

“Formed by the Story of Christ”

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We began a study in 1 Thessalonians that I have titled, “The Companions Journey.”

Why the Companions Journey?

This is a letter sent by a group of companions while they are still far from home. Paul and Sylvanus set out from Jerusalem in late Fall of 49AD on a grand adventure of bringing the good news about Jesus of Nazareth to lands that are present day Syria, Turkey and Greece. Paul and Sylvanus acquired a new team member in Derbe. His name was Timothy and so the company of travelers was expanded from two to three.

This group of companions had started this journey because of their love for Jesus—the Son of God who had been sent by God the Father to save his people from their sins, and because of the presence of God the Holy Spirit who was their constant companion—leading them, guiding them and being with them.

The journey of Paul, Sylvanus, and Timothy took them through a prosperous cosmopolitan city called Thessalonica. This city still exists to this day. While in the city, Paul preached on three sabbaths in the synagogue. Many God-fearing Greeks, some influential women and a few Jews believed in Jesus and became the first group of people ever in Thessalonica to choose to companion the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to companion each other in this crazy adventure of knowing God. And so, a small church was being formed.

This outraged the Jewish leaders, they stirred up trouble, some of the new believers were arrested and falsely accused and a mob sought to arrest Paul but the believers helped him to slip out of the city under cover of darkness. He then journeyed for 2 days until he came to Berea. The Jews stirred up trouble there and Paul fled by sea, around the mountains to Corinth. Timothy and Sylvanus joined Paul in Corinth. Paul, concerned about the believers, sent Timothy to check on them. When Timothy returned with news of the church in Thessalonica—then the companions sent them a letter around 52AD.

The letter begins with greetings that are traditional for letters of this era, but then it immediately moves to how thankful Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy are for the Thessalonians. Based on the harrowing start to this little church it is understandable why Paul and his companions write with such thankfulness.

Today we are in this section of the letter, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 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, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 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”

Paul is thankful for the Thessalonians because they have been formed by the story of Jesus. They have become imitators of the Lord. Not just individually, but as a community they are formed by the story of Jesus.

I want to consider three themes from this text related to what it might mean for the community of Fountain of Life Covenant Church to be formed by the story of Jesus.

The relationships we need.

The resources we can expect.

The resistance that brings heaven close.

1. The Relationships we need

What are the relationships we need to be formed by the story of Jesus?

“You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”

“For your sake”—we need people who love us, we need people who love us. Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy placed themselves in danger of their lives to bring the gospel. In Philippi they had been put in stocks and beaten. But they escaped to Thessalonica—knowing they might receive exactly the same affliction there. And they did. “You became imitators of us for you received the word in much affliction.”

Why? Why did the companions stay in the adventure, why did they continue to Thessalonica. Many reasons but only one given in this text “for your sake”—“for your sake”

We need people who will love us.

It takes humility, courage and porosity to recognize this need and to receive that love.

We need people with joy in the Holy Spirit. What is joy?

It is not circumstantial; it is a response to wonder and awe. For believers it is primarily associated with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are in awe that God who breathes galaxies into being could be constrained to human flesh and become like us in every way yet without sin—just to show us the Father, to show us who God is.

We are in awe that God sent his son to die for us, that the Son came to die for us and that the Spirit offered up the Son to the Father on our behalf. Who are we that God would be mindful of us? This evokes awe.

We are in awe that Jesus rose from the dead. That the gnawing cycle of endless death on this planet was called to a halt. Jesus was raised from the dead—you shall be too!

We need people for whom this awe and wonder is fresh every day and so they live with joy—a bold confidence in life that is contagious and unexplained by their circumstances.

How does this joy work practically speaking?

This is “joy in the Holy Spirit.” Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:21,22). Meaning this sort of joy comes through being in awe and wonder of God. But that awe and wonder is impossible if we are not choosing to “walk in step with the Spirit”

“If we live by the Spirit let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25)

What does that sound like—intentionally choosing to companion God the Holy Spirit—rhythms and practices of being with Jesus.

We need people who love us, we need people who companion Jesus such that their lives are filled with joy—a bold confidence in God that has nothing to do with circumstances and is simply the overflow of their regular rhythms of keeping in step with the Spirit.

2. The Resources We Can Expect

What are the resources we can expect, the resources God gives us so that we can be formed by the story of Jesus?

First, companions—people who imitate the Lord; who become models of faith for you. These are people who are keeping in step with the Spirit, who are evidently choosing to companion the Spirit. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit, let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

We can expect God to provide these models for us, however there are three limitations to keeping in step with the Spirit, three ways we may squander this resource rather than allowing it to form us.

