graves and the newer ones. Many of the older stones are inscribed with Scripture, expressing hope and confidence. But that reliance on Scripture has passed; we're in a different age. The most common motif on the newer stones is the crest or shield of the deceased's football (soccer) team. This emblem testifies to their loyalty and hope: loyalty to a football club, and hope that it will win the championship. That's an inadequate hope to sustain life. It's an inadequate hope to carry beyond the grave. It's a sorry testimony summing up a human life that is capable of so much more. On our father's stone we put a Scripture verse as a testimony to his loyalty and hope, and as a proclamation to all who would walk by: "Blessed are they who die in the Lord" (Rev 14:13). Ten years later our mother was laid to rest under that same testimony and proclamation.

So how can the Thessalonian Christians grieve with hope? What is the hope that Paul wants them to have? He gives them two reasons for hope.

1. The Creed (14)

Paul's first reason for hope is the Creed, the common Confession of the Church (14). We believe. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again." This sounds like a credal statement of the very early church. We affirmed the same when we said the Apostles' Creed together. The majority of the Creed, whether it be the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, is a statement of facts of history. First, a short statement about God: He is the Maker of all things. Second, a fuller statement about Jesus Christ: he was born; he suffered, died and was buried. He descended into hell, that is, into the realm of the dead—he really died. He rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and God seated him at his right hand as Lord and King. It is good to affirm this together regularly. Doing so shapes our thinking. It forms us spiritually.

Based on this credal statement about the past, we believe something about the future: "and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." The Apostles' Creed turns to the future with the statement about Jesus: "from there he shall come," that is, from the Father's right hand he shall return to earth. And, Paul states, we believe that he will bring the Christian dead with him. They will not be left behind!

2. The Word of the Lord (15-17)

Paul's second reason for hope is the Word of the Lord. He has this on the authority of Jesus himself. He is confident that when Jesus returns, "we who are still alive...will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep." The Christian living will not have priority over the Christian dead. The dead will not be left behind when Jesus returns. And the living, who are currently left behind on earth, will not jump to the front of the line, leaving the dead behind. No one is left behind!

In verses 16-17 Paul lays out a sequence of four events when the Lord returns. This, presumably, is the word of the Lord that Paul received.

The first event is the descent of Jesus from heaven (16a). This is what the angels had told the disciples as they were peering into the

sky trying to see where Jesus had gone: "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). His descent will be marked by a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God. That is, the cry of command from the archangel is God's trumpet-blast. Notice that there are two pairs of trumpets in our window, one pair in the Israel panel, the other pair in the panel of the new heavens and the new earth.

The second event concerns the dead in Christ, the sleepers, those who have died before Christ's return (16b). They shall be raised first, before the next event. Resurrection! Just as Jesus died and rose again, so will those who participate in him, who are "in Christ." They have died, but they will rise. The archangel's call of command on God's trumpet summons this resurrection of the dead. They are re-embodied on earth. In Paul's stirring words, made so famous in Handel's *Messiah*:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"(1 Cor 15:51-55)

The third event concerns the Christian living, those left behind on earth until Christ's return (17a). Then, only after the resurrection of the dead, "we together with them." We, the Christian living, together with them, the Christian dead newly-resurrected. We together with them. Here is the first reunion: the Christian dead and the Christian living. Together we are caught up into the clouds, the same cloud into which Jesus had disappeared and through which he reappears, the cloud which so often in the OT represents the glory of God's presence. We together with them are caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Here is the second reunion: all Christ's people will meet the Lord as he returns.

But here there has been much misunderstanding. This reunion doesn't stay in the middle of the air. It goes somewhere, but where does it go? Who turns around? Is it Jesus who turns around? Or is it his people? In what has long been the popular view, it is Jesus who turns around. He takes his people back to heaven with him. He doesn't come all the way to earth. Those still alive on earth, the non-Christians, are Left Behind! This sudden snatching of Christians out of the world is the so-called Rapture. The word "rapture" is derived from the Latin word used to translate "caught up": "we will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (17). There is a rapture: the living and the resurrected dead will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. But where does this reunion party go? In which direction? This is the big question.

The popular view of the Rapture misunderstands two key words in this passage: the *coming* of the Lord and the *meeting* with the Lord. Both words had specific meanings in the first century. Both were used as technical terms to refer to two aspects of the same event. The arrival of a senior dignitary, such as the emperor, to visit a city was described as his *parousia*, his coming. The word *parousia* means

“presence”: the dignitary arrived so as to be present. He didn’t approach the city only to turn around and go away. He came to the city so as to enter and be present with the people. As the dignitary approached the city, the leading citizens would come out of the city to meet him and escort him into the city. Such a meeting is described elsewhere in the NT.

When Paul approached Rome the Christians came out to meet him—some one day’s journey, some two. After meeting Paul they turned around and escorted him into the city (Acts 28:15). The word “meet” covers all three actions: coming out of the city, meeting, and escorting back in to the city. Likewise, in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), the bride’s attendants were woken at midnight by the cry, “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” Five wise virgins had their lamps ready, went out to meet the bridegroom and escorted him back into the bride’s house for the wedding banquet.

