

Longing, Comfort, Waiting

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

1/27/18

John Song

It is an honor to be with you all. As PD preached about last week, you are our glory and our joy. So, I pray that this next 30 minutes or so as we go into the word of God would be useful to you in seeing Christ proclaimed and your hearts encouraged by the word. At this time, we'd like to dismiss our children age four through grade one to a time of children's worship for age appropriate time of instruction. And the rest of you will have age appropriate instruction with me.

Turn your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13. As you are turning or tapping to that passage, I just want to recap where we've been so far in our time in 1 Thessalonians. And as we've left Christmas behind us about a month ago, or maybe some of you still have your trees up in which case no judgment, but we've passed through a season of advent in December. And we are spending our time in 1 Thessalonians to study and practice how we can be a people of advent today. In other words, the question that we're trying to answer in this series is how does waiting for the coming of Christ our Great King impact us today much in the same way the church and community in Thessalonica, or for that matter, every generation of the church is waiting? How are we now to live as people who are in advent today? Should we just sit on our hands and watch the Pro Bowl? Does life have any meaning or purpose in our time in waiting for Jesus to return.

Well, the last couple of weeks, we've touched on what it means to stand firm and believe in the word of God as coming from God to stand fast in the mist of persecution and affliction, to suffer alongside our brothers and sisters well, to imitate others who are pointing you to Christ so that you yourself can be a reflection of Him. I mean, already we've covered two chapters on what it means to live a Christ-centered, gospel driven life for Jesus as we await the coming of Jesus. So, this week we now are in chapter three and we're going to look at the second half of chapter three where we will spend some time exploring how we are to love in gospel community.

So, this is 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13.

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—for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. [ESV]

Won't you pray with me? Father, we ask that your word would illuminate us that we can demonstrate and show the love of gospel community to one another in our longings, in our comfort, and in our waiting for Jesus, our great King, who is coming and has come to make all things new again and to demonstrate His unceasing and unfailing love to us, not just that we may stand in awe and worship as that is certainly right. But also, that we may share those glimpses of your love with one another in a gospel community until you return. And it's in the name of Jesus we pray all these things. Amen.

I'll begin today by simply asking a simple question. And I really want you to think about what your answer would be because it plays into the dynamic of how we will spend our time here in these seven verses. It's a simple question so our young children, CPC youth, CPC adults, you can all answer this question together in your minds. Here's the question: what are you willing to risk for the people you love the most? What are you willing to risk for the people you love the most? Or perhaps better framed, what is the most you are willing to risk for the people you love the most? Where would that line be drawn for you? Would you draw that line at financial comfort or peace? Would it be your job? Would it be your privacy? Would it be stepping out alone into the world? Would it be sacrificing your own personal times and needs? Would it be your sleep? Would it be disrupting your schedule? Would it be your very own life?

Whatever your answer to that question may be, I'm going to borrow the language of one of my friends who's a pastor out in Centerville, Virginia, pastor Bobby Suh who talks about the notion of relational risk. And what the question I opened with I hope reveals is that in any real authentic relationship, there must be a risk that's involved in both initiating the relationship and maintaining the relationship. There is a risk in learning more about the heart of those that are closest to you, risks of rejection, risks of bad news, hurt, and pain, and perhaps even the risks of our very own lives. And yet why do we take these risks? Because there is a great longing and a comfort and a waiting in the love we receive back for the things that we are willing to sacrifice. Because that which we are willing to risk actually shapes our love and demonstrate the god of our hearts.

At the time of writing the letter of 1 Thessalonians, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were driven out of Thessalonica by those that were in opposition to the message of Jesus Christ. In Thessalonica things were changing so rapidly as new ideologies, immigration, political camps, religious zealots pluralizing the city so much that you needed to assimilate to the changing community out of social preservation. You had to be willing to sacrifice, take these risks of your belief at every turn just to stay relevant and alive in that city.

But the message of the gospel that Paul preached there called to a new ethical, spiritual, and cultural standard that went against the grain of the secular community, that went against the grain of community by convenience or community by affinity or community by power structure or political affiliation. It was a steep offense. The gospel was a steep offense to everyone that Paul, Silas, and Timothy evangelized to so much so that only after a short period of time in Acts 17, after three Sabbaths, they had to leave out of fear of their lives. But yet in the community that remained, that believed and received the word and truth, Paul develops a longing for his community that becomes unbearable for him not to act upon.