Conceit, provoking one another, envying one another.

Have you identified the ways that your own conceit that makes it impossible for you to see the resources God is providing you in the lives of people around you? Do you remain aloof, independent and insular because you believe you are just fine on your own?

Who are you imitating in your life right now?

Have you identified how you might choose to provoke others rather than walk in step with the Spirit and imitate those who are companioning Jesus?

We might choose to provoke others when we find ourselves intimidated. by a person who is walking in step with the Spirit—their integrity of lifestyle, their spiritual practices, their spiritual gifts, the strength of their family bond or marriage, may pose a threat to our current self-understanding. Rather than choosing to imitate them we may choose to resent the fact that their

lifestyle challenges our own. So, as a defensive move we may provoke others to notice the least failure in their lives—this may remove the sense of challenge that their life brings to us. Rather than being helped to keep in step with the Spirit by this person, we try to poke holes in that which is God's gift to us. In this way we may short-circuit the transformational value of another person's influence.

Whose life really challenges your own and leads you to provoking others to notice their failings?

A third shortcoming can be envy.

Have you identified how your heart is envious of others? Remember one of the ways we insulate ourselves from the need to change is by staying away from the very means of change God sends—those whom we should imitate.

Not only does God provide life models he also has provided us with his word.

For the Thessalonians this was the oral reports of Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy. For us this is primarily the written word of God, but hopefully also the oral reports of messengers—like this sermon today.

The Word of God is a resource in our journey. The word of God has the power to transform us, but it has to be received.

Sadly, this is a resource that is often neglected.

To receive the Word is different than to hear the word or to read the

word or to study the word. We receive the word when we allow it to stand in judgment of our lives rather than us standing in judgment of the word. How do you allow the word of God to judge your life?

The third resource that we can expect on our journey as companions who walk the ancient path toward God is affliction. Affliction is a resource that we can expect. "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Affliction is inevitable. You cannot be in this world and not suffer affliction.

Jesus has overcome the world. How? His life, death and resurrection.

It is the story of Jesus overcoming evil in his life that gives us courage to walk as he did, in the ways he did, in the spaces he did. Otherwise, we could not face into our own future. Think of the life of Jesus, there were many mundane seasons when we don't even know what he was up to. Where was Jesus between age 12 and 30? We see him speaking with teachers of the law as a boy and then the next time we see him he is boldly walking onto the political, social and religious platform of his day saying some crazy things and doing some radical acts. What was that other season? What was going on? History tells us that his earthly guardian Joseph died. Death is evil—always evil, it takes life and removes relationship. What was Jesus doing in those days? Facing into the consequences of evil for his own life—becoming the leader of the family,

working in his carpenter shop to provide for the family? Helping his mother raise her other sons? We don't know, but we do know that Jesus had to face into evil in the mundane of his life.

It is the story of Jesus destroying evil through his death that gives us confidence that even in the darkest of spaces transformation is at work. We can trust God in the most evil of times or situations because the hidden work of God is the redeeming work of God. This might be a dark night of the soul—we experience the chilled loneliness of a time when God not only seems distant but perhaps even absent, maybe even unbelievable. Perhaps there has been a diagnosis of illness for yourself or someone close, perhaps you have a dear family member or child who walks away from faith, perhaps a friend betrays you, perhaps you are falsely accused, perhaps you are simply in a season where the locusts have eaten all the fruit of your life because you ceased to be vigilant with your heart. In this affliction we cannot run past the dark and hiddenness of God—it has descended upon us. This sort of darkness gives us a sense of being out of control, having no ability to influence the emotions, and thoughts of our life perhaps. We need to recognize this time as temporary and transitory. In these seasons we learn a dying to the self we knew and a tearing down of our former identity. This feels radically uncomfortable. We do not know ourselves perhaps in these seasons. We go unrecognized by ourselves, perhaps unrecognized by others. These times are not typically explained at the beginning of the days of darkness; rather wisdom comes to us at dusk, as we are just leaving such a season. We need in these seasons to hold on to the fact that this affliction is but for a time.

It is the story of Jesus proving his power over evil in his resurrection that reminds us to lean in to the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit that is available to us right now—in this life. When we see Jesus as the one who overcomes the world we can choose one of two postures—the one representing hubris and the other grace. In the former posture we can see ourselves as the primary actors who are creating and concocting history by our actions; history will be a history of our accomplishments. Often the affliction that occurs is in fact a response to our own hubris and arrogance. The latter posture—of grace sees the whole world as being redeemed and renewed by the Spirit. Aslan is on the move so to speak and we are by grace invited to join this movement of the Spirit that will both transform us and make us observers and partakers in the unfolding transformation of God. In this scenario we enter into places of affliction having been drawn there by the Spirit, in the power of the Spirit.