When the Christian living and the resurrected Christian dead meet the Lord in the air, it is we who will turn around to escort the Lord to earth. It is not the Lord who turns around and leads us into heaven. He is the returning King coming to earth. He is the bridegroom coming for his bride. His people go out to meet him and escort him in great joy.

The fourth and final stage: “And so we will be with the Lord forever” (17b) And so, in this way: the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the Christian dead, the reunion with them of the Christian living to meet the arrival of the Lord and escort him to earth. In this way we will be with the Lord forever. All who are in Christ will be with him. None will be left behind.

What is the basis of Paul’s confidence, of his hope? It is the creed: the confession that Jesus died, Jesus rose again. Everything is based upon this. Jesus rose as the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:8; Rev 1:5). He was dead but now lives. He has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18), and is able to release from that realm all who are his. He is the forerunner (Heb 6:20), the one who has gone before us. United to Christ, participating in him, we follow him in death and resurrection. This is what baptism represents: our death and resurrection. This is what the Christian life is about: death and resurrection. The daily and life-long process of dying to self and rising in Christ, of putting off the old and putting on the new. At the end we shall put off the corruptible body and be re clothed in the incorruptible. Those who have died will be resurrected into an incorruptible body. Those who are still alive will be changed, will be transformed into an incorruptible body. Just as in the middle of time Jesus rose in an incorruptible body. In all this we follow Jesus Christ our Lord. He is our pioneer, the forerunner.

Now this is a word of comfort! “Therefore encourage (comfort) one another with these words” (18). Those who have died in the current tribulation will not be disadvantaged at the return of Jesus. The Christians can take heart in the communion of saints, the communion of the saints who have died and those who are still alive; the communion of the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant, of the saints who have passed victorious, often through martyrdom, and the saints who maintain the struggle here on earth to be faithful amidst tribulation. The Church Militant commemorates the Church Triumphant every year on All Saints Day, November 1. On this day the church sings the hymn I asked James to play for our offertory. “For all the saints who from their labors rest, Who Thee by faith before the world confessed.” Verse 5: “But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day, The saints triumphant rise in bright array, The King of Glory passes on his way. Alleluia!”

We can continue to persevere in hope under tribulation. We can continue to be faithful to Jesus, even in the face of death. We can be quiet, still, serene, unperturbed. We can get on with living our lives as faithful presence in the midst of a hostile world. We can endure because we have hope.

There is a timeline here, but it looks nothing like many of the timelines that have been developed from this passage. The popular idea of the Rapture arose about 200 years ago, first in the UK with J. N. Darby, then it spread here to the USA where it was popularized especially by the Scofield Study Bible. It was taught in many Bible schools and countless churches, including PBC in former days. This popular idea of the Rapture has caused considerable damage. I want to point out just four areas of its negative impact.

1. The Rapture breeds an escapist mentality. If our hope is that we are going to be snatched out of this world, then the only thing that really matters is to get people saved so that they have their ticket on that day and they won’t be left behind. It is reductionistic.

2. The Rapture fails to prepare the church to endure under suffering. The Rapture removes the church from the world before the supposed seven-year Great Tribulation. The idea of the Rapture could only have arisen in a society that was not undergoing great tribulation. But tribulation was the expected lot of the early church. The Thessalonian church was under tribulation. In many parts of the world today the church is under great tribulation. The church is called to be faithful and to endure in the midst of tribulation, not hope that it will be snatched out of the world and not have to face tribulation.

3. The Rapture breeds a negative attitude to the earth and creation care. We will be removed from the earth, which is not our home, we’re just passing through. The earth will be destroyed first by the violence of the Great Tribulation and Armageddon, then in a final cataclysmic judgment. Therefore Christians shouldn’t do anything to make this world a better place. I’ve heard this so often!

4. The Rapture is not conducive to a quiet life. It breeds either fear or fascination. Fear of not being ready and thus being left behind. Back in the 1970s when people watched the movie *Like a Thief in the Night*, or read Hal Lindsay’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, many Christians were terrified and very anxious. Or fascination with prophetic timelines and with all the violence and military hardware that will be unleashed during the Great Tribulation. But Paul has called the Thessalonians to live a quiet life.

The return of our Lord Jesus is indeed our great hope. He will return to earth as its rightful King. Meanwhile, we live out our lives as a colony of heaven on earth, a metaphor that Paul uses twice in his letter to the Philippians. As a colony, we seek to extend the footprint of heaven on earth, until heaven descend and fill earth. God cares about this world he has made. He loves it. As his created and redeemed people we are to care about this world also. We are to be good for the world, both the people and the earth itself. Let us live quiet lives in faithful presence, engaged in work produced by faithfulness, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3).

