

The Companioned Journey (Sermon 2)

1 Thessalonians 1:1

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Last week we began a series of talks that I have titled “The Companioned Journey” We considered the early years of Paul’s life and the first missionary journey he took with his companions Barnabas and John Mark. We also reflected around Paul’s second missionary journey with his companions Silvanus and Timothy. In that journey through much hardship, physical distress, political unrest and severe persecution, the companions arrived in a city called Thessalonica.

Paul spent three sabbaths in the synagogue preaching. The Jewish leaders, rather than receiving the Gospel became jealous of the influence Paul had with Jason a wealthy householder, as well as a good number of God-fearing non-Jews and a number of politically powerful women.

The Jewish leaders stirred up the people of the city and had Jason and other new believers arrested. These arrests led to the new believers wanting to get Paul out of the city by night- which they accomplished. And so, a church was planted in Thessalonica— with no Christian gospels or other writings available to guide them and no seasoned Christian leader left behind to shepherd them. All this nascent church had were the companionship of God through the Holy Spirit and the companionship of each other—to remind them of the sayings of Paul, the story of Jesus and their commitments to this radical new faith.

From Thessalonica Paul traveled to Berea—a 2-day journey. There Paul is again chased from the city. Having been imprisoned, tortured and beaten in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica and Berea, Paul travels to Athens and then to Corinth where his companions Timothy and Silas join him.

We know that when Paul arrives in Corinth in late AD 50 or early AD 51, he does so “in weakness, in fear and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3)—probably related to the traumatic and difficult journey he has just completed.

While in Corinth for about 18 months, Paul writes his first letter to the church in Thessalonica. He is obviously very worried about the believers there. When he left, they were under persecution, being arrested, and the Jews were making political moves against them. He knows they have no scriptures and no seasoned leaders. If you are able, would you please stand with me for the reading of part of Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

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

Grace to you and peace,

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly^[a] mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers^[b] loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you

turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

PRAY

Welcome to 2024! I look forward, God-willing, to sharing this year with you.

Today we will be considering together just the opening of the letter that is marked as verse 1 in your Bible. Since this letter is written in a typical format for letters of its era, the opening begins with a sender formula—mentioning the co-senders of the letter, follows with a description of the recipients and concludes with a greeting.

To begin, the senders of the letter are identified: Paul, Silvanus and Timothy—these three men modeled the companionship with God and each other that would be key to the survival of this church in a place of great persecution and suffering.

FOL—it is exactly this same companionship that is necessary for the survival of our own church.

Next, the receivers of the letter are identified: the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This church is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. There is the constant presence and companionship of Father and Son for this church. They are never alone, even when their founders must flee. They have the Presence of Father and Son.

Paul does not reference this church as simply being “in Christ”—this phrase is used 170 times in the New Testament. Rather, Paul uses the atypical phrase found only 6 times in the New Testament “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This phrase makes it evident that the members of the Godhead companion each other!

From the very beginning of his letter Paul addresses one of the key differences between Christianity and all of the other mystical religions, cults, and religious sects of his day

and of ours. Paul references the God of the Christian faith who is one in essence, yet three in person. This nascent church, newly birthed by God needs to understand who God is—in the midst of a hotbed of pluralism. Within the greeting and first paragraph of the letter, Paul will colonize his letter with language about a God who is a community of persons “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” v 1, “our God and Father” v 3 and “in the Holy Spirit” v 5.

Paul will end the chapter by referencing other gods as idols in contradistinction to the God of Christianity who Paul references as the living and true God.

Paul will also define the nature of Jesus “his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

For the Thessalonians, in a highly religious and pluralist culture, the concept of “God” is a radically over-filled philosophical concept. There are multiple versions of God available to the Thessalonians. There are equally as many versions of God available to us in our globalized world.

Paul is going to take his time in this letter to help the Thessalonians connect God to the reality of their lives and to transform their idea of God from primarily a philosophical concept to a robust understanding of the Real who became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Theologian T.F. Torrance says,

“What Jesus himself is and does in life and death is the window God has provided for us through which we may discern the Love of God, for in Jesus, the Son of God who came forth from the Father to be one of us and one with us, there is disclosed the very nature of the Love of our Father in heaven for his children.”

Belief in God existing as three persons in one being, and one being in three distinct persons is called Trinitarianism. Trinitarianism arose out of the concrete historical events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as interpreted through the lens of Jewish history and the Scripture as well as the ongoing experience of the Christian Church.

To understand the Christian God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit one must take the whole sweep of the biblical text into consideration. God was active in the history of Israel (as our previous sermon series portrayed) and Jesus was the unique embodied presence of God within his creation yet Jesus prayed continually to his Heavenly Father and Jesus acknowledged the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. The persons of the Trinity are bound together through their interpersonal relationships. They companion one another. This makes the Christian God unique from all other descriptions of God.

