

Series: The Companions Journey

1 Thessalonians 1

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Over the Christmas holiday season, my family and I often enjoy revisiting the movie trilogy Lord of the Rings. This 2023 season was no different -Bill and I took time to snuggle up and watch a portion of this other-worldly adventure. The 1000-page book “Lord of the Rings” is a story in three parts set in a world all its own. It is, as most of you would know, the recounting of the epic journey of a group of companions—who set off to save their world from impending doom at the hands of evil.

The companions, often reluctant to share the journey with each other, are perhaps the most significant part of the story. Because in its most rudimentary form, I would suggest that Lord of the Rings is a timeless reminder of the beauty inherent in the sort of companionship that arises when a great quest draws us to each other and to a shared vision of reality.

And what is the quest of the Christian church?—to companion a humble Savior who endured and overcame evil in order to bring us all safely home.

The journey of our fellowship FOL, of our companioned way, is through evil and on to glory.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is a message sent by three companions Paul, Silvanus and Timothy who are experiencing great suffering, torment, sorrow and distress along their journey—but they are overcoming. This letter describes their journey a little—but even more so, it describes the beliefs and behaviors necessary for unexpected companions to journey together—as they push and pull each other forward, up mountain, through ravine, over rushing river, past stinking marshes and bone-chilling darkness to stand one day in the presence of Jesus forever.

As Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”

Augustine put it this way,

“So he handed over this flesh to be slain, so that you wouldn’t be afraid of anything that could happen to your flesh. He showed you, in his resurrection after three days, what you ought to be hoping for at the end of this age. So he is leading you along, because he has become your hope. You are now walking toward the hope of resurrection.”

As 2023 comes to a close and 2024 begins to dawn, I am excited to listen to this letter with you. A letter sent forward to you through the centuries from a group of companions. A letter formulated very simply—to help us know how to companion Jesus, to offer us wisdom on how to companion each other, and to instruct us on the beliefs and behaviors necessary to safely journey.

Jesus, the measure of the completeness of human flourishing, modeled the companioned journey.

First and foremost, Jesus companioned his Father—we see this in his life of prayer and his study of scripture from an early age.

Jesus chose 12 companions—so that they might be with him

“And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:15).

This is why, Jesus’ last words to his followers, after his resurrection and prior to ascending into the clouds where he was hidden from their view were these, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples . . . And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age”

Jesus promises to companion us always. When we become followers of Jesus we immediately enter a companioned journey.

Jesus is clear that when he leaves his followers to return to his Father he will send a forever companion, literally a with-ness. “*And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, **to be with you forever**, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you*” (John 15:16-17)

The sole purpose of the sending of the Spirit in this text is for him to be with us—to be our companion.

A foundational teaching of Christian scripture is that God companions each person who receives Jesus on the journey through life.

Today we are going to consider the back-story to this letter as well as its greeting and consider what these say about the companioned journey.

The Backstory

Paul the apostle was a Jew with Roman citizenship living in a culture that was most influenced by Greek philosophy and learning. You might say that Paul was a very cosmopolitan person.

When we first meet Paul in the book of Acts he is named Saul—which is a Hebrew name. The name Paul is derived from the name Saul. Paul, as a Roman citizen would have been given three names. The first would have been his given name (*praenomen*). The second would have been the name of the ultimate founder of the family (*nomen gentile*). The third would have been the family name (*cognomen*).

Paul uses his family name in scripture. In Greek Paulos is a translation of the Latin Paulus or its variant Paullus.

Paul, the Roman Citizen who is a Jew by ethnic origin and choice of religion is a highly respected teacher within the Jewish religion. While on his way to persecute some people who were known as Christian—a new religious sect who were contradicting traditional Jewish understandings of God and the Messiah—Paul, has a dramatic meeting with the resurrected Jesus. Paul is converted to Christianity in this meeting and also sent out by Jesus himself to become an ambassador of the good news that the long-awaited Messiah of not only the Jewish people, but the whole planet has arrived and his name is Jesus.

Paul becomes companion to Jesus on an epic journey—to bring others out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of God's dear Son.

To be sent out by Jesus to do this work was to become an apostle. The word apostle simply means “sent out one.” Paul is both a companion of Jesus and a sent out one—an apostle.

There are two types of apostles in the book of Acts—those sent out by Jesus personally—they have seen the resurrected body of Jesus, and those who are sent out by the church. Both types of apostles companion Jesus and bring the good news of Jesus.

