

Presence and Absence

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13



By Al Deridder

Background: During this time of Shelter-in-Place we feel the physical absence of family, friends and work colleagues. Modern technology allows us to stay connected, but we miss physical presence. Presence and absence were poignant realities for Paul. He longed to visit his beloved brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, to be present in person, but was hindered from doing so. So he did the next best thing: he sent Timothy to represent his presence and to see how they were doing. The report that Timothy brought back only intensified Paul's longing to be with them in person so he could further instruct them. So he did the next best thing: he wrote them a letter to represent his presence. We look forward to again being present with one another. In the meantime we do the next best thing: we connect remotely.

At the end of Sunday's live-streamed service we will take communion together remotely. "Communion remotely" is an oxymoron; it is the next best thing to gathering together. Communion is about presence: though Jesus is absent from earth and present with the Father, he is present to us through his Spirit, especially as we take the bread and the cup together. I invite you to prepare elements which represent the body and blood of Jesus; please use what you have at home, don't go to the store. It does not need to be special bread or even bread, nor grape juice or wine. Then be ready to eat and drink with your families as a church family. Who may partake? All who give their allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ and follow him.

Sermon Text: 1 Thess 2:17-3:13 (NIV)

17 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. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19 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? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 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, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 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. 5 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.

6 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. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 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? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 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.

Discussion Questions

1. Preparation

- a. As you reflect on the sermon, what stands out to you most?
- b. What is one thing you hoped to talk about today/tonight?
- c. What question(s) did you come away with from the sermon?

2. Sermon questions (pick 3)

- a. Connection: How do you like to stay connected to your friends both in “normal” times, and in this shelter-in-place? How do you like to stay connected to God, both in “normal” times, and in this shelter-in-place?
- b. What has been good for you during this time? What has been challenging?
- c. What does Palm Sunday mean for you?
- d. Bernard shared how presence and absence have defined him. How have presence and absence defined your life?
- e. Paul refers to Jesus coming again, which will usher in an unending time of presence. How often do you think of Jesus coming again? Does it fill you with hope?
- f. Paul mentored, raised up and trusted Timothy to carry on the faith. It is a great privilege to mentor the next generation. Name one person you are mentoring, raising up and trusting to carry on the faith?