The substance that unites the Trinity is Love—this is not an abstract static form or a metaphysical force but a concrete dynamic interrelation of three divine persons. God is Love by virtue of the loving bond of reciprocal love that unites the persons of the Trinity. Each person of the Trinity gives himself totally to the other two persons in an everlasting act of unconditional loving service and each in turn receives and accepts the gift of unconditional loving service offered by the other two persons. It is precisely this relationship of mutual indwelling that God desires to establish with his creatures “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17:21)

To be a community who is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is to be taken up into this bond of love, this relation of self-giving love that is received and given. The Trinity is a perfect communion of persons existing in loving relationship—so there is no lack, need, or unfulfilled desire within the Godhead. God can therefore create freely not out of necessity, not for his own sake but for the sake of creation itself. Creation flows

directly from God's love but is not a necessary product of that love. This is why the Nicene Creed says "it was for us and for our salvation that Christ became truly human." The key to the mystery of the world lies in the coming of Jesus Christ to earth. The mystery of our future existence as humans is already present in our community now—we enter the bond of love that unites the Trinity. We have no lack, no need and no unfulfilled desire when all that is present to the Godhead is also available to us because we are taken up into the life of God. Therefore, we can serve and love the creation (humankind and planet) freely—not out of necessity, but out of the overflow of God's love for us, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the creation.

Too often we perceive our unity with God as simply something that is abstract—it is not an embodied reality. We do not live as though we are united to God who is by very essence Love, we do not companion God. There is a reason that the greatest command for any human person is to love God. We tend to want to strip this of its enfleshed components and just make it about how we feel about God or how we think about God or simply that we believe in God. But this way of engaging with God will never transform us, it will never change us, it will never allow us to tangibly and viscerally experience what it means to be a community who is "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". To love God is to companion God, and God is clear with us about what this looks like. It is impossible to love someone whom we do not companion. Let me show you what I mean:

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

The whole community of faith in Thessalonica was united with God—they were together "in God." This means that each individual in the community was already one with each other.

FOL—we have been taken up into the life of God. God companions us.

FOL—as a community we are in God—this means we are one with each other. We companion one another, there is a with-ness between us.

I think this might be why Paul goes on to write “grace to you and peace.”

These words of Paul do not reflect some trite saying like the “have a good day” that we say when we pick up our drink from someone serving us at Starbucks or a boutique coffee shop. These words of Paul represent resources that are available to us because we have been taken up into the life of God. They represent visceral, tangible, actual realities.

The peace of God transforms community in at least two ways.

Peace is the last word we would use to describe the texture of the life of the world. Our world is not at peace with God and individuals are not at peace with their own inner reality, there is a gnawing sense of being fractured and fragmented, compartmentalized, torn and disquiet.

Paul’s word to the Thessalonians is Peace!

Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the presence of flourishing, of shalom, of wholeness.

The core moral precept of the universe is love. Sin is the failure to fully adhere to this precept and it generates estrangement, the disruption of proper relationships within creation itself (love of neighbor) and between creation and Creator (love of God) The word sin expresses the personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs. The act of sinful turning away cannot be reduced to individual moral failings. Absence of love of God and love of neighbor means that the pristine harmony of creation itself disintegrates and falls into a futile bondage of dislocation and decay. Sin at its heart is privileging self above God and others—thereby disconnecting the reciprocal giving and receiving of self-donation that is central to all the structures of the world. We sin when

we participate in an economy of power that places us in direct opposition to the love of God.

When we receive the love God has for us, when we abide in God—our sin is forgiven and our guilt is removed. We are at peace with God and we now have the capacity to flourish, and become whole persons as we are taken up into the life of reciprocal love. However, many of us do not experience this peace with God because we do not actually companion God as we would another person with whom we have a loving relationship.

To experience the peace of God is to be in regular rhythms of communication—where we listen to God and we talk to be God.

To experience the peace of God is to be in the regular rhythms of relationship which include confession and forgiveness.

We have begun Practicing the Way groups specifically for this reason.

These groups are not primarily meant to connect you with community, but to connect you with a community who will hold you accountable to begin or maintain rhythms of connecting with God. I will be contacting those of you who are in these triad groups to restart in January. If you are not in one of these groups I really hope you would consider joining a triad for one hour every two weeks and inviting others in the community to support you as you learn to companion God through regular rhythms of communication and relationship. Please reach out to me if you would like to join a group.

Paul also writes “grace to you.”

What greater grace is there than having access to this bond of love that unites the Godhead, this constant flow of reciprocal self-donation. And that is what grace is—

access to all that Divine love offers because we are in God the Father and in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let's take a minute and reflect on the richness of this statement.

Do you believe that God says "grace to you?" Do you believe that you have access to all that Divine love offers? I don't mean do you agree this is true, I mean—do you experience this as true? Is this the reality out of which you live your life? One of the best ways to judge whether or not you are experiencing God's grace is to simply consider how easily you give grace to others. Jesus said the person who has been forgiven much loves much. Another way you might make that same statement is to say the person who has received much grace offers much grace to others.