When Paul goes out on missionary journeys he goes out as an apostle with a very specific mission—to reach the Gentile world with the good news about Jesus.

Soon after becoming a follower of Jesus—Paul was joined by a companion. His companion's name was Barnabas—which means in English, son of compassion. Barnabas is described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). He went to Tarsus—Paul's hometown, to look for Paul and when he found him he brought him to Antioch, a missional church plant—this was probably a period of growth and discipleship for Paul. While at Antioch Agabus the prophet foretold a great famine. So all of the believers in Antioch took an offering and sent it to those living in Judea. They sent the offering by the hand of Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem. When Barnabas and Paul completed this mission they returned from Jerusalem, to Antioch with

Barnabas' nephew John Mark. Paul has two types of companions for the journey ahead- those who are more experienced in the faith and those who are just learning the faith.

While in Antioch, Barnabas and Paul were in a time of worshiping the Lord and fasting with other prophets and teachers in the church. The Holy Spirit spoke into that meeting and told these leaders to set apart Barnabas and Paul for the work he would call them to—which ended up being missionary work. Over his lifetime Paul will undertake three missionary journeys—that we are aware of from the writings we have available to us. In each of these journeys Paul will companion Jesus—be led by Jesus, go where Jesus asks him to go. In each of these journeys Paul will also be accompanied by companions on the road.

Missionary Journey #1

In Paul's first missionary journey he is companioned by Barnabas and John Mark. At their third stop in Perga in the region of Pamphylia, John Mark left them. Perhaps he was not accustomed to the ways of the Greeks and the Gentiles—but for reasons not stated he returns to Jerusalem.

The companioned journey includes seasons when we will be abandoned by others, when commitments will be broken and when help we expected will be removed. How do we respond to these betrayals? FOL has gone through a season that may have felt like abandonment by brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you partnered to plant a church.

It is these seasons, episodes and experiences that we receive as abandonment that make us gun-shy of wanting to companion others. Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, speaks of how during modernity we remade the human person into a “buffered” self- protected, autonomous, independent, free to determine our own good and pursue our own authentic path. The desire for a buffered self, a protected self, an autonomous self, an independent self and a self free from mutual obligation does not

represent who humans were made to be, nor what it means to be on a companioned journey. Quite the opposite is in fact true. Clay Routledge in the National Review states, “since social connections and love are so central to the human experience, we are vulnerable to great social suffering.” The buffering we place in our lives between ourselves and others is an allergic reaction to great social suffering.

Nor does this buffering make sense of who Jesus made us to be in relation to himself “a friend who is closer than a brother.”

This buffering can cause harm to our brothers and sisters, can alienate our brothers and sisters—and ultimately often ends in an independent journey rather than a companioned journey.

God has never invited his children into an independent journey. We travel a companioned way—we are companioned by Jesus, the Holy Spirit and those who form our local fellowship.

Paul and Barnabas complete their missionary journey together and return to Antioch in Syria. Today, 2000 years later, there is an Orthodox Christian Church, remaining in Antioch.

After being home for a brief while, Paul decides he wants to go and check on all the folks who came to faith in Jesus from his first missionary journey—and discover how they are faring and how their little faith communities are growing. He asks Barnabas to accompany him. Barnabas says he’ll go if they can take John Mark with them. Paul refuses to companion John Mark. Many years later Paul will be transformed in his heart toward John Mark and he will request his presence and help in ministry. In a personal letter to Timothy, he writes, “Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry” 2 Timothy 2:11.

Barnabas and Paul separate over John Mark. Paul will head out on his 2nd missionary journey to visit Gentile believers in Galatia.

Barnabas will head out to visit Jewish believers in Cyprus—where he was born. This difference could be put down to Barnabas' acceptance of the thinking of people called Judaizers—mentioned in Galatians 2:13, that made Gentile believers take on the social customs of Jewish faith. However, it is clear that the primary point of difference is not theological but people-related.

I wonder about you and me. Who do we refuse to companion on our journey- because we have past hurts, past betrayals, past abandonments that still form how we journey? This division between Barnabas and Paul would have been painful for both of them. When there is division between companions we tend to see ourselves as victimized and we may not see how we are complicit in how the relationship has ended. We create buffered selves. It would seem that Barnabas cannot understand how Paul would want to be companioned by faithful friends when going into dangerous territory where he will suffer great opposition—and when we see what Paul will endure on his second missionary journey there may have been some ways that Paul was expressing prudence in his refusal to bring John mark along.