This is your first point, a longing for the body. Paul longs to see his spiritual family again. Paul is wondering, have they kept the faith? How are they doing? Thessalonica's Facebook feed has gone completely dark. There are no posts on Instagram, no tweets from their Twitter account. Paul has real fear of missing out on what's going on with the people he desires to see the most. His real fear of their well-being turns into a hosts of terrors in his mind over whether or not the ministry he left behind was surviving, whether they were holding fast and firm. And so, for Paul in chapter 3, it wasn't the question of what he was willing to risk for those that he loved in Thessalonica but rather who he was willing to risk for his longing for the body of Christ in Thessalonica. The longing for the body that we see when Paul could not bear any longer to not hear a report of what was happening in the city and the church that he loved, he sent Timothy to let the church know how much he cared for them, to also hear how they were doing and living out the call of the gospel, waiting for the coming of Christ again.

And as we look at verse 6 again, we realize that Paul's risk is rewarded in the report that Timothy brings. The church is being sustained. The community that Paul longs for also longs for him in kind. And in this longing, we realize two things that this verse teaches us in the practicality of living in gospel community together. First, that the longings of the heart reveal the lord of our hearts. The longings of our heart reveal the lord of our hearts.

Now perhaps some of you are looking at verse 6 and you might be skeptical about Paul's intentions in sending Timothy. You might be saying, wait a second, hang on, Paul longs for the church so much that he doesn't go himself; he sends Timothy? I mean that really doesn't seem like Paul's really risking much, is it? I mean, he doesn't even want to risk his own life. He risked someone else's life. How can I take his longing

seriously? By sending Timothy, he's just sending his youth pastor to do the dirty work. That hardly seems like a risk at all. (Randy doesn't do that, by the way. So this is not a commentary on my employment here at CPC). You have to remember the importance that Timothy placed in the life of the body. You have to remember how significant Timothy was to Paul.

Timothy was referred to in 1 Timothy as Paul's true child in the faith. For Paul, who was unmarried and as we know in 1 Corinthians, he was rejected by the community that he grew up in, he once held high honor and status and prestige but is now a tent maker, an itinerant missionary alone going from city to city planting churches, facing persecutions, afflictions, all kinds of physical ailments. Timothy was family. Timothy meant everything to him. Timothy was a son to him. Paul takes the relational risk by sending that which mattered most to him, his one and only spiritual child in the faith. He risked Timothy's life to share the good news of salvation out of a longing to see his people face to face.

Do you see who this reminds you of? Paul's longing for the body, the longing of his heart, means that he naturally echoes the character and truth of the gospel he proclaims. He is willing just as our God did, our great Father did, by entering into human history by sending His Son to endure the pain of loss, to endure perhaps the greatest suffering in losing His one and only Son so that the people that God loves could know truth and embrace life together.

So, Paul's longings and risks could be realized in the echoes and reflections of the longings and risks of God our Father and the risks of Jesus Christ, His Son who longs for you and I to be in relationship with Him. This is what the gospel of grace is all about. Paul's longing of his heart echoes the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why, by the way, that any longing that you have that isn't rooted in the gospel will ultimately leave you empty and unsatisfied because your deepest desires aren't in that new phone or quick fame or whatever you assume that's going to make you happy apart from God. But if it's simply rooted in the narcissism of lifting up your own name in glory, then you will only repeat the same despair and the same loneliness and the same searching for nothing that will come of those that came before you in every point of human history.

How many celebrities have we seen that went out to seek fame and found only nothing but death, depression, and darkness? How many of us right now, myself included, fall into believing the lie that an artificial online community can bring to us only what being connected to the body of Christ can bring? Or that a group – perhaps an affinity group, only tied together by a certain age demographic or stage of life, affinity of what I like or don't like, my personal preferences – is the only true community that I can belong to. Do you see?

Maybe the better question to ask is, what are the longings of your heart here today, and who do they reflect? What is God in your life? What does your heart reveal?