Earlier in the service we said the Apostles’ Creed. I would like us to say it again, hopefully now with more meaning and understanding. The creed is in three sections. First a brief section about God: he made all things. Then a longer section about Jesus Christ: what he did in the past followed by what he will do in the future: he will come again from the Father’s right hand. In the third section of the creed we affirm our belief in the communion of saints, the res-

urrection of the body and the life everlasting. I encourage you at home to teach your children the Apostles' Creed. It is a great thing to commit to memory.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thess 3:16)

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I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

PEACE AND SECURITY



1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Sixth Message

Bernard Bell

August 30, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Peace and Security. The coronavirus has shaken our sense of peace and security. In their place have arisen fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Some have asked if the pandemic is a sign of the End Times. And now the fires that rage all around us have turned the sun to darkness and the moon to blood. Is the end nigh? Is the Day of the Lord upon us?

We are all now conscious of the need for protective clothing to provide safety. We wear face masks to protect one another—even at the Tour de France which began yesterday. Healthcare workers suit up in PPE, personal protective equipment, to protect themselves. The firefighters suit up in protective equipment. The police suit up in riot gear. They all hope that their clothing is adequate for their security. What clothing should we put on to feel secure?

Two thousand years ago the young church in Thessalonica was anxious and uncertain about the Day of the Lord. They had two concerns. Firstly, they were anxious about their Christian brothers and sisters who had died under persecution. What would happen to these martyrs when the Lord returned? We looked at this last week (1 Thess 4:13-18). Paul gave them a word of comfort. At the Lord's return the Christian dead would be resurrected and reunited with the Christian living. Together they would greet the Lord in the air and escort him to earth as its returning King. "And so we will be with the Lord forever" (4:17). Paul urged them to comfort one another with these words.

Secondly, they were anxious about themselves. Would they be ready for the Day of the Lord? Would they pass the Lord's judgment? This is the concern we turn to today. Again, Paul gives them a word of comfort. And again this passage has aroused speculation about the future. What word of comfort does Paul give them? And how should we live today in such unsettling times?

Our passage today is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, which I will take in three sections.

1. Like a Thief in the Night (5:1-3)

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thess 5:1-3 NIV)

In general Paul is very pleased with how this young church is living in faithfulness to Jesus. But there are a few areas in which he feels they need some remedial instruction to "supply what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). This he provides in these last two chapters of his letter.

Paul now turns to the topic of "times and dates" or "times and seasons." This phrase is shorthand for the timing of the End, the arrival of the End Times. Paul uses two terms to refer to the End Times. In the previous passage Paul wrote about the *parousia*, the

coming of the Lord Jesus—his Second Coming, his return to earth. In this passage Paul refers to the Day of the Lord. What is the Day of the Lord? It is the day when God intervenes to put things right. It is the day when God acts in both judgment and salvation, to overthrow the wicked and save his people, and thereby vindicate his own righteousness. It is a day that has come but is yet to come. It is a day frequently mentioned by the OT prophets. Israel was eager for the Day of the Lord to come. But they shouldn't have been so eager, for God came in judgment first on them. God's own people had broken loyalty and defected to the side of the wicked. God brought judgment on them, first the northern kingdom Israel, then the southern kingdom Judah. The Day of the Lord arrived in the middle of time, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God in Christ defeated not any human enemy but the greater enemies of sin and death. Jesus rose as the firstborn into the new age. And all who are in Christ follow him into this new age. The Day of the Lord marks the transition from one age to the new age. But there awaits a yet future Day of the Lord, when God will finally put all things right.

The Day of the Lord is the same as the *parousia*, the Lord's return, but with a different focus. The Lord's return focuses on his presence with his people. The Day of the Lord focuses on judgment, salvation and vindication.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they know very well the timing of the day of the Lord. It will come like a thief in the night. This metaphor is used seven times in the NT, in the gospels, the epistles, and the book of Revelation. The phrase "like a thief in the night" was made famous by the 1972 movie of this name, featuring Larry Norman's song, *I Wish We'd All Been Ready*. If we knew which night and what time the thief was coming we would indeed be ready.

We are concerned today about home burglaries, so many of us have home security systems that can alert us anywhere in the world. Today many burglaries take place in the daytime, sometimes brazenly so. But the motif of the thief in the night was a very familiar one for me growing up in rural Thailand. The robbers always came at night. Every night we locked up our house tight. Every night my dad brought his motorbike into a storage area and locked it up with a heavy chain. Still the robbers would prowl around at night, and sometimes they would get into the house, even with us inside. We knew the robbers would come, but we didn't know which night.

We may feel secure, saying "Peace and safety" (NIV; "security" in most versions). But often this is a false sense of security. Hear what the Lord said to the leaders of his people in Jerusalem through his prophet Jeremiah:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" (Jer 7:3-4)

In Jeremiah's day the leaders in Jerusalem were saying "The temple of the LORD..." Even as the Babylonian army was closing in on them

they were confident that they were safe. The Lord's temple was there, and surely he would never allow his temple to be destroyed. But they had things the wrong way round. They misunderstood Peace and Security. The Lord continued,

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. (Jer 7:5-8)

The temple didn't guarantee their safety. Instead they were to guarantee the temple's safety by keeping the Lord's word. "Peace and security," but that wasn't true for the little people whom they were oppressing: the poor, the widows, the fatherless, the foreigners. God's vision of peace, of *shalom*, included justice for the marginalized, and righteousness in human relationships even with the oppressed.

