

**“You Became an Example”
I Thessalonians 1:1-10**

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Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

The Sermon

Margaret Mead was a popular anthropologist, an academic, and an Anglican Christian active in the mid-20th century. Someone asked her one time what she considered to be the earliest known evidence of human civilization.

She said an archaeological dig had uncovered a human thigh bone that was about 15,000 years old. Much, much older bones have been discovered—not to mention tools and artifacts and even signs of local decision making or governing.

But close inspection of the femur from 15,000 years ago revealed that at some point it had been fractured—and, more importantly, the fracture had been allowed to heal.

For somebody to have survived that kind of injury to that kind of bone, that person must have been tended to, cared for, for enough time for the bone to heal. Somebody provided not only basic accommodation—a place, with protection from the elements and any other threats, and something like a roof—

but must have also brought food and water, and looked after the injured person for a considerable amount of time. In fact, if it were just the injured person and one caregiver, both would have been at significant risk, so there must have been some communal attention paid to the injured person.

Margaret Mead was suggesting, in the words of Dr. Jeffrey Oak, that “the first indication of human civilization is care over time for one who is broken and in need.”ⁱ

Decades ago I heard the comedian Paul Reiser do a routine where he was saying he had read somewhere that scientists were learning so much from an early human body that had been discovered—so much about the time in which that prehistoric person had lived—and it led him to worry that one day, thousands of years from now, scientists of the future would find him, and ask him to explain how everyday things worked, and realize he didn't really know anything.

The only one I specifically remember from a long list is they ask him, “Why didn't the electricity spill out of the wall outlets?” No idea.

Some things we don't know. The list of home improvements, or even basic functions that I live in the midst of without having any idea how they work, or even that they are happening at all, is epic.

Some things, not everybody knows how to do, or even knows about.

But there are some things we know to do, and we know how to do them.

And we know why they have an importance beyond themselves—that they indicate something deeper, and greater, and more powerful than what they are.

In Acts 17, Paul and Silas, on a missionary journey, came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue, and over three weeks, Paul made the Biblical case that Jesus was the messiah.

And some were persuaded, and Paul and Silas started a church there, with them and “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

But the Jewish authorities formed a mob and went looking for Paul and Silas, during which they attacked the home of a man named Jason.

They couldn't find Paul and Silas, so on that day of terror, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have been here, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying there is another king named Jesus."

And the people and the city officials were disturbed by this, and that night, the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea.

Some time later, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out about the church and how they were doing, and when Timothy came back from that visit, he had amazing news.

Apparently that young church had already begun to distinguish itself—the people had begun to distinguish themselves—by their work of faith, their labor of love, their steadfastness of hope in Jesus.

And Paul in his giddiness wrote, "We know that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.

"And you became imitators of us and of the Lord," he said.

And in spite of that terrifying persecution, said Paul, "You received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers" throughout your part of the world.

And now, everybody knows how welcoming you are, and how you have turned your lives around, to serve a living and true God—the God who rescues.

"When we came to you, to show you the living example of what this all means, you, in spite of everything around you, received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, and *you* became examples."

People are seeing what you will do and how you will be.

What do you want to do with that?

More importantly, what do you think God wants to do with you?

We are living in a time that cries out for human beings to administer grace and mercy and goodness—

to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15),
to be angry, but do not sin (Ephesians 4:26),
to not grieve as others do who have no hope (I Thessalonians 4:13),
to love one another just as Jesus has loved us (John 13:31-34),
to make sure people who are hungry have food
and who are thirsty have water,
and strangers are welcomed,
and people in poverty have something to wear,
and people who are sick are cared for,
and people in prison are visited (Matthew 25:35-36).

Private, quiet devotion that is entirely between you and God is a fundamental cornerstone of faithful life.

But those who have practiced it since the earliest days of the Covenant and all throughout the centuries of Christian practice have taken the inspiration from their quiet rooms and brought the fruits of that devastating spirituality to the lives and the care of the most marginalized, the most endangered, the most at risk.

And the world, and its people of faith, have seen and taken notice. And light has been brought into dark places.

And you may say that the forces of hate and voices of fear have hardly abated—they *seem* to sound as loud and dangerous as ever right now, given the size of the megaphones available.