It would also seem that Paul cannot understand how Barnabas might feel about Paul showing compassion to his nephew who had made some poor choices. After all, Paul had been pursuing Christians in his past and seeking to imprison them, everyone was afraid of Paul, but Barnabas had sought Paul out and brought him into the fold. He had in some ways staked his own reputation on Paul by choosing to companion him. Until we see how we have been co-conspirators to our own relational breakdowns we cannot be transformed and changed.

Paul is unwilling to journey on his own. He knows he needs companions for the journey, such an epic adventure as bringing lost souls to Jesus cannot be undertaken without human companionship.

Paul chooses Silvanus who is a prophet as a seasoned associate for his second missionary journey. Silvanus is the Greek version of the name that is also translated Silas in its Jewish version. Silvanus is a trusted and mature believer. Paul heads out with him and very early on the journey he returns to Lystra. On his first missionary journey Paul had been thrown out of Lystra, but while he was there it would seem that a young man named Timothy had heard and received the gospel. Paul wants to bring him along on the journey, and he comes as a novice apprentice. So Paul has his new equivalents of Barnabas and John Mark in Silvanus and Timothy. It is interesting who Paul chooses as companions on his journeys. A seasoned person to support, encourage, challenge and rely on as well as a younger person to be mentored and trained along the way.

In a later letter, his first to the Corinthians Paul will reference Timothy in this way, “my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.” (1 Cor 4:17) Timothy’s faithfulness to Paul as a companion throughout Paul’s missionary journeys is evident because in one of his later letters 1 Tim 1:2—Paul references Timothy as “my true child in the faith”.

Paul has a deep love for Timothy and in both of these statements it seems, in some ways, to be connected to Timothy’s loyalty and faithfulness to Paul. Unlike many of Paul’s other companions, Timothy does not betray, desert or defy Paul. Their relationship is a beautiful image of mutual care and support. Companions can be intergenerational, at very different places of maturity in their faith and yet deeply interconnected by mutual need. Remember that the places of greatest transformation are often where we meet each other in our need. Vulnerability is a key aspect of companioning another well. Paul and Timothy need each other in a mutuality of support, encouragement and strengthening—just in very different ways. Paul would lead and teach Timothy and provide an example of uncommon valor and virtue through his resilience in great hardship. Timothy would provide Paul the loyalty and eager commitment to Paul’s churches that Paul so much needed—Timothy literally became an advocate for Paul with the churches he had founded. They both had genuine, vulnerable need of the other.

These three companions are the men who sent the letter to the Thessalonians that we hold in our hands today.

When you think of who is companioning you today, who is the seasoned person who is there to support and encourage, challenge and depend on? Who do you have with whom you can be an unbuffered self?

Who is that novice, apprentice who will depend upon you as they grow forward?

In Acts 16 Paul and his companions experience great suffering along this journey. Paul and Silas are attacked, have their garments torn from them and are beaten with rods, “when they had inflicted many blows upon them” “he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.” The text does not explain how Timothy escaped the notice of the mob, but he does.

The companionship of Paul and Silas becomes deepened and solidified as they pray and sing hymns together. Imagine the bonding that occurs through this experience of terror, trauma and suffering. Shared experiences of injustice and being persecuted for the sake of the Gospel are tragic and should not be sought out, but they often have the happy outcome of forging the types of bonds between companions that are not easily broken.

God miraculously intervenes in response to the prayers of Paul and Silas and they are released from jail.

From Philippi, after much suffering and also much fruitful return for their labors the three companions head to Thessalonica. And, this is where we are first introduced to the first recipients of our letter and those for whom it was first written.

Thessalonica was a city that has many properties similar to that of Los Angeles County. *As Los Angeles County is an amalgamate of many smaller cities, Thessalonica was a city that was established by the forcible joining together of 26 villages by King Cassander in 316-315 BC.

- LA is considered one of five landmark cities in America, Thessalonica was considered one of the top 10 cities in Rome. She was central to major trade routes both by sea and land.
- Political unrest—left vs right for LA ; for Thess—constant civil wars with a record of typically backing the losing side
- Classist divide—huge division between rich and poor
- Societal failure—street population of temple prostitutes, beggars, run-away slaves, displaced persons all over the Roman empire might end up in Thessalonica LA—homeless crisis
- Loss of shared consensus related to truth in LA, Rome was only held together due to the holy Roman emperor and the fear he struck, there were multiple cultures from around the world who could find a home in Thess
- Racial tensions in LA—constant in Thessalonica, huge disparity between Roman citizens and those who could not get citizenship
- Religious pluralism in LA—religions from around the empire on Thess
- Much spiritualism and mysticism with multiple gods and multiple ways of worshipping God.
- A very tribalized setting—fractured, independent no single pervasive belief system.