"Peace and security," said the leaders. But they were trusting in deceptive words. The Lord did the unthinkable: he removed his presence from the temple, leaving it just an ordinary building. Then he brought Babylon to capture it and destroy temple, palace and city. When they were claiming "Peace and security," sudden destruction came upon them. Just as Paul writes here.

"Peace and security" was also a Roman slogan: *pax et securitas*. It was inscribed on monuments and stamped on coins. It was part of the imperial propaganda, how Rome presented itself. Rome did bring peace. It cleared the Mediterranean of pirates and the land of brigands. Travel was relatively safe by land or sea, allowing Paul to travel long distances. But this *pax Romana*, this Peace and Security, was imposed by a mighty military machine. It came at a heavy cost to the conquered peoples. The first century Roman historian Tacitus attributes these words to Calgacus, the Caledonian chieftain, facing the Roman army: "To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a wasteland and call it peace." The Roman peace was peace to some but not to the conquered.

Apart from a small elite, the Jews in the Land did not view the Roman occupying army as the bringer of peace and security. When the disciples asked Jesus "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), they were chafing under the peace and security of the Roman occupier.

While people are saying, "Peace and security," destruction will come on them suddenly. Rome called itself the eternal city, but it eventually fell. It is a characteristic of the great city, the city of man, that it thinks itself secure behind walls of its own making. Though it say, "Peace and security," it will fall. Thus happened to Babylon, to Rome, and to many others.

Peace and Security. At the beginning of this year we were feeling secure. Our economy continued its long, sustained recovery from recession with record highs in the stock market and record low unemployment. All seemed well. And then...the pandemic hit! Then the economy tanked. Then unemployment skyrocketed.

And then...the killing of George Floyd exposed an ugly underbelly to the celebrated prosperity. Peace and security was not for everyone. Law and Order brings peace and security to some but at considerable cost to others. This week we've seen yet another black man, Jacob Blake, shot by police, shot in the back with a stream of bullets.

Like a thief in the night, like a woman going into labor, like a people living under the illusion of peace and security, the day of the Lord is coming but at an unexpected time. So how will we all be ready?

2. Day People and Night People (5:4-7)

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. (5:4-7)

One way to avoid the thief in the night is to live entirely in the day. So, in vv. 4-7, Paul reminds the believers that they are people of the day not of the night, they are people of light not of darkness. Day and night, light and darkness: these also are frequent biblical metaphors. In biblical imagery, darkness is chaos, light is order.

In the beginning God spoke light into the darkness, order into the chaos. He shines into our lives, dispelling the chaos of our darkness with the order of his Spirit. The Christian life is about transformation from darkness to light, from chaos to order. We come to Christ in a disordered state. This disorder isn't immediately turned to perfect order. Instead, coming to Christ is only the beginning of a daily and lifelong journey of transformation. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our disordered affections are realigned and brought into order. We are turned from night people into day people. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph 5:8-10).

The distinction between light and darkness is a less powerful metaphor for us today when we can turn on a light switch and immediately dispel the darkness. We even have lights on our phones in case we are ever caught in the dark. In the ancient world, and in parts of the world even today, the distinction between darkness and light was stark. Darkness was full of night terrors, of danger lurking in the shadows.

The early church developed a song to celebrate the lighting of lamps in the evening that dispelled the darkness. They called it *Phos hilaron*, Hail gladdening light. Chris Tomlin and others modernized this into the song *Joyous Light*. "Hail Gladdening Light, sun so bright, Jesus Christ, end of night, Alleluia." Jesus Christ is himself Light: "Light of Light," as the Nicene Creed states. In him we come out of the shadows, out of the darkness into the light. "Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come; Into Thy freedom, gladness and light, Jesus, I come to Thee."

"So then, let us not be like others" (6). As people of the Day let us not be like the others, the people of the Night. The gospel redraws the boundaries of identity and of associated behavior. There are only two identities: those in Christ and those not in Christ. People of the Light and people of the Darkness. People of the Day and people of the Night. Paul adds two more binary pairs of metaphors: those who are awake and those who are asleep, those who are sober and those who are drunk. Here his use of the sleep metaphor is different than in the previous paragraph. In chapter 4 those who sleep are those who have died in the Lord. Here, using a different verb, those who sleep are those who are dull, unaware of realities. They are not alert.

If we are in Christ then God has shone the rays of his Spirit into

our lives. If we live as people of the Day, awake and sober, then we will never be taken surprise by the thief in the night. We will never be caught unawares by the arrival of the day of the Lord, because we are always living lives of readiness. We are always ready to meet our Lord and Savior. We are always ready to meet his gaze.

How do we prepare for the Day of the Lord? How do we ensure we are ready? We prepare by living differently, by living as the people of the Day rather than the people of the Night. So what does living as people of the Day look like?

3. Living as Day People (5:8-11)

In vv. 8-11 Paul describes the life of Day people:

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (5:8-11)

Since we are Day people, how should we live? We live wearing the right protective clothing. The Christian life is about death and resurrection: dying to self, rising to Christ. It is about putting off and putting on: putting off the old self, putting on Christ as if he were a garment. Putting off one set of clothing and putting on another.

