

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Authentic Christianity 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Introduction

Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonian church from the city of Corinth not long after his first to them, possible only a few months later. He devotes much of the letter to the return of Christ and the importance of living faithfully until that day comes. Besides the persecution the church has been facing from the beginning, it appears that some false teaching about the day of the Lord had wormed its way into the community of believers and was having its harmful effect as all false teaching does. In addition, some of the believers were evidently so eager about the coming of the Lord that they had quit working and, with extra time on their hands, had started meddling in the lives of others, living like parasites on the labors of others.

Paul starts the letter in his usual manner, but in doing so reveals why he is so confident his readers are truly born again. What he describes well summarizes what authentic Christianity looks like in the lives of a healthy local church family.

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God our
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for
you, brothers, as is right, because your faith
is growing abundantly, and the love of every
one of you for one another is increasing.

⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in
the churches of God for your steadfastness
and faith in all your persecutions and in the
afflictions that you are enduring.

1. Blessings from God (1-2)
2. Thankful to God (3)
3. Testimony for God (4)

1. Blessings from God (1-2)

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God our
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

These verses are nearly identical to how his
first letter to the Thessalonians begins. The
only difference is that he adds that grace and
peace are from God the Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ.

The church is a called-out assembly of the
people of God, but the way Paul describes

their identity is that they are the church IN God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

They have a vital connection to God the Father and God the Son. They have entered into the life of God Himself.

Into the family of God—He is their heavenly Father, and as any good father does, He exercises loving watchcare over them. His spiritual dna at work in them transforming them to be like Him. Their character and behavior reflects His.

In the Lord Jesus Christ—the Savior King who rules over an everlasting kingdom. They are citizens in His kingdom, those that have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Jesus taught His disciples that anyone abiding in Him would bear much fruit. Without Him they could do nothing, but true believers are in Him and He is in them. That makes them productive in ways only God can produce in a person.

For any Christian to thrive in a hostile world of persecution, false teaching, and off-course living, he or she must be clear on whether they are in Him. That chief identity defines who they really are, flowing out in what they desire, think, say, and do.

Those whose identity is in the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ experience grace and peace.

Grace is favor, goodness, beauty they have not earned nor could they ever do so. It is too lavish for that. It is a loving gift from God.

Peace speaks of their restoration to fellowship with God—reconciliation to Him when once they were by birth and choice rebels and enemies. They are now aligned with their Creator and thus are in tune with the universe He designed and governs. His life in them makes healthy relationships with other people possible and even normal, especially with those of the household of faith. He gives a peace that passes understanding, that calms the fretful heart, and that gives them self-control and settled calmness because they are assured that God is for them not against them.

These are blessings from God, His gifts to His people. He is the fountain of all the good that flows into their lives and equips them for battle against Satan, the world, and the flesh.

Applications

- In what ways can you remind yourself each day that your chief identity is one who is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?

- What are ways you can keep in the forefront of your mind that you have freely received the infinite blessing of God's grace?
- In what ways does the relationship of peace you enjoy with God flow out to your relationships with others?

2. Thankful to God (3)

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Two major reasons for praising God for what is happening in the lives of these brothers and sisters:

Growing Faith

Your faith is growing abundantly

Like a luxuriant plant in a well-watered garden. Their reliance on God is not drying up and blowing away under the firestorm of persecution and affliction. It is still alive. It is holding, deeply rooted in His faithfulness. It is strengthening. It is growing with the life of God in them, spreading out like a fruitful vine in all kinds of practical ways.

Increasing Love

The love of every one of you for one another is increasing

Wherever genuine faith is strong, love will increase. It is the fruit of God's life in them.

Everyone of you. No exceptions. And wherever you see this kind of love flowing freely among a community of believers, you are witnessing the mighty work of the God of love. For this reason we give God great praise for it wherever it is increasing among His people. It is the hallmark of authentic Christianity.

For one another—it is mutual, flowing from every believer to every other believer and from every other believer. Love weaves their hearts together and binds them close in the unity the Spirit of God produces among true brothers and sisters in Christ.