Now, don't misunderstand me, there is a counterfeit to grace and that is cheap grace. Cheap grace is something we offer one another when we don't measure up -not because we have accessed the riches of God's grace ourselves, but because we want to have a very low standard of righteousness applied to others so that it can also be applied to us. Paul writing *grace to you* is not Paul writing—hey the moral center of the universe is being continually altered to match your desire and ability to measure up to loving God and others. No, Paul writing *grace to you* is Paul holding the absolute standard that the only beautiful, good and glorious way of engaging the other is self-donating love, but that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are forgiven when we fail and falter. Grace between us is not dropping our standards to some false economy of power—that would be direct opposition to the love of God. Grace is receiving all that Divine love offers not because of what we have done but because of what Jesus has done.

One of the best places to give and receive grace at FOL is in Life Groups or Youth Groups -depending on your age. Paul and Barnabas were called to their first missionary

journey when they were meeting in a small group with other prophets and teachers to pray and fast. Life Group is about companionship.

The theme of companionship and mutuality at the start of this letter is rich. Father and Son are one and companion each other. The Thessalonian church is in Father and Son and therefore companion the members of the Godhead. And, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy companion each other as well.

What a beautiful reminder that at the center of the universe, at the very heart of all reality is this Love who is God—and it is this that must shape all of who we are and how we journey. We journey in-relation.

As we close our time today, I want us to consider Paul and his companions and the brief first words they sent to the church at Thessalonica.

Paul came to Thessalonica in a tender way for at least two reasons.

First, he had recently been treacherously treated as a Roman citizen by the authorities. He had been beaten and placed in stocks—something that was completely unjust based on his standing.

Paul and his companions arrive in Thessalonica not months but just a few days after suffering so severely in Philippi. Yet, God had been their present companion in prison—God had heard their prayers and rescued them from all their troubles. Silas and Paul had companioned one another and through their mutual prayers and singing they had held each other up in the midst of injustice and physical torture.

This interdependence with God and human companions made it possible for Paul and his friends to plant churches all across Asia. A pattern in Paul's life specifically was: being verbally attacked and mocked, physically assaulted, falsely accused and run out

of the city. Yet Paul gets up and does it again and again. Why? How? If we miss Paul's companionship with God and with Silvanus and Timothy, we will miss the means of grace and the presence of Peace.

Paul was not some super-Christian who lived a life that is inaccessible to us. Paul's character of self-donating love, constant sacrifice and integrity are directly in keeping with the ways he chose to companion God and others.

Admittedly, I have met only a few people like Paul in my lifetime—with his level of loving and serving others. One of these individuals became my pastor just after Bill and I had completed a tough bi-vocational church plant at age 27. That church persisted and grew for the next 30 years—but it had not come without great challenge, deep sacrifice and personal loss. Bill continued in his role as a computer guy with Digital Equipment of Canada and we ended up attending a mid-size Baptist church in another city. This is where I met pastor Rob Miner. Rob was a humble man. He had been scouted for MLB in the U.S. as a pitcher. Rob's wife Patty was pregnant with their first child and they were about to begin a career in professional baseball. Their first child Jeffrey was born with Downs Syndrome. Rob had a choice, he could commit to a career that would have him on the road and away from family a lot, or he could choose to companion his wife and son. Rob felt called by God to be with his wife and their new son. He also felt a calling to be a pastor. When I met pastor Rob, he had two little daughters as well and his son was 12 years old.

Pastor Rob was not the preaching pastor of the church I joined, he was rarely upfront at all—pastor Rob was the associate pastor, but I always refer to Pastor Rob as the praying pastor.

A few vignettes I remember from his life.

Rob always carried a large notebook with him—this is before the days of personal computers. I noticed him carrying it with him wherever he went. I wondered what it was but I did not ask. One week, just a few months after we joined this church, we asked some friends of ours who were Jehovah’s Witnesses and had four children of a similar age to ours to come to church with us. They did. Rob greeted them at the door, asked the names of mom and dad and each child.

Our friends did not return to church with us for a few months. When they did, Pastor Rob was at the door and he greeted each person by name. I was quite surprised and I approached Rob after the service thanking him for remembering their names. Pastor Rob smiled and said, it is hard to forget the names of people you pray for every week. It was then that I discovered what was in Pastor Rob’s note book—the names of everyone he met—and the names of those he prayed for consistently and every week.

Pastor Rob—companioned God, his life was taken up into the life of God the life of Love. This made it possible for pastor Rob to offer grace and peace to those around him, it flowed directly from his time abiding with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Another vignette I remember from the life of Pastor Rob is related to one of the few sermons he ever preached. I have heard tens of thousands of sermons in my life—especially since I used to attend morning and evening services for the first 45 years of my life. But I never forgot the one that Pastor Rob preached, the title was “He’s not heavy, he’s my brother” and focused on how we companion others in the journey of life, how we stoop down to make others great, how we choose to carry others’ sin burdens with grace and love.

FOL—we have been taken up, as a community into the life of Love, the life of God. As we companion God and each other we will learn the rhythms and practices that restore flourishing and transform us into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