As people of the Day what is our protective clothing? What should we wear so that we are ready for the Day of the Lord? We have put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Faith, love and hope. Again, this is the name of this series. Clothed in faith, love and hope we live as people of the Day.

Paul has praised the Thessalonian Christians for their faith, love and hope and for the fruit of these three virtues: “your work produced by faith(fulness), your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). Faith, love and hope. They live as children of the Day. Faith, love and hope are evidence of God’s calling, that he has transferred them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They are evidence that he is at work in them and through them.

Therefore, Paul assures them, “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (9). You have nothing to fear on the Day of the Lord. For people of the Night it will be a day of wrath. But for people of the Day, Christ’s people, it will be the day for receiving salvation. Notice here that Paul places the reception of salvation in the future. We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. We have been saved, transferred from darkness to light, so that we might live transformed lives of faithfulness, love and hope, so that in the end we might take possession of salvation.

All this is through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that we might live together with him. So that we might live together with him: this is the possession of salvation. This is the goal of our calling: that we live together with him. Together not only with him, but together as those who are awake and those who sleep when the day of the Lord comes. Here Paul changes the metaphor of awake and asleep. Those who are awake are those still alive on the Day of the Lord. Those who sleep are those who have died in the Lord prior to that day. Here again we have the communion of saints, as in chapter 4. The Christian dead and the Christian living will be reunited and

will live together with the Lord.

So that we may live together with him. Here is Paul’s word of comfort. It is similar to his first word of comfort: “And so we will be with the Lord forever” (4:17). “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (11). The Thessalonians are already living as people of the Day, as evidenced by their faithfulness, love and hope. Paul encourages them to encourage one another to keep on going, keep on persevering.

In our Scripture reading (Acts 1:1-12a), the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were eager for the day of the Lord to come. For them that meant the overthrow of the Romans, under whose peace and security they were suffering. It meant the restoration of physical Israel. They were thinking in nationalistic terms: us versus them, Jews versus Rome. But Jesus told them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And so they went back to Jerusalem and they waited. They entered liminal time, that is in-between time. It’s an uncomfortable place to be. It’s a place of uncertainty. It was only ten days, but how long those ten days must have seemed. “You will be my witnesses,” but how could they do this? “You will receive power,” but what would this power be? Ten days later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and they received that power, power to be witnesses. Peter got up and preached his first sermon. “This Jesus whom you killed God raised to life. He has made him both Lord and Messiah. Therefore repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” Soon he would bear Spirit-empowered witness about Jesus to a Roman centurion, an officer of the occupying army of Peace and Security. Cornelius became a follower of Jesus, and Peter stayed with him for several days, sharing table fellowship.

We live in liminal time, in the in-between time between the ascension of Jesus our risen Lord and his return in glory, his parousia. But we live in this liminal space empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus. We witness to him not only in our words when we share the gospel but also in our lives when we live as people of the Day. When we are clothed with faithfulness, love and hope.

This week I’ve been struck by words penned by Esau McCauley, assistant professor of NT at Wheaton, in an editorial last year for the *Washington Post*. The NT tells us of “the trials and struggle of Christian communities trying their best to live lives indicative of the king that they claimed to follow.”¹ Communities of people of the Day. Communities such as the Thessalonians. Their trials included tribulation and opposition for following Jesus. We don’t face persecution, though there are plenty of Christians around the world who do. But we are beset by trials including the pandemic, the economy, and the fires. Many of our brothers and sisters face the trials of racial injustice.

In our trials may we seek to live lives indicative of the King that we claim to follow. Lives of faithfulness, love and hope, living as people of the Day. Clothed with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope we will have peace and security, and so be ready for the Day of the Lord, whenever that may come.

May God himself, the God of peace [and security], sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

1. Esau McCaulley, "Why it matters if your Bible was translated by a racially diverse group," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2019.

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1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Seventh Message

Bernard Bell

September 6, 2020

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Today is week 26 of our livestream Sunday services, so today we reach the six month mark. Few of us could have imagined that restrictions on public gatherings, church gatherings, even personal gatherings would last this long. For a half-year we have been unable to gather physically as a church. This has been hard because the church is a gathered community. We are fortunate that modern technology allows us to gather virtually, to livestream services, to hold Zoom sessions. But this is not the same as gathering in person. We look forward to the day when we can safely come together as a gathered community. Meanwhile we persevere, we seek to be safe and keep others safe, and we seek to maintain a sense of community.

I began this series on 1 Thessalonians on March 22, just a few days after the Shelter-in-Place order went into effect. Today we finish the series with restrictions still in place. Preaching this series has been very different from what I had anticipated. I have found this little letter remarkably relevant to our unusual situation in these last six months.

Paul wrote this letter “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). Some months earlier, on his second missionary journey, Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica. In the Jewish synagogue he proclaimed Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, and that he is now Lord, sharing an identity with God. To the Gentiles in the city he had proclaimed that there is another king, Jesus. Caesar is not king. Caesar is not lord. Some believed: Jews, God-fearing Gentiles who attended the synagogue, and Gentiles. Together they formed the church in Thessalonica. The Greek word *ekklēsia* means “assembly.” Our English word “church” derives from the Greek word *kuriakos*, meaning “pertaining to the Lord (*kurios*).” The church is the gathering of the Lord’s people in a particular place, in this case Thessalonica.

