



Over the past two months people from around the world have been forced to get creative, in finding ways to stay connected to friends and coworkers. Use of Zoom and other virtual chat platforms exploded when orders to stay home were rolled out across the nations. At first, it was fun to see the faces of people we care for and to have the chance to continue talking in groups. After participating in a few of those chats the newness wears off, and the realization sets in, that something is still missing. We were made to feel connected to others. Online group meetings are a poor substitute for gathering in person. Two months of this has made us acutely aware of just how important it is for humans to be present with each other, face-to-face.

My point tonight is not to encourage anyone to disobey our elected officials, regarding the stay at home orders, or to stir up anger about the rules that are currently in place. Instead, I want to address a real issue that many of us are struggling with right now. We long to gather with those we love, with each other as believers, but can not at this time. Then, I want to provide an encouraging perspective that comes from the writings of one of Jesus closest companions during his time of earthly ministry.

***Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete"*** 2 John 12

Think with me about who was writing this. John the Apostle was writing under divine inspiration. This is part of what has been considered the inerrant and completely sufficient word of God. Even still John is longing for more than words. He's longing for presence. He wants to be together.

As we look through the stories and accounts of friendships within the early church, we become aware that social distancing is not really a new thing. There were some very sad goodbyes, when God's people would move from place to place while carrying out their service to the Lord.

Consider the moment that Paul said goodbye to the elders in Ephesus.

***<sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. Acts 20:36-38***

In 2 Timothy 1:4 Paul expressing a longing to see Timothy again.

***3 I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy.***

There was no Zoom, Facetime, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, text messaging or any other way of quickly seeing and hearing friends and loved-ones while being physically separated. Social distancing was even more painful.

Beyond the fact that they did not enjoy the technologies that we have today, they had the very real concern of severe dangers faced daily by those who chose to follow Christ. Many died simply for believing what you and I believe about Jesus. It isn't difficult to imagine that saying goodbye and being socially distant from each other was extremely difficult for them. I suppose that the realist in those days understood that there was a good chance that goodbyes would be permanent, until they were reunited upon death.

For all of these reasons, and more, you see that the longing to be together was intense within the people of God throughout the days of the early church. That longing for togetherness even goes back to the direct way that Jesus ministered. As he was getting started, Jesus called men to join him up on the mountain. He appointed twelve there. We read about it in Mark chapter 3.

***<sup>13</sup> Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. <sup>14</sup> He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach <sup>15</sup> and to have authority to drive out demons***

Jesus didn't just share teachings, ministry and mission. He also shared his presence with them. They did life together in shared spaces. There is profound value in relationships, especially those relationships with Christ at the center. In relationships presence matters. We long for togetherness. We desire to be close.

All over the world, right now, churches are doing their best to stay connected. We're all watching livestreams of services online, receiving push notifications on cell phone apps to alert us to new messages for the church body. It is just what we have to do in the moment and we are grateful that we can at least do these things. However, my guess is that most of us are longing for the day when we don't have to settle for online church or lagging streams due to poor internet conditions. We are longing for the day when we can be together again, face-to-face.

Notice when John expressed his desire to be face-to-face that he believe being together would make joy complete. During this time of social distancing we still have some amount of joy when we find ways of

staying connected but maybe it feels incomplete. We're looking forward to greater joy when we can once again be close.

Going back to the Apostle Paul for a moment, we notice a common phrase in many of his letters. To the Romans, Philippians, Thessalonians and to Timothy, Paul wrote, ***"I long to see you"***.

Paul held this belief that being together had significant spiritual benefits for believers.

***I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*** Romans 1:10–12

He told the Thessalonians that the reason for sending Timothy to them was to strengthen and encourage them.

***"We sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith"*** 1 Thessalonians 3:2

Being together, face-to-face, somehow allows for opportunities to strengthen each other in ways that can't be done by any mode of online media. Are we all sad now, for what we don't have at the moment? Sorry if that is the case. That is not my goal.

Many of us are getting restless. We are becoming aware of the limitations on truly connecting while social distancing. We are being as creative as we can but we are longing to truly be together with those we love. We know that when that happens it will feel like a great reunion. I believe that is a God-given desire.

I also believe that God wants our expectation and anticipation to grow for an even greater reunion that awaits all of his children. Are we longing for the time when we will see Him face-to-face, when he makes all things new, removes all sin and forever removes all shelter in place orders?

John, who pointed out that being face-to-face was better than ink and paper, looked forward to that day.

***I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*** Revelation 21:3

God Himself will be with us. This was the truth that gave John joy and comfort during a time of extreme social distancing, while isolated on a remote island. He looked for what is to come and was strengthened and encouraged by the truth that our future, forever, is with the Lord. His writing of this truth has helped countless Christians to persevere through difficult seasons of life. It is still doing that today.

Our hearts long for the day when we can be together again. How much more should they long for the day when God himself will be with us, as our God, and wipe away every tear from our eyes!

You are loved

*Tony*