



The Christian life is a journey.

TrailNotes speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the "landscape" we are passing through in this trail-laced, wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. **TrailNotes** is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we're learning and doing. This is a monthly publication of Grace Fellowship Church, Mansfield, Ohio.

Who are we? What are we? What are we to live for? — A brief reflection on the message of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

GREG FRANKENFIELD

The Plan: God's plan for renewing the face of the earth and creating a people to be His disciples is described in the following two parts of the letter to the church in Ephesus, written for Him by His servant Paul. Those verses challenge our capacity to believe because their words seem so far beyond what we experience in normal life.

Ephesians 1:4-5 (NIV)

"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ..."

Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."



What does all of this mean? We are created to be increasingly transformed into a likeness of Jesus. And we are alive here and now because God has chosen our time and the places where we are to be formed and have our impact. Our formation in Christ-likeness is accomplished during prayer, fellowship, service and immersion in the Scripture. As this is proceeding, we are being led to grow in our capacity to recognize and do our part of His work, the work for which He created us to live in the here and now.

So, however we came to be, we are not accidents. We are not here by accident. God created us to become the men and the women whom He called into life and redeemed for eternal life in Him.

He caused us to be born and to live our lives in a specific place and time in history. He created us to be re-born in Jesus. He has done this to both advance His work in us and to call each of us into a specific part of His mission.

In John's gospel we learn that He has also intended, in advance, for us to be both one with each other and one in Him. We read in the Gospel Jesus' prayer *"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be [one] in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* John 17:21 (NIV)

The process: The process of this change, growth and calling as His servants happens as the Holy Spirit energizes the Scripture in us, guides the course of our lives and shapes us through prayer, fellowship and suffering.

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As the word of God gains traction in our lives and as we obey His promptings, we submit more and more of our spirit, soul and body to His love and Lordship. We grow increasingly whole, increasingly united with brothers and sisters and increasingly one with Him in His mission here and now.

In that process and by His plan, there will be both joy and suffering. Just as Jesus was shaped by the word of God, He was also shaped by suffering. We read in the letter to the Hebrews: *“Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered.”* Hebrews 5:8. (NIV)

Suffering, when done in Jesus and with Jesus, is an essential part of both His plan for shaping us and His plan to work through us in the world where He has placed us. He was referring to this suffering when he said to His disciples, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple [to follow me, imitate me and serve me] must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* Matthew 16:24 NIV

A New Testament picture of this plan in action: Let’s take a look at the work of the word of God, fellowship and suffering as it was experienced by the newly born church in Thessalonica as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (Ch 17 in NIV):

v. 1: *“When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.”*

The shaping effect of the word of God and fellowship:

vv. 2-4: *“As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”*

The role of suffering:

vv. 5-9: *“But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.*

They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: ‘These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.’ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.”

Paul’s three weeks in Thessalonica changed the personal lives of a small group of men and women and opened for them their part in the continued work of Christ in their world.

This was a serious situation. In the Roman world of 50 AD, declaring that anyone other than the emperor was king was considered high treason and was punishable by death. The *Lex Iulia Maiestatis* (Julian law on majesty) criminalized any statement or action that diminished the majesty of the emperor. Under Roman law, “naming a rival sovereign” was a capital offense.

The social/cultural aspect of the danger to this young church:

Thessalonica, then the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, was deeply embedded in the imperial cult. Coins from the reigns of Claudius and Nero bear inscriptions like ΚΑΙΣΑΡ ΣΩΤΗΡ (“Caesar Savior”) and ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ ΚΥΡΙΟΣ (“Lord Emperor”). Public loyalty to the emperor was both political and religious, and challenging it was tantamount to rebellion. Lastly, posting bond meant that a trial was sure to come on the charge of treason.

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Provincial Roman coins showing Claudius as “Lord Emperor” at left and Nero as “Caesar Savior” at right.

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Paul's letter to this small body of believers was meant to encourage them. In chapter one of the letter, it took the form of describing the character changes the gospel has worked in them:

"We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV)

To understand what Paul is saying, it is helpful to look more closely at "work" vs. "labor" and "produced by faith" vs. "prompted by love" in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. The differences here are subtle but meaningful.

1. "Work" vs. "Labor"

- Work (*ergon* in Greek) refers to the overall faith-filled effort to support each other to remain faithful and committed to Christ in the face of serious threat to their lives.
- Labor (*ponos* in Greek) emphasizes the specific steps they are taking to continue worshiping and serving God together and protecting each other in the face of danger and social rejection.