Christians are not just individual followers of Jesus. We belong to a community. The NT focus is that we belong to a local community, a local gathering of Jesus people. The NT has no conception of a believer isolated from community. Being a Jesus follower entails being part of the local community of Jesus followers, and part of the family of God in Christ. In our individualistic age it is important to hear this. When we follow Jesus, giving him our allegiance, we join God’s family, God’s household. We also join the local assembly of God’s people.

We are Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, an assembly of Christ-followers that normally gathers in this building on Blaney Avenue in Cupertino. It is indeed sad that we cannot gather physically, for gathering is foundational to being church. But we continue to seek to function as a community, gathering online as we are doing now.

Fourteen times in this short letter, Paul addresses the Thessalonian Christians as “brothers and sisters.” They don’t belong together naturally but now they are family. They are gathered into a new family, a family that cuts across all previous dividing lines of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status. A family of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks

and Barbarians, men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, high status and low status. They are what Scot McKnight calls “a fellowship of differents.”¹ These different people are learning how to be a family gathered together with one new common identity that binds them together. They are “in Christ.” A couple of years ago I spent some time with the pastors of Oakland City Church. This understanding of the church as “a fellowship of differents” is well reflected in how that particular church perceives itself and presents itself: “We are people who don’t belong together gathered around Jesus for the sake of those who don’t belong.” We are learning how to belong together.

In the final section of his letter before the closing greetings, Paul addresses how the Thessalonian Christians function as an assembly, when they gather together as a church. He’s concerned about their Life Together, their Body Life. In 1 Thess 5:12-22 Paul gives four short words of instruction for the assembly.

1. Acknowledge leaders (5:12-13)

In the first section Paul writes about the leadership of the church.

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. (1 Thess 5:12-13 NIV)

Paul urges the church to acknowledge and respect their leaders. Each church has some form of leadership. Elsewhere the NT mentions several types of leader: elder, overseer, deacon, shepherd (pastor), teacher. Over time several different leadership structures have emerged: episcopal, presbyterian, baptist, congregational, etc. PBCC has its own leadership structure with elders, deacons and pastors. But none of these positions is mentioned here. Instead, Paul lists what these leaders do, their function not their position.

He describes three functions: they work hard among you, they care for you in the Lord, and they admonish you. In admonishment the leaders of the church implement Paul’s corrections and admonishments contained within this letter. This is largely what chapters 4–5 are about. But they do so with care. Any admonishment is to be given with care and love and received with love. Church leadership isn’t about power or control. It’s not about leaders fulfilling their own agenda. This is about leaders caring for their people, shepherds tending the sheep, overseers working for the flourishing of those under their oversight. The leaders exercise this care in the Lord. They are mindful of their common identity in the Lord: the leaders and the led together. They are mindful that the Lord be exalted not self.

This is the attitude of our elders. As overseers their aim is to care for the body. They care deeply about your welfare during this pandemic. They care for the body by seeking to maintain unity in this difficult season: unity among those who have different opinions on

reopening the church or on our current Conversation on Race. They seek to preserve the peace. We the people are to hold them in high regard in love. So, a big “Thank you” to our elders.

Paul exhorts the church, “Live in peace with each other.” He gives this command in several of his letters to different churches, suggesting how difficult it is for some churches to live in peace. This is what comes from being people who don’t naturally belong together learning how to belong together. It is a beautiful thing to live in community, but it is also challenging. It is challenging to be peaceable with people with whom we may disagree. This is particularly challenging these days with all of the tensions in our society: tensions over coronavirus restrictions and reopening, tensions over racial justice, tensions over the impending election. These tensions penetrate deeply into society and they penetrate deeply into churches. We are not immune to such tensions. We have tensions within our body on these matters. We have to strive to live in peace with one another, to be a “fellowship of differents,” disagreeing on some matters, but united in our common identity as being “in Christ,” a common identity that is stronger than all of our differences. The differences are real, but we are first and foremost Christians, united in Christ. This should bind us together more strongly than any difference separate us.

2. Life Together (5:14-15)

Caring can be difficult and draining. Next Paul addresses some difficult situations requiring care, some people we might perhaps not want to care for.

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. (5:14-15)

Paul lists three categories of people and the appropriate way to care for them. The first group are the “idle and disruptive.” These two words represent just one Greek word, which means “disorderly.” Who are these disorderly or disruptive people? For a while they were viewed as being idle, and this is reflected in several translations (e.g. ESV). But the tide has swung away from that view. I think they are probably connected to Paul’s earlier admonishment to “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands” (4:11). The disorderly are failing to do this. They are not idle. Far from it! They seem to be disruptive busy-bodies who are not doing what they should be doing and are disrupting the lives of other people. These disorderly people were evidently such a problem in Thessalonica that Paul will have to address them again more fully in his second letter. Paul’s counsel is to admonish them (the verb translated “warn” is the same as “admonish” in v. 12).