Upon entering the City of Thessalonica, Paul follows his usual pattern. He goes first to the Jewish synagogue to reason with them from the scripture. He is there for 3 sabbaths—but his presence enrages the jews who become jealous of his converts. Paul and Silas have primarily three groups of converts: a./ Jason’s household—a wealthy man who is able to house and care for all 3 missionaries—only the very wealthy owned homes, b./ a large number of the God-fearing Greeks—folks who attended the synagogue but did not want to follow ceremonial law of the Jews c./ a number of the leading women are converted. These particular peoples would have represented both popularity and money for the synagogue. Leading women would have been referencing women who were married or in some way attached to prominent men in the city. The

Jews stir up a mob who begin a riot and attack the house of Jason—one of the first converts in Thessalonica. When they cannot find Paul and his companions they drag Jason and some of the other new converts before the city officials—accusing them of two primary offenses.

First, breaking the peace and turning the world upside down.

This is a serious accusation. The purpose of Rome's presence in places like Thessalonica was to keep the peace and retain order. If there is a group who is thwarting the work of Roman representatives and the Roman army they could experience swift and serious consequences.

Second, "they all are acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus" this is an accusation of treason which could be punishable by death. These are extremely serious although false accusations against Paul particularly. Jason offers a security bond and then the brothers and sisters, in the night send Paul and Silas away to keep them safe.

What a birth story for this little congregation—only a short time with their founder, no written scriptures available explaining the Christian faith for them- and their companions are torn from them in fear of their lives. No wonder we will hear Paul, in his letter to them, expressing great concern for their well-being.

As Paul and Silas/Silvanus leave the city we are not certain if Timothy accompanies them. The city officials may not be aware of Timothy's presence or have animus against him personally. This may be why Paul would send him later as an emissary to check in on this infant church.

When Paul and Silas rush away from Thessalonica in the dark of night they must travel 45 miles on foot to Berea—at least a 2-day walking journey. They have immediate fruitfulness in Berea but Paul, specifically is targeted and followed by Jews from

Thessalonica who come agitating and upsetting the crowds. Paul is sent away by the brothers and sisters in Berea—obviously seeking to keep Paul a free man. To continue his journey, Paul must take a boat in order to avoid the mountain range between Berea and Athens. He leaves Timothy and Silvanus behind with the believers to continue to preach and teach the gospel—asking them to join him as quickly as possible.

So we see the danger of this journey—Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea—from every one of these cities Paul must run. His companions are absolutely necessary to his flourishing as a human person in the midst of such distressing and overwhelming experiences of rejection and suffering. But also, he sees the hand of God bringing many people into the faith and a little church is birthed in every city. The journey may be treacherous but it is also filled with the beauty and joy of new life, new faith, new hope, new companions and new expectations of glory.

After Athens, Paul journeys to Corinth. We know that Paul arrived in Corinth “in weakness, in fear and in much trembling” The humanity of Paul, his need for companions, his need for strengthening, encouragement and help is evident in this text. FOL the journey is treacherous, the way is difficult, you have only enough light for the next step on the path. The Holy Spirit is your companion for the journey. However, just as in the Garden of Eden when Adam had a perfect relationship with God, a perfect workplace environment, and a perfect world in which to live—he still needed a companion—so do you and I! Paul is weak and weary—he needs companions to journey with him. He knows this and stays in Corinth for about 18 months.

At some point in his time at Corinth Silvanus and Timothy join him and together they send this letter to the believers in Thessalonica. The year is either late AD50 or early AD51. We know this exact dating because of three things.

- a. Timothy’s return from Thessalonica and report to Paul in 1 Thess 3:6 is equated to the return of Timothy and Silas to Paul in Corinth recorded in Acts 18:5. So the letter was written during Paul’s stay in Corinth.

- b. During Paul's stay in Corinth he appeared before Gallio—the proconsul or governor of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17).
- c. An inscription discovered in Delphi dates the start of Gallio's one-year term as proconsul to either July 51 or July 52.

We know then, in Corinth, with the companionship of Silas and Timothy, Paul writes this letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul will later write a 2nd letter to the Thessalonians but we are not certain from where or when this letter is written.