But from time to time, and more often than we may realize; and here and there—in more places than we know about, a word or an act of love begins to overcome fear and melt hate—words and acts of hate never do that, by the way.

But quietly, in the corners of the world, one by one, the world witnesses and records examples of faithfulness—to God, and to the world, and to each other, and to ourselves; to those who have gone before, and those who will come after.

Not giant gestures designed to draw as much public attention as possible, but small acts and quiet words designed to love and, God willing, to comfort and to heal.

“I’m reminded,” said David Brooks, “of Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s 1931 memoir. When hiring doctors for his hospital in the African jungle, he wrote, he never hired anyone who thought [they were] doing something grand and heroic. The only doctors who would last are those who thought what they were doing was as ordinary and necessary as doing the dishes: ‘There are no heroes of action’ [wrote Schweitzer]—‘only heroes of renunciation and suffering.’”ⁱⁱ

Around the same time, Gandhi was saying, “It is better to allow our lives to speak for us than our words. God did not bear the cross only two thousand years ago. He bears it today, and he dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be a poor comfort to the world if it had to depend on a historical God who died two thousand years ago. Do not, then, *preach* the God of history, but show him as he lives today through you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Wayne Lee Wilson, 67 years old, of the southern Michigan town of Niles, passed away on May 28, 2019. His obituary published by a funeral home in Niles read in part:

“He was a truck driver for many years. Wayne proudly served in the Army from 1971 to 1977... He was passionate about helping his fellow wounded veterans and encouraged others to give to the Paralyzed Veterans Association.

Mr. Wilson has no surviving relatives...

All members of the public are invited to attend to pay their respects for an American hero.”^{iv}

When Wayne Wilson’s friends issued that invitation, they were hopeful that 10-15 people might notice it and show up.

As the time of the service approached, the funeral home personnel made their way to where the service was to be held, and as they came near, they found waiting for them 3,000 people.

They had come from their jobs and their homes. From across the border in Indiana. From Iowa, Tennessee, Florida, they had shown up on a Wednesday afternoon to pay their respects to a Vietnam War veteran who had no surviving family members.^v

You don’t have to be a Christian to do generous, benevolent things that speak truths about humanity and divinity.

But to be a Christian is to be dedicated to living a life and doing the things—small things: showing up once in a while; showing appreciation for life, and people; giving thanks; being kind and thoughtful and generous—everyday things that have followed the example of what it means to know the way, and the truth, and the life.

On the last night that he was with them, Jesus gathered at the table with the disciples, and said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one

another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John O’Donohue concludes his reflection for the end of the day, “A Mirror of Questions,” with this one:

“From the evidence—why was I given this day?”^{vi}

In whatever time we have in this life, in this world, we can follow the examples of faithfulness that we have seen; and we can say every morning,

God, I give you thanks that for some reason,
you have decided to give me another day today,
and I am looking forward to finding out why.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
October 18, 2020

ⁱ Jeffrey Oak, “A 15,000 year old bone and the Fall 2013 issue of Reflections,” <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/15000-year-old-bone-and-fall-2013-issue-reflections> (Oct. 8, 2013). The article continues: “This story is told by Ira Byock, an authority on palliative medicine, in his book *The Best Care Possible: A Physician’s Quest to Transform Care Through the End of Life* (Avery, 2012).”

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, “The Age of Coddling Is Over: Learning what hardship has to teach us.” NYT, April 16, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Young India (1927) reprinted in *All Men Are Brothers* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2013)

^{iv} [https://brownfuneralhomeniles.com/tribute/details/2466/Wayne-](https://brownfuneralhomeniles.com/tribute/details/2466/Wayne-Wilson/obituary.html?fbclid=IwAR3ZuHFejY86Q76hbOiyVWnv7m8WGBf8rDcvqx4FHOrEheNYrnsetwqT64c)

[Wilson/obituary.html?fbclid=IwAR3ZuHFejY86Q76hbOiyVWnv7m8WGBf8rDcvqx4FHOrEheNYrnsetwqT64c](https://brownfuneralhomeniles.com/tribute/details/2466/Wayne-Wilson/obituary.html?fbclid=IwAR3ZuHFejY86Q76hbOiyVWnv7m8WGBf8rDcvqx4FHOrEheNYrnsetwqT64c)

^v <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/17/us/wayne-wilson-veteran-funeral-trnd/index.html>

^{vi} John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).