The second category are the disheartened. This probably included those whose loved ones had been killed in the affliction being suffered by the church, those who have fallen asleep in death (4:13). The right way to care for them is to comfort or console them. This is what Jews from Jerusalem did when Lazarus died: they went out to Bethany to be a consoling presence with his sisters Mary and Martha (John 11:19,31). There are other reasons for people to be disheartened today, especially as the pandemic drags on and restrictions remain in place. When people are discouraged we draw alongside them in sympathy to provide comfort and encouragement. We can’t do that

in person right now, but we can still care.

Our deacons are especially concerned about our older folk who are shut in at home. They have established a Circle of Care. They care by sending cards and by arranging for people to call to check in on them. Our Children’s Ministry is concerned about families whose children have started online classes. Many parents are overwhelmed and fainthearted, especially if the mother is trying to work while the kids are doing school at home. So Children’s Ministry has launched Adopt-a-Family, where those with time can cook meals for families stretched to the limit.

The third category are the weak. We don’t know whether these are physically weak through sickness or spiritually weak, perhaps because of their anxiety over the Day of the Lord (5:1-3). Here Paul’s counsel is to help them. The word means to have a strong attachment. What do we do with the weak? We stick with them. We don’t abandon them in their weakness to go and spend time with the strong. Simply remaining with them, sticking with them in their weakness, is itself a powerful help.

The disorderly, the disheartened and the weak. Leaders might wish that their church be full of successful people who are easy to work with, who are energizing—the beautiful people. But every congregation has such people: disruptive, disheartened, weak. These are the wounded sheep who need the care of a shepherd, the care of the whole body. These are the little people whom it’s easy to overlook. Part of pastoral care is caring for these people, recognizing which category they fall in and applying the appropriate care. The disheartened don’t need admonishment. The disorderly don’t need encouragement. Encouraging the disheartened and helping the weak are things we all can do. It’s part of caring for the weaker members. It’s part of the functioning of the Body.

Paul next urges, “Be patient with everyone.” To be patient means to remain tranquil while waiting or in the face of provocation. Paul had urged the Christians “to lead a quiet life” (4:11). A non-agitated life that is tranquil even in the face of provocation. Be patient with everyone in the church. Caring appropriately for the disorderly, the disheartened and the weak certainly requires patience. Living in peace with each other requires patience. Our present circumstances require great patience. Patience to endure the ongoing pandemic, which just goes on and on. Patience also in our current discourse about the pandemic, about racial justice and black lives matter, about the upcoming election. Christians are as deeply divided as the nation. It is so easy to be provoked, so easy to be agitated, even by one another within the church. We are called to be patient with one another in the church.

Paul’s exhortation to be patient with all includes also those outside the church. In the case of the Thessalonian Christians, those outside the church meant them harm. The church was suffering affliction and tribulation. Some had been martyred. Paul urges patience: “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong.” The hostile opponents were wronging the church, but the Christians were not to respond in kind. Instead Paul urges them to pursue good, to “strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” Strive to do good to those in the church and to those outside the church. Paul has given thanks for their “endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). It is this hope in the return of Jesus, his *parousia*, that enables the Christians to persevere in their ordeal, under tribulation from hostile neighbors. It is their faith, love and hope that enables them to pursue good rather than evil. Paul will later counsel the Christians in Rome, “Do not be overcome by evil,

but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). Overcome evil with good. Respond to hate with kindness, goodness, gentleness, even with forgiveness. In recent instances of racial injustice we have seen some Christian communities do this, extending forgiveness to those who extended hate to them, to those who killed their brothers and sisters. Seek to do good. Seek a win-win solution rather than a zero-sum, win-lose solution. Doing so disarms the hate.

In these first two sections Paul has exhorted the Christians in their horizontal relationships with one another, including those outside the church. He has written some challenging things: Live in peace with one another. Be patient with one another. Strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. How are we able to do this? How can we rise to this challenge? How can we rise to this challenge in this particular year when there are so many things that might provoke us to react differently? A good way forward is to first pay attention to our vertical relationship with God, not just as individuals but as a body, as a church. This is what Paul does in his next two sections.

3. Congregational worship (5:16-17)

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (5:16-18)

When Christians gathered together in their house churches, they paid attention to one another and they paid attention to God. They carried over some of the practices of the synagogue, but also adopted new practices. Rejoice, pray, give thanks, writes Paul. He would later write to the Ephesians,

be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18-20)

Rejoice always. The Christians praised God, using the psalms, just like the Jews in the synagogue. They also praised the Lord Jesus, using songs of their own composition. It is possible that the NT itself contains a few of these songs. It is striking that the early church incorporated Jesus into its worship of God. Jesus was worthy of worship as Lord. Praising God and rejoicing over who he is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, gets our eyes off ourselves and our problems. It sets our eyes on him, what he has done and what he yet might do in us and through us. The early Christians were a joyful people.

