

“Resilience on the Journey”
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We have been studying Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. I have titled this series of talks “The Companioned Journey” because it is a letter from companions who were on a journey through Macedonia to bring the good news of Jesus.

- **Senders:** Paul, Sylvanus & Timothy
It is a letter to companions—folks who heard the good news of Jesus and decided to turn to God from idols and to companion each other as they serve the living and true God and wait for his Son from heaven

- **Recipients:** The church of the Thessalonians
And the good news the companions bring is that God the Father so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son Jesus to planet earth to show the human race the love of God so that all who believe in Jesus might have eternal life and God the Holy Spirit would be given to them to live in them.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are companions who choose to companion each other and all who come to God in faith.

So far this letter to the Thessalonians has read a bit like a travelog—in the sense that it has been Paul reviewing the visit that he and his companions made to Thessalonica and then describing some of the ways that the gospel invading the lives of believers has affected the region.

As we have been reading the travelog we have been focusing on what we can learn about how to companion God and others.

As we listen to the text today, we are going to pay attention to what Paul has to say about resilience in our journey together toward God—resilience!

Listen to Paul’s self-reflections about his travels in 2:1-2:

“For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”

So here is the synopsis of this brief section.

Paul begins with the language of relationship referencing both how he and his companions are related to the Thessalonians and their shared knowledge of one another. The brothers and

sisters in Thessalonica know this about Paul and his companions: the coming of the companions to Thessalonica was not in vain—*kenos*

At the end of chapter 1, Paul had said this,

“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.”

Clearly the companions’ journey to the Thessalonians was not a journey that was in vain. The fact of the church of Thessalonica is the fruit of the journey that Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy made—together. The visit had not been empty, as a vessel that contains nothing. The visit had been exceptionally fruitful.

But the journey to the Thessalonians had come with a cost.

The text also says, *“though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”*

Paul and his companions had suffered and been shamefully treated along the journey to the Thessalonians. They had already suffered before they arrived.

In referencing suffering (Greek: *propascho*) Paul uses language that is specific. It is related to the emotions, passions or feelings associated with suffering.

The suffering being referenced here is not the beating or the stocks but the passion or emotion related to that suffering—how these abuses have affected Paul and his companions psychodynamically, the effect they have had upon the companions.

The words “shamefully treated” help us understand how the incident is something that affected their personal identity. They were treated in a way that injured them because the person doing so behaved insolently, outrageously and in an insulting way. The word *hybrizo* is often used in referencing how someone speaks evil of another. Words do not physically harm one. Clearly the suffering and shame here is not related primarily to the physical beating or being put in stocks—although that would have caused physical pain and injury. But the text seems to dwell on how a person is injured in their identity by being beaten or put in stocks.

The traveling companions had suffered in Philippi and were treated shamefully—in such a way that their own self-understanding was attacked.

This becomes clear when Paul writes about how—despite this suffering and shaming they still had boldness in God to declare the Gospel. Paul is not referencing how even though the companions had physically been injured they were able to declare the gospel. Rather, he is referencing, how even though the companions had suffered psycho-dynamically and had been shamed—having their identity attacked they still had boldness to declare the Gospel.

I am sure that for each of us we hold memories of suffering in some way and of being shamefully treated.

My mind goes back to my childhood. I was raised in the kind of poverty where there is no indoor plumbing to speak of—so we used an out-house and there was no warm running water in my home. I lived with my family of 6 in a single car garage converted to a house. I usually went to school quite dirty, with my hair all in a riot. I had huge buck teeth in the front that were the first thing you would notice when speaking with me. I was also put ahead in school—so I was of normal size for my age, but very small for my classroom. So, bullying was a daily part of my life. In Grade 3, I remember how I feared going to school. My day began in the same way every day. As soon as one of the students who most despised me saw me enter the room they would touch me and then they would run from student to student touching them and loudly proclaiming “you have the Cook—touch.” (My maiden name was Cook.) The shame and deep embarrassment of starting my day each morning in this way caused far more sorrow for me than the physical beatings on the way home from school. Bloody noses, bruised ribs, being kicked and hit and rocks thrown at me were far less painful—than the terror of my morning ordeals. My mother had difficult mental illness and so she did not intervene. My father worked twelve-hour graveyard shifts in the mines and went to college as a full-time student in the day. He was unaware of my situation. This and other years of difficult bullying at school strongly formed the person I would become. The shameful treatment had long and residual effects on my identity for many years to come.

For the companions who suffered and were shamefully treated—the physical wounds would heal the deconstruction of their identity would have been the point of real suffering, the pain point.

But having suffered we hear this remarkable report, *“though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”*

The word boldness is *parrēsiázomai*. It means to have freedom, to speak with frankness and to utter with confidence both in your spirit and your demeanor.