My second subpoint in this longing for the body, if the longings of the heart reveal the lord of our hearts, we read in the end of verse 6 that our longings from others for us creates a longing from us for others. I'll say that again. A longing from others for us creates a longing from us for others. We read at the end of verse 6 that Paul hears back from Timothy and notes that the Thessalonian church shares the same longing and affection that Paul does for his church. What could have possibly created this kind of love and affection for a community that he spent so little time with? Only through an understanding of what a real community, a real body of Christ looks together could have done this. The people of God united in Christ through the gospel will have a healthy longing and seeking after one another.

Picture this, I want you to imagine this: Sunday morning when all of us are gathered here in the church together. This is going to be one of the times of the week where our greatest longings are met and we see each other, the body of Christ, because we finally get to commune together as the people of God. We get to do what we were made in life to do, to proclaim the name of Jesus together in worship, to listen to His word, to confess, pray together, to be encouraged after the service as we see one another. Or perhaps in your community groups this week, those times when your greatest longings are met because your longings to be connected to the body of Christ are fulfilled sharing, praying, suffering, laughing, hoping together. Is there nothing greater to hear from another person than the words: oh my gosh, I missed you so much, it's so good to see you again; how's life going?

I'm often reminded of this every week as we have our youth group gatherings. And just an aside, not only our youth group here, but in all of our ministry from CPC kids, nursery, Pioneer Girls, CSB, VBS – church, you are blessed with so many volunteers who serve our church wonderfully and reflect Christ in ways that show the longing of being together as a body. The sacrifices that these volunteers make for our young people here so that this place can be called a home for them, for our young children, makes this place such a wonderful and loving place to be. Amen?

Last week I got a glimpse of what this looks like. Our 8th grade girl's community group leader, Mara Johnson, comes into our weekly meeting. And as we catch up before the meeting begins, I realized the relational risks and sacrifices she and her family have made so that she can actually be present on a Thursday evening at 7 p.m. With Elev8, with family, with everything, there's all these things going on and she's making all these sacrifices to be here. But then after the evening concludes, I hear what she says in her small group with her 8th grade girls. She said something to the effect of, "I came here not because I really wanted to. I was tired. But I came here because I wanted to be with you." And her 8th grade girls affirmed back something to the effect of, "We came here because we wanted to be with each other, too."

These are what longings look like for us as a church. It's that feeling of spending five hours with someone and feeling like it's only 20 minutes long. It's our longing for Christ's coming means that we cannot be alone. We need true Christian community together. And when there is absence, we feel it. We all need it. I need it. PD needs it. Randy needs it. And we work here, but we need this. Why?

Because it becomes for us our second point, a comfort for the soul. Verses 7-10 show that Timothy's report to Paul shares comforting news with it. You see, the faith of the Thessalonian church wasn't just a sinner's prayer with no true-life transformation, but it was a holding onto the faith. It was a church persisting in its walk with Jesus. And with that comfort to Paul, that comfort comes in two different ways.

The first of the comforts of the soul comes through comfort through suffering. In verse 7, Paul, Silas, and Timothy's own afflictions and persecutions, going from city to city and expecting death to wait them, they are now simply relieved not by thinking of their own self-help of how they can heal themselves or how they can think better about the situation, but rather in knowing that the Thessalonian church, knowing that other people, are walking side by side with them and holding fast to their confession.

Paul understands the sacrifices, the risks, that the Thessalonian church needed to make to profess Jesus Christ as Lord. He knows that people will come to this church saying, Christianity is not socially convenient, that Christianity demands too much, that it's silly to believe in such ridiculous tales, that it is "not intellectually satisfying," that it is dangerous to believe Christianity and that the relational risk of believing in such a crazy religion will cost you everything. And aren't these things still echoed today? Paul's comfort in the Thessalonians was not merely that they were there and that they were calling themselves Christian but rather that they were still obeying and being disciples in following the commandments of the new standards of living in community with Christ. And that their Christ is leading them to redeem what is lacking in their faith.

So, think about this. Our sufferings, then, are lessened when we know that there are those who are in the trenches with us experiencing the same. This is why it's so good for us to go beyond the superficial when sharing our lives together in community, to extend our thoughts and our feelings to more than just thoughts and feelings but to share the deepest desires of our heart. It's not just about the fact that you're tired or that your kids are acting up. It's that your soul longs to be comforted. And hearing from others how they're doing gives you life knowing that you're not alone and that you're fighting together. To hear someone else say: we're going through the same thing. You haven't given up yet? You haven't killed your kids? How? Tell me. Show me how to do this. You see, when we do that, our afflictions and our distress are relieved because we know our foundation is secure in one another and in Jesus Christ.