For the next months we will be considering this letter that flows out of the companionship of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

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

Grace to you and peace.

This is a beautiful beginning to Paul's letter to this little beleaguered church that had such a limited time with her founders.

First the senders of the letter are identified: Paul, Silvanus and Timothy—these three men modeled the companionship with each other that would be key to the survival of this church in a place of great persecution and suffering. Paul does not need to identify himself as an apostle at the beginning of the letter, as he does with other churches, because his authority is not in question with this congregation. Paul had spiritual authority with this congregation that would have been gained in a number of ways -as we shall see when we further study this letter. However, at least two things would have gained Paul this authority—1. He suffered on behalf of Christ and this church. Suffering on behalf of Christ gains us spiritual authority. What wounds do we bear on our bodies

because we have been ambassadors of our King? 2. His companions displayed love, respect, honor and mutuality with Paul—how Silas and Timothy related to Paul would have set the tone for the authority Paul carried as the leader of the missionary journey. Second 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 ever Presence of Father and Son. It is so interesting in this letter that the church is not simply “in Christ”—this phrase is used 170 times in the New Testament. No, the atypical phrase in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ again speaks of the unity, and companionship of the Father and the Son.

The unity in diversity, the companionship and the mutuality at the start of this letter is powerful.

Father and Son are one and companion each other. The Thessalonian church is in Father and Son and therefore companions 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.

After noting the senders and the receiver—a church that is in the Father and in the Son, Paul goes on to give his greeting.

“Grace to you and peace.”

This greeting reminds the Thessalonians of the great salvation they have received. Grace is the absolutely free gift of God’s undeserved favor that the Thessalonians received because of their relationship to Jesus Christ—they are in Christ. The life of the

Thessalonian church is hid in the Father and in the Son. Not only do they have undeserved favor, but because of that favor—exhibited in God sending his son to save them from their sins, they also have peace. Peace with God, the ability to have peace with each other and the gift of extending that peace to those around them.

Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is the restoration of flourishing, of wholeness, of harmony that was characterized by humankind's original relationship with God, with each other and with their environment.

Paul is greeting this little church by not only reminding them of this undeserved favor and this restoration of wholeness but by extending it.

As we close this brief history of these three companions and the church of Thessalonica I want us to consider the Paul we have met in this biographical review and also in these brief first words to the church.

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.

It is not months but simply days since Paul suffered so severely in Philippi.

Yet, God had been his present companion in prison—God had heard his prayers and rescued him from all his troubles. Silas had also been his companion 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 not to buffer, step back, step away from going on to the very next city and vulnerably making

himself available to preach the gospel. And, when he does so, he is again attacked, 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. The grace that God offers you as you enter 2024. FOL—you have suffered greatly over the last few years. You can choose to buffer yourself, wrap yourself in cotton so you will not get hurt. Or, you can choose to develop patterns of companionship with God and others that will grant you the courage and hope to sing and pray even in the most difficult of situations.

Take a few moments right now, take out your phone, and text a companion asking them to pray for you that you will not allow past suffering to make you risk averse from what God may be calling you and our community into in 2024.

Second, Paul was also tender as he entered the gates of Thessalonica because he was aware of his fractured relationship with Barnabas who had been his mentor and dear friend. Only a few months previous, Paul had been humbled by his own shortcomings and lack of grace that had led to decisions that wounded and alienated his friend. His own sinful past could have made Paul fearful of entering ministry, anxious about what he might encounter of himself that is ugly, distrustful of his abilities and competency. Yet we read his words—"in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul was so very aware that only because of the salvation of God, only because of his identity "in the Father and in the Son" could he ever have grace to minister or peace in his heart as he ministered.

FOL—as a church you have experienced wounding. But, as a church we have also wounded others. As we end 2023 we need to ask God to show us our personal or corporate patterns of behavior that lead us to fracture relationships and alienate others. Having identified those, we then need to remind ourselves of the forgiveness that flows from the cross of Jesus Christ. We are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are covered in undeserved favor and in the wholeness that comes from right relationship with God. Let's choose companions who will love us more than their

relationship with us, companions who will tell us the truth about ourselves and the truth about God's wonderful love for us.

A dear mentor of mine, a companion for the journey— Timothy Keller passed away in 2023. I would like to end 2023 with a word from this faithful servant of Jesus:

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus than we ever dared hope.”

BENEDICTION

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.