

Now We Really Live!
I Thessalonians 3:6-10
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We are in the season of Eastertide.

Eastertide is a festal season, lasting 50 days from Easter Sunday to the Day of Pentecost. During Eastertide we focus on celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Today we will be returning to our series on The Companioned Journey which is a series of reflection on a letter from Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy to a fledgling group of believers in the first century city of Thessalonica. As we listen to the writings of the companions and ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate the meanings they want to share we will be reminded of the real meaning of Eastertide and why we dance and feast in these days.

Christina read our text for the day, of what she read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10 will be our focus. Please open your Bibles as we begin.

“But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith”

As you know, Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy had spent just a few weeks in Thessalonica spreading the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. They and the new believers had been brutally attacked and persecuted. Before the mob could arrest them the newly formed church rushed Paul out of the city. Paul and his companions journeyed for a number of weeks to Corinth. While waiting there they have been concerned about the

welfare of this little, struggling, persecuted church that was undergoing severe affliction. So, they sent Timothy to be with them.

Timothy has returned and now brings word from companions far away in Thessalonica to companions in Corinth who have been waiting for news. While waiting in Corinth the little mission team of Paul and Sylvanus has been undergoing distress and affliction of their own. The word distress here has the idea of being in a constant state of needs unmet. The word affliction has the idea of being strongly pressed due to trouble and anguish. So, Paul and his companions have been enduring the distress that comes from being in need as well as the sort of anguish that comes from being persecuted. They have been pushed and pressed and under great strain—the kind of strain that pushes in on you emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally. We are whole people, if one part of us is in distress—the whole of us is affected. So, these companions waiting for this news have been in difficulty and trouble perplexed and crushed is how Paul would refer to himself at other times.

This past week many of you have been experiencing times that may feel perplexing or even crushing—this has been a difficult season. In these days many of us are experiencing the death of family members and friends. Bill and I have also been distressed in this way. Bill heard yesterday of a friend of 55 years passing away—one who was without hope and without God in the world. And just two weeks before I learned of my much younger cousin's being called home to Jesus. There has also been diagnosis of deadly disease in some of your immediate families, or a disease in remission raising its ugly head again. This week, one of our members was in hospital companioning one family member only to discover that another was being brought in to emergency and then admitted to hospital. Others among us continue to cope with financial distress, job loss, and the uncertainties of life. This is not perhaps the anguish of persecution—but it is the vagaries and vicissitudes of life on planet earth that distress us as human beings.

In these situations what news might bring a ray of light into the gloom that hovers, what streak of joy might shoot into the bleak of being born to a dying and groaning planet that longs for release into new creation?

Why—new creation itself showing up. The news Timothy brings to the friends in Corinth who are in such distress and affliction is new creation news! It is the sort of news that turns mourning into dancing and douses us in oil of gladness instead of the ash of death.

When we are in distress and affliction, one might say that the best news one could ever receive from friends afar is that they miss me and love me and that we have a strong and enduring relationship that is not harmed by time or distance.

Timothy does report that this is in fact true. He describes how the Thessalonians always or “ever” remember their friends kindly and they long to see them. As a matter of fact, the text says, “and long to see us as we long to see you.” There is a reciprocity of love here. The earnest desire to see one another is present and it goes both ways. The longings of the companions awaiting news are met in the longings of the Thessalonian brothers and sisters. So, Timothy brings news of an enduring relationship, one that is not harmed by time or distance—a relationship of mutual love and affection. This is good news!

But the letter does not say that it is this news that brings Paul and his friends comfort or consolation in the midst of all their distress.

Rather the text says, “for this reason brothers we have been comforted in all our distress and affliction about you through your faith.”

The loving friendship between the companions in Corinth and the distant companions in Thessalonica has brought cheer, I am certain to the hearts of Paul and Sylvanus. But, it

is the faith of the Thessalonians that brings fresh courage, consolation, and strength to Paul and his friends.

What is faith?

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Hebrews 11:1

The Thessalonians did not meet Jesus. They did not see Jesus as he walked on the earth. They did not see Jesus hanging on a cross. They did not see Jesus raised from the dead. Like you and I they have only heard the good news of who Jesus is and that he has come to make them free.

It is the sustained faith of the Thessalonians that comforts Paul and his companions. So much so that Paul makes this bold statement, “Now we really live if you are standing firm in the Lord.”