So, Paul is saying that he and his companions though suffering psycho-dynamically, though having their identity attacked through being shamefully treated still had freedom to speak with confidence.

The text is clear that this boldness, this inner freedom in the form of confidence did not come because now they were in a place of safety, now they could relax because there was nothing to fear, now they could have confidence because that was just a one-time thing and what happened in Philippi would not happen in Thessalonica.

No—they had boldness in the midst of much conflict!

A quick tour through Acts reminds us that suffering and shameful treatment are a regular part of the journey for these companions.

How did these companions, as they journeyed to bring the Gospel of God, have boldness. Even in the midst of much conflict.

In the midst of on-going attack. In the midst of people speaking of them in a way that shamed them, in the midst of people attacking their identity—they were able to declare the Gospel of God.

The companions on this journey were able to hold on to a sense of self, a sense of identity. That sense of self, that sense of identity is absolutely crucial to our ability to declare the gospel of God.

In some ways it is the basis or rationale for why people will listen to us.

In our previous session on January 21, we learned about the fact that as companions on the journey toward God that we must resist. We need to become a zone of resistance. We need to resist evil within our own hearts and we must resist evil systems that are not in alignment with God's created purposes. That resistance for the Thessalonians included the very fabric and texture of being a church comprised of wealthy women, Greek men and women—possibly slaves and non-Roman citizens as well as some Jews. This church from the beginning resisted gender, race, ethnicity and religion norms and came together as companions on a journey toward God. That resistance would not simply be about resisting of the norms of the Roman Empire and its evil systems that involved racism, sexism and religious intolerance to those who would not worship Caesar. It was also a constant resisting within their own community and within their own hearts of how they would companion each other.

Paul had thanked God that the Thessalonians had become imitators of him and of the Lord. Their lives were shaped by the life of Jesus of Nazareth and this is how they became a zone of resistance as individuals and as a community.

Now, in this text, Paul is not talking about the companions becoming a zone of resistance to all forces that would norm them and shape them in ways contrary to the life of Jesus. He is talking about how to hold on to that resistance over the course of a lifetime. How do we continue to resist the attacks on who we are, how do we continue to resist when our identity is constantly under attack? It was the psycho-dynamic effects of the physical suffering in Philippi which had

the greatest potential for detouring the companions away from continuing to boldly preach the Gospel.

In this text Paul is describing the resilience that is necessary for us to companion Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to companion each other in the grand adventure of bringing the Good News of Jesus with boldness.

James K. A. Smith would say, “we are carriers of desires that outstrip our mortal frames.” How does one stay resilient when our very dusty and earthed human capacity in its frailty and phantom-like nature cannot match the desires God has birthed in us?

When you think about resistance— think about two things—a rock and a hand. The hand is external pressures seeking to shape your identity, seeking to attack your identity, seeking to diminish your identity, seeking to shame you. When a hand seeks to shape a rock—it is impossible to do so, the hand becomes shaped by the rock. People are not made of rock; people are made of dust.

Now think about two things—dust and a hand. The hand is external pressures seeking to shape your identity, seeking to attack your identity, seeking to diminish your identity, seeking to shame you. When a hand seeks to shape dust—it is easy to do so. People are made from dust and to dust we will return. We are constantly being formed and shaped by external pressures. So, how do we sustain our identity after suffering and being shamefully treated when we are made of dust?

How do we sustain our identity after a history of suffering and being shamefully treated and in a situation where there is much conflict—much pushing against your identity, more shaming, more people attacking your identity, more psycho-dynamic distress?

The text has these three key words—which explain resilience. “In our God.” God is the Rock. One of the names for God is “the Rock.”

When external pressures seek to shape a person, it is easy to do so if they are simply a collection of dust.

When external pressures seek to shape a person who is “in God” it is impossible to do so. God is a rock—God is a solid, unshakeable in his identity. God is not only a rock—God is the Rock.

- “For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?” (Psalm 18:31)
- “Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.” (Isaiah 44:8)
- “On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.” (Psalm 62:7)
- “Be to me a rock of strength, a stronghold to save me. For you are my rock and my

fortress; for your name's sake you will lead me and guide me." (Psalm 31:3)

- "He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken." (Psalm 62:2)
- "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:44)

God is the rock that is not shaped by external influences.

- "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Colossians 3:3

Your life is hid in God. Your identity is not dust.

Although you are dusty in your human nature and although all those who do not find refuge in God are like dust—your life is hid in God.

God is the rock and you are a rock when your life is hid in God.

As a matter of fact, because of your relationship with God you have become a living stone.

- "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Paul is describing the resilience he and his companions enjoyed. Resilience in the midst of much conflict, resilience after having suffered. Resilience after being shamefully treated. That resilience is related to knowledge that freedom and confidence, boldness is related to "in our God."