Pray continually. They petitioned God about all their circumstances. Here too they incorporated Jesus; they prayed in the name of Jesus, confident that, seated at the Father’s right hand, he had the ear of the Father. OT Israel prayed towards the temple which was a conduit to the open ear, eye and heart of God in heaven. We don’t pray towards a place; we pray towards the Lord Jesus Christ at the Father’s right hand. Being human he is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, in our present circumstances. God’s heart is open to him, and through him to us. In our difficult circumstances we can pray for God to be at work. We can pray for eyes to see the opportunities that God is creating. We can pray that we would be able to overcome evil with good. We can pray for the grace to live in peace with each other and to be patient with all.

Give thanks in all circumstances. They gave thanks to God in all circumstances, which for the Thessalonian Christians included some

pretty difficult circumstances: tribulation from hostile opponents, the martyrdom of their fellow Christians. A little earlier Paul and Silas themselves were praying and singing hymns to God in prison in Philippi (Acts 17:25). We are in some difficult circumstances. We give thanks *in* them but not necessarily *for* them. We can give thanks that even in these difficult circumstances God is at work, that he is creating opportunities for us to be of service.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. The informal worship patterns of the early house churches were quickly shaped into a rich liturgy of praise, prayer and thanksgiving, a process well underway by the second century. Many elements of this early liturgy remain in liturgies of churches today.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. This is a little more difficult for us today. We can’t gather in person to do this collectively. We miss the sound of us singing together. Even though we’re now allowed to gather outdoors in limited numbers, we can’t sing. But we have technology that previous generations did not have. We have easy access to a vast array of music: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. We have wonderful musicians here at PBCC who have been recording songs for us during our shutdown. A big thanks to our musicians and technical crew. Listening to such music can focus us on God and lift our spirits.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. This is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit was also involved. As the Christians met they were to be filled with the Spirit. Paul’s next section concerns this.

4. Testing prophecy (5:19-22)

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. (5:19-22)

One of the spiritual gifts, given by God through his Spirit to the church body, was prophecy. Praise, prayer and thanksgiving are the church speaking to God. Prophecy was God speaking to the church. The Spirit revealed something to one with the gift of prophecy, who announced it to the assembly. It was then evaluated by those with the gift of evaluation. Here, Paul urges the church not to quench the work of the Spirit by being contemptuous of prophecy. Instead, evaluate the word of prophecy. If it is good, hold onto it. If it is not, then reject it. What were they to test it against? The standard of evaluation was the apostolic teaching which Paul had passed on to them, the tradition that he had received from the Lord and delivered to them, which they were to guard and deliver to the next generation. In time this apostolic teaching would be enshrined in the New Testament. Whether or not the gift of prophecy is still active today is a much debated question. If it is, then the standard for evaluation is the New Testament scriptures which encapsulate the apostolic witness and teaching.

After these final instructions concerning Body Life, concerning the life of the church in horizontal relationship to one another, and in vertical relationship to God in Christ through his Spirit, Paul now wraps up his letter.

5. Final Matters (5:23-28)

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all God’s people with a

holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (5:23-28)

“Greet all God’s people with a holy kiss” (26). Most of Paul’s letters end with greetings. The Christians were a big family. There were interconnections between the various churches. These greetings connect the churches together. The greetings are part of Body Life. Several letters end with an exhortation to kiss one another with a holy kiss. This was the greeting between family members, especially between siblings. That’s what the Christians were: they were brothers and sisters together in one new family. To a non-Christian onlooker this would be very strange. They were used to the kiss between physical siblings; it was part of their culture. But in the church this might mean a master greeting his slave with a kiss, a Jew greeting a Gentile, a wealthy man greeting a poor man. It was a highly visible expression of the new family, of the “fellowship of differents.”

Paul solemnly charges “to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters” (27). This letter, as all the letters to churches, was intended to be heard in a public reading to the gathered church. In English this short letter can be read aloud in just over 12 minutes. The first reader would have been Timothy. He almost certainly carried Paul’s letter to Thessalonica. Paul would have explained to him carefully everything that was in the letter and how to present it. The church would hear the physical voice of Timothy, but hear the written voice of Paul—this apostle who cared so deeply for them, who loved them so much, who described his love and care as like that of a nursing mother for her infant and as a father for his children. It was as if Paul were present with them. I’m sure this letter was brought out and read again and again. Each time they heard Paul present with them. Over time the churches copied the letters they

had received from Paul and exchanged them. These letters were then collected together to form our NT epistles. Here we are two thousand years later listening to Paul.

This letter conveyed Paul’s presence to the Thessalonians when he couldn’t be physically present with them. My series on this letter has been preached to a camera in an almost empty church auditorium. There’s only a small technical crew here, to whom I say a big “Thank you” for all your labor to make these livestream services possible over the past six months. You, our church family, are unable to be present with me here. Instead these sermons on 1 Thessalonians have been delivered to you by YouTube. We are physically separated but united in spirit, in our bonds of love, and in our common identity in Christ. Just as Paul wrote repeatedly to the Thessalonians, we are brothers and sisters together, even though we cannot be physically present with one another. I end this series the same way Paul ended his first letter to the Thessalonians: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (28).

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)

1. Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

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