A decade ago or so, there was a common saying “get a life!” This is what you might say in your mind or aloud if you saw people spending their time on some meaningless endeavor.

- Blogger Hunter Hobbs spent 9 hours manually scrolling down to the end of an Excel spreadsheet to find out it has 1,048,576 rows.
- Mazen Kourouche, a tech blogger from Sydney, spent ten days camping in a tent to be first to get his hands on the flagship iPhone X.
- Super Mario Maker allows you to create your own stages. You have to prove you have completed your own stage before you can share it with others. Braden Moor created a “beatable” stage, but ended up spending over 1500 hours trying to master it, which is equal to 60 full days of playing.
- For Season 7 of “Game of Thrones” a group of people wanted to do a deep analysis—like the bloodshed / crying / negotiating ratio. They created

spreadsheets and slowly watched each episode. It took 304 hours to create a Game of Thrones Timesheet

To all of these ridiculous time-wasters we might say “get a life!”

But what does it mean to “really live?”

This ancient text, this letter written from Corinth to a newly formed group of Christ followers in Thessalonica is a travelog of how to fruitfully and safely journey through life.

Paul and his companions are saying, “listen up, here’s it is, here is a navigational tool for the journey”

“Now we really live—if the people with whom we shared the good news of Jesus are standing firm in the Lord.”

Now we really live, now we are not lifeless, we are not next door to dead, we are not static, we are not on pause, we are not paralyzed. Now we feel within us that we are alive. Now we really live! As the prophet Andy Dufresne says in “Shawshank Redemption”: “either get busy living or get busy dying!”

These companions want to really live, to live life to the full—they want to taste new every day the breath of life that was breathed into the dust of the earth. Not the so-called life that hangs like a shroud over the muddy clay of human existence hardened over time into a robotic creature, who goes through the motions every day. But the resurrection life that is breathed into them. The breath that transforms.

Do you know what happened on Easter Eve: “*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they*

saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John 20:19-22.

Do you see this scene in your mind's eye? The disciples are scared, Jesus was just executed and they are his followers and they have locked themselves into a room— from fear. For all they know they are next, the Jewish leaders will stir up the Romans and they will be arrested and executed just as they saw happen to Jesus. In the middle of their hide-out, Jesus comes and stands among them and you can be sure they were totally freaked out. He says "peace be with you" and they would have been reminded, as are we of the words 'peace be still" that Jesus said to the unruly sea and the waves went flat. Well, the disciples' hearts are the unruly sea- and Jesus whispers peace. He then shows them his hands and side. The disciples are glad Jesus is alive but they are still unsure, distressed and most likely not able to comprehend all that is going on. Jesus knows they are struggling with fear, anxiety, distress—they have just gone through incredible trauma, and now their friend who was dead and put into a tomb is alive before them. So, Jesus repeats his blessing, "peace be with you". And then he says the craziest thing: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you!" What! Where did that come from? How do those two things go together "peace be with you" and then "as the father has sent me, even so I am sending you." What happened when the Father sent the Son? He was constantly attacked, falsely accused and eventually crucified. Jesus says be at peace—I'm sending you just like my Father sent me. This seems like an absolutely insane thing to say. And it is! Unless Jesus does the next thing. And what is the next thing? He breathes on them. Jesus breathes on them and says "receive the Holy Spirit." What is going on here? Last time God breathed on a clay pot in the form of a human—a soul that would never die entered in. Now God breathes again and this time they receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enters into them. This is not a being entering into them. God is not a being; he is being itself. God is the essence of life. Jesus said "I am the Life". What is breathed into those followers is not simply the breath that gave us life and we became a human soul; they already have that. What is

breathed into those followers is Being itself. The Holy Spirit who is God is within them! The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work within them.

New creation has arrived, in the breath of Jesus the disciples breathe for the first time the breath of heaven, not something that wafts past as a breeze—for the Spirit does travel where he desires and no one knows his coming and going. No, the disciples receive into their very being the essence of reality, the real, the Divine. They are filled with the Holy Spirit.

C.S. Lewis describes this beautifully in this scene from *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* that occurs right after Aslan has returned from the dead. It is meant to give us a visual image of Jesus breathing on his disciples after his resurrection.