That resilience also has a purpose: "We had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God." The companions had boldness to declare the gospel. The boldness of the companions is an embodied view of the Gospel.

What is the gospel—you are more sinful than you dare believe but more loved than you could ever imagine because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The companions behaved as though they were more loved than anyone could ever imagine. So, loved that they could endure hatred, envy, being shamed, being mocked, being falsely accused in Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica. The resilience of their lives displayed the Gospel.

Resilience is based on our lives being hid in God.

Practically speaking. . . How is resilience held?

- "***Our coming to you was not in vain.***" Resilience is held by intentionally keeping company with our companions on the journey—whose lives, along with ours, are hid in God.

- *“Our coming to you **was not in vain.**”* Fruit of past labors together in the kingdom give us shared hope.
- *“We had boldness in our God.”* When you think of a life of resilience on the journey what do you think of? Do you think of gritting your teeth and just holding on, do you think of resilience as just making it through like some person hanging off of a ledge, white-knuckling it and clenching whatever they can grab before they fall to their death?

Resilience is not white-knuckling it, although occasionally it may feel like that. But for the most part, resilience has to do with boldness in God because our life is hid in God. But what sort of life is that? Listen to how Paul describes resilience in Romans 2.

- *“He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing.”* (The patience in well-doing is another way of describing resilience)

So Paul is saying to those who are resilient to those who by patience in well-doing *“seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life”*

The fabric of a resilient life is not white-knuckled hanging off a cliff in fear.

The fabric of a resilient life, the fabric of a life hid in God is boldness—freedom and strong confidence because we are in God and God is our rock. The fabric of a resilient life is boldness.

It takes boldness for a dusty creature, whose life is hid in God, but who is still dusty to seek glory, honor and immortality along the journey of life.

FOL—my companions on the journey—we are not seeking the stuff of this world, we are not seeking what dust has to offer—for to dust it shall return, we are seeking how our labors in the dust can be about glory, honor and immortality.

Resilience in this journey occurs because our life is hid in God, because with boldness we seek glory, honor and immortality and because eternal life is the end in view.

Please notice that such a quest, such a journey is not self-seeking. To seek glory, to seek honor and to seek immortality is not a selfish quest.

Paul juxtaposes this quest with those who are self-seeking. Listen again to that text:

*“He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life **but for those who are self-seeking** and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.”*
The glory, honor and immortality for which we seek is not self-seeking because it is directly related to giving the Gospel of God.

Later in this letter Paul will say this:

“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.”

This has clues as to what this glory, honor and immortality are all about. Our glory and joy in this life and before the Lord Jesus when he returns are the companions who are coming with us into glory because we declared the gospel with boldness.

In the midst of much conflict, in the midst of a decaying world and a dying civilization, in the midst of shameful treatment, seeking to diminish your identity we are bold to declare the gospel of God.

We declare that gospel both through the bold confidence and freedom we display in the conflict and through giving the words of Life. Those words of life are what bring many sons and daughters to glory.

We seek glory, honor and immortality when we are bold in God to share the good news of eternal life.

Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy show us in this letter what it means to seek glory, honor and immortality—it is a messy journey, it is a suffering journey, it is a glorious journey with feats of boldness that end in the forming of a church—a little group of companions who take up the cause, who themselves go after the glory, go after the honor and go after the immortality by turning to God from idols to serve and to wait for God.

The companioned journey is all about finding more companions to take with us into the presence of Jesus. It is all about seeking glory and honor and immortality—not for ourselves alone, but for each other and for those who are not yet with us on the journey.

The horror of a self-seeking journey is not only that it falls short of eternal life, but that it falls short of bringing so many others with us on the journey.

There is great glory to be had along this journey, there is great honor to be had along this journey, there is immortality to be discovered along this journey and there is eternal life as not only the destination—but the texture and feel of the life we live here.

Fill your imagination with these things—know that your life is hid in God. Know that your mission is not in vain—there will be fruit. Your identity is never at risk, you cannot suffer or be shamed in an ultimate sense for you **are in God your Rock** and your Salvation. Although you will feel the wounds, feel the shame, and experience the psycho-dynamic reality of suffering—it is the cost of the journey, the cost of seeking honor, glory and immortality in this life and eternal life in the age to come. The suffering and shameful treatment cannot ultimately shape you because you are in God. God is the rock who shapes all that comes in contact with Him.

FOL—let's go after the glory; let's go after the honor; let's go after immortality. Let's acknowledge the suffering of the past and the conflict of today, but let's not allow past

shameful treatment to keep us from our great quest—to companion Jesus, to companion each other and to bring many companions to glory with us.

BENEDICTION

As we companion each other on the journey this week: may God be our rock, our fortress and our deliverer. Go out my friends with your eye ever on eternity and your feet firmly planted in the path of honor, glory and immortality.