The second comfort of the soul is comfort through legacy, verse 8. Paul writes, "For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord." What gives Paul his greatest joy is not his own self-fulfilling joy. He doesn't look inward, he looks outward. The joy in knowing what he has passed on, the message of the gospel, the proclamation of the word, what he has passed on and given to others is now kept in the lives of others. He's not saying here in verse 8 that his own physical life is at stake, but rather the purpose and meaning of Paul's life

moves forward because they are leaving a legacy of the gospel, of the anticipation of Christ, the waiting for Christ to come and that that will be passed on. That will last eternally.

Now I love these months in January and February here at the church because I get to have a front row seat at some of the best examples of this idea of comfort through legacy. Every Friday and Saturday throughout these two months, I see a bunch of adult men and women coaches running, jumping, passionately screaming words like “box out,” “shoot!” Screaming “Warriors,” “Pistons,” “Mercury” at the top of their lungs. Grown adult men and women screaming. Thomas Fahs pacing up and down the sidelines yelling enthusiastically at middle school guys who are playing their hearts out for him. Why? Why are these adults doing this? Why are these adults sometimes perspiring more than the players on the court playing the game? It’s because their joy is made complete, you see, knowing they’ve passed down something more than just a jump shot or rebound. That it’s something that will last a lifetime.

So, can I extend that to us as a church here today? Imagine sharing a gospel legacy with someone that will last more than just a lifetime, maybe eternally. Imagine by being used by God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit to be a disciple of Jesus who makes other disciples and seeing them walking from darkness to light. Imagine them being shaped by the word suffering together in the miseries of Christ, but also sharing in the glories of Christ in fellowship and communion in this body. I know of no greater life to live than that. And I know of no greater joy than of seeing one of our young kids profess Jesus as Lord and to know that they’ve now begun the steps in walking with Jesus for a lifetime.

Imagine as Paul does in verse 9 the immensity for the gratitude and thanksgiving that would be to God for seeing someone who was once in a hell bound race, as the song says, right, “indifferent to the cost.” Imagine seeing someone change from that to believe that Jesus Christ is Son of God, took the penalty of their sin and shame, and gave them a new heart with new longings and new desires, washed them clean. Imagine them living a life that was committed to proclaiming and living out those truths. Imagine the glory, as verse 9 shows us, the glory that God would receive.

So, maybe perhaps to reframe the question, what risks would you take to evangelize and make disciples to the people that you love the most that you know do not know Him yet? What risks would you take? That’s the comfort of legacy. That’s how we understand Paul’s connecting his life to their faith. This is why Paul repeats his longings in verse 10 to see them face to face. He echoes that language again. And to continue to see what is deficient in their understanding of the gospel, Paul wants to continue their education. Paul wants to be with them again. He longs to see them again to fix their jump shot in the faith, to help deepen their love of Christ so that they could be equipped to do the same. And in his longing and his comfort, we find that Paul is able to rest in the waiting for the Head, to rest in the advent. He is then, upon having his longings for his people realized, his risk to send Timothy rewarded upon being comforted by the reports that they are committed to standing in the suffering and continuing in the legacy of the gospel. He is able to exhort his people to wait for the Head who is Christ.

Verse 11, Paul begins a section which some commentators have called a brief three verse prayer for the church that he longs to be with. And here we see with this prayer that once again he reaffirms his longing and waiting to see his church again showing that the foundation of their gathering together is attended by God Himself. These are perhaps the most theologically centered verses in our text today. This is a waiting for the Head which is Christ and it also means that there are different kinds of waiting that we have.

The first kind of waiting is awaiting with one another in love. As PD often shared last week as he talked about the persecution that’s happening in the churches in China, as I was reflecting on that and listening to that, we often take for granted the idea that we’ll get to see each other again. But for believers in other persecuted countries, that’s not a given. There’s a greater sense in them in which they realize that is only by the grace of God that they’re able to find their way to each other. This is why Paul writes in verse 11, “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.” As they await their gatherings again, they pray to God that they might be able to see each other again face to face. That every time we get connected to believers that we have not heard from in a while, we know that it’s going to be the Father and His plans that bring us together again.