2. "Produced by faith" vs. "Prompted by love"

- "Produced by faith" means their urge to remain faithful is the natural fruit of their faith, the source and power behind their work.
- "Prompted by love" means that their actions in this crisis were motivated by love — love for God, love for others, or love for the mission. Faith is the foundation; love is the driving and shaping force. Faith ensures the work is God-centered; love ensures it is selfless and relational.

For our study here, it is especially important to look closely at Paul's use of Endurance (in the face of suffering) inspired and sustained by their hope in Jesus Christ.

- Example: A believer's "work" might be sharing the gospel; it is produced by faith because it flows from trust in Christ's message and is prompted by love because it is done with compassion and concern for others' spiritual well-being. And it is sustained even under

adversity or fruitlessness. Together, these three describe a life where faith and love are inseparable and sustained by hope even in the face of suffering.

With this brief glance at the transformation, sufferings and endurance of the members of this tiny church, we can take a look at the forces that God brings to bear in our own lives to shape us and sustain us in our share in the ministry and sufferings of Jesus.

Looking more broadly at how the church is experiencing the sufferings of Christ in today's world: In Pakistan, India, Nepal, Syria, China and Nigeria, Christians experience threats, violence (and in some cases murder), imprisonment, or social ostracism for their faith. While no single modern city is identical to Thessalonica in every detail, several places show striking parallels:

Pakistan – Christians, including laborers in brick kilns, have been targeted with threats, harassment, and in some cases violence for their faith.

India – Many believers face intimidation, surveillance, and restrictions on public worship, with some subjected to blasphemy charges.

Nepal – Christians have experienced discrimination and occasional violence for their faith.

Syria – Christians have been subjected to persecution, including threats, harassment, and in some cases imprisonment, for practicing their faith.

China – House churches operate underground due to government suppression, with believers facing surveillance, imprisonment, and demolition of churches.

According to the organization Open Doors, 2025 was the deadliest year in modern history for Christians, with 4,849 people killed due to their faith, an increase of 373 from the previous year. The vast majority of these deaths occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where 3,490 Christians were murdered, accounting for roughly 72% of the global total. Other countries

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with high levels of lethal persecution include North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, and Syria.

Closer to home, what do we experience in The United States?

In our immediate world, we are also experiencing the shaping and guiding work of the Lord in our lives through the Holy Spirit-inspired Word, prayer, fellowship, encouragement and suffering.

It is worth noting that though we are often open to the shaping and guiding work of the Lord, we struggle with the area of suffering. The suffering we experience because of the gospel and the supremacy of Christ is present, but more subtle.

If we share the message of the gospel with others, we will eventually be judged and criticized by some. Many around us feel that it is immoral to “force” our beliefs, to denigrate other’s “faith.” It is not uncommon to encounter people who see sharing the Lord’s plan to deal with sin as arrogant. To them, it is judgmental to imply that people might sin. If there is a God, He or She would certainly love everyone and judge no one. To imply that we know about God and His nature and His will and the meaning and direction of human life is absurd because, in reality, no one really can know about these things.

If we say that the Bible is definitive and inspired by God, we are confidently told that it is just a book cobbled together to gain control over people’s lives. And there are many equally revealing books “that have been hidden away from us” because they paint a different picture about Jesus and His work.

Looking more broadly, a look at the culture’s preferences for entertainment, we quickly see a loss of a sense of moral direction. Corrupt practices are seen as “normal.” Church is often viewed by many as simply a power trip and a money-making scheme.

In this environment, in the face of criticism and sometimes mockery, most Christ-followers are quite simply afraid to share the gospel.

But the message of Ephesians, the message of Hebrews, the message of Jesus in the Gospels and

the example of the Thessalonians clearly say one thing to us: We are created for life in a time and place, and we are both formed and called to support each other, to immerse ourselves in the Word of God and prayer, to learn from Jesus and to become like Him. We are called to share in His mission, accepting our part in His suffering in response to a calling that we are far more than just “simple” people trying to get through life.

GFC Community Celebration 2026

Back on August 29th the people of Grace Fellowship Church gathered together for the annual Community Celebration—a great time of worship, remembrance and challenge, and oh, yes, food! Here are a few glimpses of that evening as captured by the candid camera lens.



Update from Tamura City, Japan 日本・田村市からの更新情報

Monday, August 31, 2026 at 11:14 PM

2026年8月31日(月) 午後11時14分

Hello, Everyone,

This email is a little shorter since I spent half the month in America with my family. This was a great time for me to visit loved ones while also returning refreshed to continue the work the Lord has for the team and me in Japan. Upon arrival in Japan, I was able to attend the Floating Lantern Festival in our town (pictured below). This was a fun night to enjoy Japanese culture, hang out with friends, and see many people from our community. Though now, the holidays are suddenly approaching, and there is quite a bit to do in preparation. I have come back to a packed schedule as we began preparing for fall, Halloween, and even Christmas festivities!