In these ways even affliction is a resource that can be used for good in our lives if we companion Jesus.

3. The Resistance that Brings Heaven Close

“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.”

Faith as an act of resistance. To companion Jesus is an act of resistance.

By faith I do not mean a confession of what we believe—like a creed. Although that is where faith begins. The faith of the Thessalonians was not known everywhere because people had heard about the creed of the Thessalonians. The faith of the Thessalonians was known because they were a site of resistance against the systems of this world, systems that hold us captive to the powers of darkness.

“We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”

But what are we to do about the evil one?

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”

Everywhere Paul and his companions go they are either chased, beaten, jailed, falsely accused, stoned, mocked or arrested. Why? They are bringing light into darkness. They are setting up zones of resistance to the powers of darkness.

Just think about who this first community was:

- women—married to men of influence
- companioning Greek men—who were devout but very likely slaves, not necessarily freed men,
- companioning Jews.

What sort of community is this? Men and women, freed and slave, wealthy and poor, Greek and Jew. These companions are a site of resistance to cultural norms related to religion, ethnicity, race, gender and status.

Just think about what it would mean for these people to companion one another? Wealthy women sharing their wealth, influence, power, privilege with slaves and ethnically alienated Jews. Jews sharing their ancient scriptures as the backstory to the coming of Jesus. Greeks sharing their intellectual categories that would later help to form the Creeds to which we as Christians still cling. Slaves sharing their wisdom on how to endure opposition and suffering with people of privilege, sharing their skills in how to build community and companion each other on the margins.

What was becoming known around the Roman Empire was the faith of the Thessalonians—as people identified by a powerful love, a love that resisted the systems of evil all around them. This is where our text began today “you know what kind of men we proved to be among you **for your sake.**” Suffering affliction, persecution, mocking, arrest, mob violence for your sake, for your sake. This sort of resistance is costly. This sort of resistance does not occur passively.

We just celebrated Martin Luther King Day this week. King advocated for non-violent resistance. In describing resistance to evil systems of our day King used these words “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love.” A courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love. The assassination of MLK displays the extent of the evil he was resisting. Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and system of evil. To live rightly, to live as a zone of resistance we must realize, as James K. A. Smith would say, “we are carriers of desires that outstrip our mortal frames.”

FOL in our current context, sited in the region of LA and the city of Long Beach we need to be a confessional community (that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord) but our identity needs to be made evident, ratified if you will in our identity as a zone of resistance through love. Our faith in God needs to become known everywhere. We resist the forces of evil in this world, we resist our own sinful nature. If we want our faith in God to become known everywhere, we have to move past simply being a confessional community. The church in Thessalonica was a confessional

community— “the word of the Lord sounded forth from them.” But they were also a community that brought light and resisted the darkness.

Sarah led us in the reading of a portion of John 9 this morning—thank you Sarah! Jesus—the one whom Paul imitates, the one whom the Thessalonians imitate, the one whom we should imitate, is resisting evil systems and also conquering evil.

First Jesus is resisting the evil system of thinking that his disciples are caught up in “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

Resistance begins with systems of thinking that alienate, marginalize and despise (think less of) people due to self-righteousness.

Next, Jesus explains his purpose in this world. “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Do you see the connection Jesus is making here? To heal this man of blindness will be doing the work of God. To do the works of God the Father is to be the light of the world. Jesus is the light of the world when Jesus participates in the works of God.

Light in the John 9 context is not associated with confessional truth. Light in the John 9 context is directly related to activist truth. The truth that comes through actions that overthrow the systems of this world, resists evil and restores goodness, flourishing and wholeness. These “works of God” are described as light because they shed light on who God is. These works of God are the ways people see God, the ways they understand who God is, the ways God can be seen and known. The works of God become a means to display the beauty of God. When we participate in activities that resist evil and overthrow evil systems with love—we are showing the world who God is.

When we provide food pantries to share with those who are materially impoverished, we are making a powerful statement. The evil of inequity of access to food security is being resisted. We are resisting systems that privilege the educated and elite and those with sound mental and physical health.

When we provide English as a Second Language courses, we resist forces that alienate and marginalize first-generation Americans, that make equal access to job markets, housing and resources difficult.