““What an extraordinary place!” cried Lucy. “All those stone animals—and people too! It’s—it’s like a museum.”

“Hush,” said Susan, “Aslan’s doing something.”

He was indeed. He had bounded up to the stone lion and breathed on him. Then without waiting a moment he whisked round—almost as if he had been a cat chasing its tail—and breathed also on the stone dwarf, which (as you remember) was standing a few feet from the lion with his back to it. Then he pounced on a tall stone dryad which stood beyond the dwarf, turned rapidly aside to deal with a stone rabbit on his right, and rushed on to two centaurs. But at that moment Lucy said,

“Oh, Susan! Look! Look at the lion.”

I expect you’ve seen someone put a lighted match to a bit of newspaper which is propped up in a grate against an unlit fire. And for a second nothing seems to have happened; and then you notice a tiny streak of flame creeping along the edge of the newspaper. It was like that now. For a second after Aslan had breathed upon him the stone lion looked just the same. Then a tiny streak of gold began to run along his white marble back—then it spread—then the color seemed to lick all over him as the flame

licks all over a bit of paper—then, while his hindquarters were still obviously stone, the lion shook his mane and all the heavy, stone folds rippled into living hair. Then he opened a great red mouth, warm and living, and gave a prodigious yawn. And now his hind legs had come to life. He lifted one of them and scratched himself. Then, having caught sight of Aslan, he went bounding after him and frisking round him whimpering with delight and jumping up to lick his face. Of course, the children’s eyes turned to follow the lion; but the sight they saw was so wonderful that they soon forgot about *him*. Everywhere the statues were coming to life. The courtyard looked no longer like a museum; it looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing round him till he was almost hidden in the crowd. Instead of all that deadly white the courtyard was now a blaze of colors; glossy chestnut sides of centaurs, indigo horns of unicorns, dazzling plumage of birds, reddy-brown of foxes, dogs and satyrs, yellow stockings and crimson hoods of dwarfs; and the birch-girls in silver, and the beech-girls in fresh, transparent green, and the larch-girls in green so bright that it was almost yellow. And instead of the deadly silence the whole place rang with the sound of happy roarings, brayings, yelpings, barkings, squealings, cooings, neighings, stampings, shouts, hurrahs, songs and laughter.”

And this is why Paul and his companions are rejoicing too! What have the companions been doing? They have been sharing the good news, they have been showing people Jesus. And when those people turn in faith and believe—what happens? They go from stone cold statues to living creatures. The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit enters them and they come alive, truly live. No wonder the whole life of this team of mission companions—Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy—is consumed with seeing what happens when the Holy Spirit breathes life into another person and another person.

This is life! This is why we are still on the planet! This is why we are not taken up to heaven to be with Jesus as soon as we confess our faith.

Now we really live—if you are standing firm in the Lord!

This is where the joy is!

What does it mean to stand firm in the Lord?

The letter Paul wrote to the Philippians gives us a clue.

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved." Philippians 3:20—4:1

To stand firm in the Lord is to remember that we are citizens of heaven, we have a home in heaven, and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ is returning. The transformation that has begun here will be complete when we are with the Lord. Our lowly body will be transformed into a glorious body. The transformation that has begun in us as God has breathed his Holy Spirit into us will one day be complete.

To stand firm in the Lord is to rely on the power that enables Jesus to subject all things to himself. We stand firm when we depend on the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. When we waiver, when we are faint, when we doubt, when we are tossed about by many fears—we stand firm by remembering that being itself dwells within us. No death, no disease, no distress can win—Life is within us, resurrection life, we cannot be defeated.

To stand firm in the Lord is to remember that we travel a companioned way. We have a company of other followers of Jesus who companion us—Paul tells the Philippians that they are his joy and crown, they are his beloved. FOL—you are beloved. Yes, beloved by God! But you are among the beloved here, in this place, not simply because God loves you, but because of the love God pours into our hearts for one another. Someday when new creation comes all the way in and we are in the new heavens and the new earth we will be the joy and crown of each other.

To stand firm in the Lord is to lean into your future hope of complete and glorious transformation—the resurrection work of God that has already begun in you will be complete.

To stand firm in the Lord is to lean into the resurrection power of Jesus that is already at work within us—the Holy Spirit.

To stand firm in the Lord is to lean into your companions here in this place.