But it's so much more than that. In verse 12, we realize that this waiting for coming of Christ again means, also – and this is the second kind of waiting – waiting with one another in love for each other. Paul and his fellow missionaries had had to create a community in spaces in Thessalonica where none had existed before. They didn't have affinity groups based upon stage of life at the Thessalonica church. They didn't have Thessalonica youth, Thessalonica Pioneer Girls. They didn't have that. So, what does a young teenager and an elderly man have in common in Thessalonica? What does a young immigrant into Macedonia have in common with a native Thessalonian? Or perhaps a Roman who came into the city, what do the rich and the poor, the social elite and the social outcast have in common in this church and how can the community move forward? It's by abounding in love with one another. It's about uniting ourselves under the person who has loved us the most, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have been bought by His blood. We share in the ruling and reigning of His kingdom. We have a common hope despite our differing life stories. We have a common joy because we will know where we will all be at the end of the story. Despite all the different pathways, no matter how old you are or young you are, where you come from, or your background, we have this common love because we have someone who has loved us perfectly, completely, and wholly first. We love because He first loved us.

So, church, what are you willing to risk for the church that you are called to love? What suburban idols would have to die so that you can truly be vulnerable for the first time here? To be truly loved because now you've exposed the real you. What petty differences and arguments and church preferences, worship preferences, whatever, would have to die so that you can forgive your church brother and sister in the same way that Christ has forgiven and loved you?

Christianity Today in one of its feature articles in September 2018 talks about the idols of what writer Chris Ridgeway calls the “false theology of privacy.” And he breaks it down into these three categories of idols. The first is distance, believing our independence is ultimate. The second is defense, believing that we need to let people see only what we want them to see. And the third is anonymity where people can see you but not really know you. He writes this in this quote in discussing what it means to love one another in gospel community,

“Salvation is a God who hears, who hears the weeping of lost Hagar, the celebration of humble Mary, the secret denial of scared Peter. Salvation is a God who knows our intimacy paradox, the simultaneous longing and fear of being known. The church challenges our temptations to independence, to defense, or anonymity because the body of Christ, the true community alone has the power to heal our isolations, our fears, our loneliness.”

Could we, Columbia Presbyterian, be a community that loves like this until Jesus returns? Because this is the kind of love that verse 13 says is the catalyst for the kind of character that shapes the Christian community in establishing us as blameless in holiness before God our Father. “Abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you so that he may establish your hearts.” Love so THAT. Love is the condition of sanctifying the gospel community in such a way that God the Father looks at the church in the second coming and says to it, well done, well done good and faithful body.

So, our church growth strategy, abound in love for one another. Our five-year plan for ministry development, love one another with the love of Christ. Our philosophy and ministry and our philosophy of worship love each other and love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second command is just like it, love your neighbor as yourself. It's not that we're placing love as the ultimate virtue as though love becomes God in and of itself, but rather we are able to see ourselves formed and shaped by Christ's love in a way that's transformative for this body inwardly and transformative for the world outwardly because what's waiting for us at the end?

This last half of verse 13, what's waiting for us, where is the fulness of all our risk come? It's the great treasure, it's the greatest treasure that makes longing, comfort, and waiting possible. It's Christ in His return. Christ coming in glory. Christ coming again to meet us face to face. Christ who longs to be with His people. And in that, our longings are realized, our comfort is secure, and our advent done. And by the way, He's not coming alone. He's coming back with all those we lost along the way. He's coming of our Lord Jesus with all

His saints, all those whom we long and have lost that we will see face to face again. All the ones in perfected bodies, no sickness, no weeping, no death, just a state of glory. Our family is coming back to be family once again in perfect harmony singing praises forever and ever and ever and ever.

So, Christian, what are you willing to risk for those that you love the most? God our Father who did spare His one and only Son so that He could demonstrate His love to you is calling you to reflect His love here in the community of Christ today in our longing, in our comfort, in our waiting. And we will get to do that now. We will get to respond in worship to that right now. So, let's go to Him in prayer.