When we provide tutoring for children, we resist forces that have caused a divide between resourced and under resourced schools, we resist forces of evil that have created single-parent families through divorce or death or addiction, we resist forces of evil that have caused grandparents to raise children when they themselves are already over-burdened.

These are the works of God and this is how the truth of who God is can be seen, piercing the darkness with the light of God’s love.

To have an impact in our city, like the Thessalonians had in theirs, we have to be sites of resistance. Long Beach wants to see this city restored to thriving and beauty and flourishing. The Christian community has the resources necessary to bring about that thriving—but only as we resist the collapse into pragmatic and transitory values. We hold to that which we confess

and we operationalize that in tangible acts of love. Our acts of love are our acts of resistance that activate change that is durable.

The church as a community is constituted in this way—it is animated by the Holy Spirit and has as its goal—companionship with God and neighbor. Love is possible in our community because love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that is given to us Rom 5:5.

The church stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.

To be formed by the story of Christ we need people who will love us and people who are filled with joy because they are being formed by the awe and wonder that comes from being in the presence of Jesus.

To be formed by the story of Christ we need to access the resources God has already given us: people of faith, his Word and the transformational work of affliction.

To be formed by the story of Christ we need to join the Jesus resistance movement. We need to show the world how love overcomes evil and light pushes away the darkness.

Perhaps the greatest place of resistance is within your own heart. Do you find it hard to believe that God loves you? You need to resist the lies of Satan. Your heart needs to become a zone of resistance. Resist Satan and he will flee from you. Of course, you do not deserve God's love. God's love is not evoked by something in the one he loves. God's love is evoked by the nature of who he is. God is love. God loves you because God is love. In this is the love of God demonstrated in that while you were still a sinner Christ died for you.

This table of communion is a table of resistance. This is a table that resists the voice that says we are not worthy. This is a table where Jesus bids us come—not because of what we have done but because of what he has done. This table resists a society of meritocracy that says we must measure up.

This is a table that resists the lie of the sufficiency of the insular and independent self. This table is for those who identify as absolutely dependent upon God—so much so that we need to eat his flesh and drink his blood so that we might have life. This table resists the culture that pushes us into the mold of the self-made person.

This is a table that resists the idea that life is all about the journey. As companions with God and each other we continually look forward to our final destination. It is hope in a coming kingdom that holds our feet to ancient paths and to this shared adventure. Jesus said, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death **until he comes.**”

This table resists the lie that overcoming evil comes through power games. Overcoming evil comes through laying down power and all other weapons and offering ourselves in love to God, to each other and to the city of Long Beach.

And so we come together and say these words to each other:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts!

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Holy and right it is and our joyful duty to give thanks to you at all times and in all places, O Lord, our Creator, almighty and everlasting God! You created the heaven with all its hosts and the earth with all its plenty. You have given us life and being, and preserve us by your providence. But you have shown us the fullness of your love in sending into the world your Son, Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, made flesh for us men and for our salvation. For the precious gift of this mighty Savior who has reconciled us to you we praise and bless you, O God.

With your whole Church on earth and with all the company of heaven we worship and adore your glorious name, saying:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

Most righteous God, we remember in this Supper the perfect sacrifice offered once on the cross by our Lord Jesus Christ for the sin of the world.

In the joy of his resurrection and in expectation of his coming again, we offer ourselves to you as holy and living sacrifices.

Together we proclaim the mystery of the faith:

Christ has died!

Christ has risen!

Christ will come again!

Send your Holy Spirit upon us, we pray, that the bread which we break may be to us the communion of the body and blood of Christ. Grant that, being joined together in him, we may attain to the unity of the faith and grow up in all things into him Christ our Lord.

And as this grain has been gathered from many fields into one loaf and these grapes from many hills into one cup, grant, O Lord, that thy whole Church may soon be gathered from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

As we gather at this table, all who confess Jesus as LORD and have chosen to follow him with their whole heart and life are welcome to partake with us as a community of faith.

The Lord Jesus, the same night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me."

After the same manner also, he took the cup when they had supped, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Together as one community of faith, united with Christ we acknowledge that the bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ and the cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.

Communion Thanksgiving

Let us give thanks with Isaiah and bring these words to the Lord and to our companions gathered around this table.

You will say in that day:

I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me.

Behold, God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

"Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.

"Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;

let this be made known in all the earth.

Shout, and sing for joy, O companions of FOL,

for great in our midst is Jesus our Messiah, Savior of the World!