Paul is really living because his far-off companions, his beloved ones are standing firm in the Lord.

Look again with me at verse 9

“For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account?”

Paul and his companions do not know how to pay God back for all the joy they have as they rejoice in life not only coming into the Thessalonians, but rejoice in the fact that it is real life, it is true life. It is the life that transforms, that changes, that travels across the whole life and eventually changes every part of the stone, cold, white marble of human existence into exotic colors and wildlife.

When Paul and his companions fled from Thessalonica they could not know if the Thessalonians had truly turned to Jesus, if the Holy Spirit had entered into them, if they would be able to stand fast in the Lord. Perhaps the cares of this world and the hardships of persecution had tested the faith of the new believers in Thessalonica—and it had not been saving faith at all. Perhaps the transformation of new creation had not come.

But then—Timothy brings the good news—they are standing firm, the Spirit of God is in them, they are being renewed day by day, they are being transformed. They are leaning into their future hope, the power of the Holy Spirit and their companions.

And Paul shouts out: “Now we really live if you are standing firm in the Lord!”

And this is where you and I get a glimpse into what it means to be truly alive.

Life begets life. People who are truly alive in Christ and are filled with the Spirit take joy when they see life entering into another person. There is nothing more joyful in this world than seeing someone pass from death to life, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son. And this is not our work, this is God's work. We are but messengers that new creation has arrived on planet earth, and observers of how the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, being itself, begins to blow across every aspect of a person's being. We can be remade in the image of Jesus. Our race can be healed. We have been freed to be fully human. Just as Lucy and Susan danced with joy as Aslan breathed life into these cold marble statues so we follow in Jesus train—bringing news of new life and we dance for joy as we see people come alive in Christ, alive through the Spirit.

No wonder the companions say that they are beseeching God—night and day to be in the face presence of the Thessalonians so that they can complete whatever might be lacking in their faith. The companions want to return to their friends so that they can give them whatever might be deficient, whatever might be lacking in their conviction of the truth, in their belief in God. They ache to do this, they pray earnestly, beseeching God that they might do this.

Why? This is really living!

We live in a time of malaise when people are bored and jaded, there is deep melancholia, dejection and despondency. This cultural disquiet has seeped through the cracks into the church and perhaps into your own heart.

FOL—have we forgotten what it means to really live! Do we think of sharing the good news of Jesus as work—because seeing the Spirit of the Living God moving across a person's whole life and changing everything may be a distant memory for us. May I suggest that if we are not seeing new creation arriving and dismantling our own lives

and the lives of those around us then it is possible that we ourselves are no longer standing firm. Standing firm in the Lord!

FOL have we forgotten what it means to be alive in the Spirit ourselves, to be alive in Christ? As you do an inventory of your own life—where have you seen new creation, transformation, renovation? Where are you feeling the prickly sensation of parts of you coming newly alive? Where are you finding that edge of discomfort as God calls you and moves you into new spaces.

It is a scary thing to open our lives completely, to stand with hands open and say to God, “remake me, renew me, may your kingdom come and your will be done in me as it is in heaven”

Just as Jesus entered that locked room on Easter Eve, so he stands with us in this room today. Might he be saying to us in a fresh way today, “*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*”

There is a bit in verse 9 that we might rush by if we are not careful.

I think the companions who wrote this for us might say, stop here for a while and rest with us. Take in the vista, the grandeur, the beauty.

Listen carefully to their words: “*in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God?*”

As you rejoice in the breath of Jesus, the Holy Spirit being blown into the life of those to whom you proclaim the Gospel, as you turn with glad eyes to your companions who are with you in proclaiming the gospel and see the joy that emanates from their eyes, you are not alone. You are in the presence of God—he companions you in this rejoicing. For it is this work of giving life that makes the heart of God happy. And so, in this moment,

your heart becomes like the heart of God and you have the capacity to share in real joy and real life in the presence of the Giver of life.

What a beautiful picture.

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner whose heart is changed” Luke 15:10

“The courtyard looked no longer like a museum; it looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing round him till he was almost hidden in the crowd. Instead of all that deadly white the courtyard was now a blaze of colors...And instead of the deadly silence the whole place rang with the sound of songs and laughter.”

Now we really live—if you are standing firm in the Lord. What thanks can we return to God for you? In return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God?