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I Thessalonians 2:1-6a:

Old Ground, A Reality Check on “The Now” And the Way It Will Be

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I Thessalonians 2:1-6a

Dear Friends in Christ,

I can't remember the name of the program, but brief mention was made to Navy Aircraft Squadron Flight 19 of December 5, 1945. One account I read stated that the flight took off "from Ft. Lauderdale Naval Air Station in Florida on a routine three hour training mission." It then stated that "Two hours after the flight began, the leader of the squadron, who had been flying in the area more than six months, reported that compass and back-up compass had failed and that his position was unknown. The other planes experienced similar instrument malfunctions." The planes were ultimately lost, and, after a most intense search, not even a trace of them was found. Of course, most of you know that I'm talking about the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle.

Would it be okay to say that maybe we feel a bit like Flight 19: failing compasses, running out of fuel, trying to find a way back to something familiar, comfortable, and safe? Feeling as if we're flying around in some sort of Bermuda Triangle?

But, of course, the compass hasn't failed. It has always worked, but, maybe, we've just spent too much effort trying to fly with this world. We know the compass: The Word of God. It always directs us to . . .

OLD GROUND, A REALITY CHECK ON "THE NOW," AND THE WAY IT WILL BE

I. Old Ground.

I want to walk some old ground with you for a few moments. Recall the time when the great prophet Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal; keeping in mind that Baal worship was a humanly created, popular worship of the time. It began with a confrontation between the prophet Elijah and King Ahab. We're told, "When (king) Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is that you, you troubler of Israel?'" (I Ki. 18:17) *Troubler*. That's how the world has always seen the Word of God and the church. *Troublers. Troubling*.

And then, Elijah's response: "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed Baals." You see, for Ahab and others it was a matter of embracing a god that appealed to human wants! So, Elijah called for a showdown between himself and the 450 prophets of the pop-culture of that day! He said:

"I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on wood and put no fire on it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on wood and put no fire on it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." (I Ki. 18:22-24a)

I'm guessing you remember the rest of the account. The prophets of Baal shouted and screamed and cut themselves bloody in an effort to get their god "to answer by fire" - but nothing happened. And then, after pouring water on Elijah's sacrifice - in fact, three times - we're told: "Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water in the trench." (v.38)

It's a mind boggling picture of the world's opposition to God. God enters humanity to love it to eternal life. Humanity does everything to drown His love because humans want God to agree with their thinking and expectations. It has always been that way. Thus, Paul begins our text:

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive... (vv. 1-3)

Declare to you the gospel in the midst of conflict. Our faith has never been a guarantee of a wonderful life here. Walking "the old ground" will keep us... well grounded, and gives us...

II. A Reality Check On the Now.

... A reality check on the now. The brothers and sisters of the past did not suffer and struggle apart from the love of God. That love always flows to us from the Written Word and the visible Word, Baptisms and the Lord's Supper. This world's hatred of the Gospel - its hatred of the forgiveness of sins and promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ will not end until, as Paul writes, "...the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, and with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet sound of God." (I Thess. 4:16)

And look at this: Paul says, "...but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak...". (v. 4a) You see, that includes us. We too have been approved. Listen, once again, to the powerful words of Peter to those who have been brought to the sin cleansing blood of Jesus - approved:

But you are a chosen race [We are God's people in Christ. We don't ever want to lose sight of that!], a royal priesthood [Priests! We are priests. We don't need another human to intercede for us. Jesus is our High Priest Who gave Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin and has made us priests who give offerings of praise and thanksgiving and service!], a holy nation [Heaven is our homeland!], a people for his own possession [Life isn't about, "I'm my own person." He owns us!], that you may declare the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light [Let's never wonder what our purpose is!]. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy [Mercy unlike anything known to humans. Mercy for all who were once, by nature, children of God's wrath!]. (I Peter 2:9-10)

Opposition to God's love in Christ? It's always been that way. It's the *now*. And in the midst of it is a people *approved by God and entrusted with the Gospel*. That's the way it is...

III. The Way It Will Be.

...and that's the way it will be until the end of time. Here are the last words of our text:

...we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, not with a pretext of greed - God is our witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others... (vv. 4b-6a)

I know, we're not Paul and his companions traveling everywhere to spread the Gospel. But we are God's people through faith in Christ, chosen to *declare* (speak) *his excellencies* to others. Jesus was very clear when He warned those first disciples and the church of the generations to come - us - "...you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake...But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Mt. 24:9b,13-14) We live in an explosive world; corrupt and packed with violence. Everything is moving to the final moment. God said it would!

Some might ask, "How do you declare the excellencies of God as you're sliding into the MRI - when you hear your doctor tell you news you never wanted to hear - when the dreams and plans you had fizzle and fade and the years grow short - when a loved one or friend who has been so much a part of your life leaves this world? How do you declare the excellencies of God when everything around you is vile and demonic? How? Let's get a good hold on these words of promise, truth and encouragement:

So we do not loose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (I Cor. 4:16-18)

God help us to keep a tight grip on those words! Life here is not about how much fun we can have. It's about the joy and blessings of serving Him while we also prepare ourselves for the entrance into eternal life.

It's old ground, a reality check on "the now", and the way it will be. God bless and help us all!
Amen!

Pastor Bill Abbott