Elementary School Lanterns ● Akabeko (Red Cow) Lantern

While a lot of that is the background work for the team and me, we are already in full swing of the fall semester. This semester doesn't feel quite as long since we have many small breaks during this time. However there is still a lot of work to be done! From meetings to my school's sports day, I ask that you pray for endurance for the team. Alongside this, these busy schedules provide us with the opportunity to continue to build relationships and have gospel conversations. Please pray that these opportunities keep popping up for us.

Just this week, I was able to have a conversation with someone about the will of God and how He can use discernment through prayer and confidence in other believers. Also, I had a deep conversation with someone about the book of Revelation.

While understanding the depth of Revelation and its symbolism has never been my strongest suit, I was able to encourage another believer about the urgency of the gospel needing to be spread, especially in Japan!



The team wearing their yukatas (summer kimonos)

In a neighboring town, a church has been closed. While we don't know the full extent of why, as a team we have been able to welcome some of the people to our church. It has been a blessing to meet these believers. At the same time, the circumstances because of which they have joined is quite disheartening. Most churches in Japan are one-generational. Usually, once the pastor passes, that church closes. Japanese Christians are one of the fastest declining groups in the world-wide church today. Please continue to pray for our church in Tamura City, that we can bring hope to our community and welcome in a new generation of believers!

Thank you for all your prayers,

Maria

Maria M. McCreadie

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Eric Byrom Presiding Elder/ Pastor

Jadaé Fox Elder

Kay Berry & Jadaé Fox Office

(A complete list of church functionaries
will return next month)

Caveat from the Elders: Kindly note that the following does reflect more of an Eastern Orthodox viewpoint and is not the official position of Grace Fellowship Church.

Facing up to Mary *Peter E. Gillquist* (Concluded from the September 2026 TrailNotes issue)

TAKING ACTION

Many Christians have been grossly misinformed in the last 150 years concerning the historical Church's view of Mary. Therefore, I would suggest that you keep this booklet and use it to help others when the question arises. And remember also that there are things that are unique to the Virgin Mary. She was the only one who gave her flesh to the Son of God, and she is uniquely to be blessed throughout all generations (Luke 1:48). What we do about Mary is connected directly to what we do about Church. The community of Christ's followers is called to act together. Taking action with regard to Mary is not simply personal or private; it has to do with responding as The Church. And where in Christendom has the fullness of truth concerning Mary been preserved? Even most Protestants—both liberal and conservative—know she is slighted in their circles. The answer for Protestants who take the biblical and historical evidence seriously lies neither within the Protestant churches nor in the Roman church, with its questionable late dogmatic additions concerning Mary.

I urge you to visit and get to know the historic Orthodox Church which has maintained the biblical fidelity concerning Mary and Christian faith in general. Within the boundaries of orthodoxy, the faith and practice of the Church safeguard true commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ together with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is there that the truths of the Bible are taught in their entirety, where the worship of God is experienced in Spirit and in truth and where Mary and the great cloud of witnesses for Christ throughout the ages are honored and revered.

The hour is at hand for all of us who love Christ and take seriously the Holy Scriptures to set our hearts and minds to giving Holy Mary her proper due in the proper Church. We do so because God has done great things for and through her (Luke 1:49). As Christians, we do not live by feelings, we

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- 3** Games Reach Family Game Night, at GFC, 6:30-8:30 PM.
- 4** Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 4:18-22.
- 10** Dance group refresher class, 10-11 AM, GFC sanctuary.
Ladies' lunch at Bob Evans on Hanley Rd., 1:00 PM.
Fall Family Fun night at GFC, 6:00-8:00 PM.
- 11** Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 4:23-25. 
- 18** Elder Jadaé Fox preaching on Matthew 8:1-3.
- 25** Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 8:4-13. 

live by faith. Let us once for all rise above those things the devil has sown in our hearts to neutralize us against this precious woman who gave birth to our Savior. Bless her in the midst of God's people. Follow her example in exalting Christ. Confess her as the Mother of God. Come home to the Church that has kept intact our holy faith. And may we help turn our generation back to giving Mary the honor and blessing which God has commanded.

Editor's note: Permission granted and excerpted from Facing Up to Mary by +Fr. Peter Gilquist, from Ancient Faith Topical Series. Published by Ancient Faith Ministries (formerly Conciliar Press), 1987, second edition 1994. Full copies, as well as other publications by +Fr. Gilquist, are available at this site: store.ancientfaith.com.



A number of us at GFC will fondly remember the author of this article, who we knew as just "Pete Gillquist" back in the 1960s and 70s before he joined the Antiochian Orthodox Church in 1987. His basic message is an important one.