The pressures of life and the mistreatment we experience from those outside of Christ seek to undermine and poison our relationships with our brothers and sisters. Faults and failings common to human beings rub us wrong and can make us cynical and bitter toward others. That kind of response is from our sinful flesh, not from the Spirit of God.

We need one another. Others need our self-sacrificing love, the we need theirs. We cannot thrive in a hostile world as lone rangers. We dare not let the evil one cut us off from the love and help we need from our brothers and sisters, nor turn us to selfish isolation. They need our love, too.

Will you notice further that Paul does not just say that he, Silas, and Timothy are thankful for the Thessalonian believers. He says we “ought always to give thanks”—it is a debt owed; God has earned it. Then he adds “as is right”—it is fitting, appropriate to do so.

Not giving thanks to God for His transforming work in the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ robs God of the praise due Him and is entirely unfitting to what is happening in their lives.

When you and I see growing faith and increasing love in the lives of other believers, we ought to be thanking God for what we see in them. It is fitting to do so, and it is not fitting to ignore it.

Sometimes professing Christians, preachers included, get this backwards. They’re always nit-picking about what other believers are doing wrong while they completely ignore all the evidence of the mighty work of God in them. That kind of Christianity is diseased. It detracts from God’s glory, and harms and discourages brothers and sisters that need our love and encouragement.

It’s not that sin in another believer’s life should never be confronted. But we are commanded to do so with the gentle affection

that desires restoration to health. *No relationship works well if all you ever do is highlight the faults of other people while dismissing all their good qualities.* That's more like the accuser of the brethren, the devil, whose name means slanderer.

Applications

- Where do you see growing faith in the lives of your brothers and sisters?
- Where do you see increasing love in their lives?
- How can you make it a habit to give thanks to God for these supernatural blessings you're seeing in them?

3. Testimony for God (4)

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

Boast about you in the churches of God

Encouragement to other churches

When we see other believers thriving in a hostile world, we have reason not only to give thanks to God, but also to share with others what God is doing. It is an encouragement to their faith. It lets them know God is at work in all kinds of places in the earth. It strengthens their confidence in the power of the gospel to save people to the uttermost.

As we talked about this verse in our staff meeting this week, the men mentioned it reminded them of the kind of missionary reports we get from J.D. Crowley and the rest of the team in Cambodia. If you think about it, the reason we love the *Dispatches from the Front* films produced by Frontline is that we get to rejoice at the progress of the gospel in some of the hardest places on earth. Last year the *Operation Go* movie featuring believers in Mongolia stirred our hearts in a similar way.

It's really important for us not only to thank God for gospel advance and spiritual growth in the lives of believers in a particular place, but also to share their progress with believers elsewhere so that they can rejoice with us in what God is doing. God gets the honor He deserves when we do so, and we create a ripple effect of encouragement. Whatever God is doing in your life and in the lives of your brothers and sisters is not just for the benefit of our local church, but for the benefit of His people everywhere.

Some ministries and fellowships focus much of their energy on pointing out what's wrong with other ministries and churches, even those devoted to Christ and His word and despite their fruitfulness from God's supernatural work among them. Consider how

much more beneficial it would be to praise God for what He's doing in those ministries and to share with others the good news of His blessing.

That's one reason we pray for other churches in our Greenville area devoted to Christ and His gospel, including those whose culture and history may be very different from ours. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we want to highlight that. We want to be praying for God's mighty work among them and to be thanking God for that work and sharing it with others. We are not on the planet to further our own reputation and glory, but God's. When we praise Him for what He's doing elsewhere and share that good news, we are striving to make much of Him not ourselves.

What is giving reason for Paul to boast?
Steadfastness—endurance, to bear up under, to remain under

And **faith**—ongoing reliance on God, continuing to lean the weight of their trust on Christ to sustain them and bear them through.

In all your persecutions—to pursue, hunt down—hatred and mistreatment from enemies of the gospel

In the afflictions—pressures, tribulations common to life as well as those created by the persecution

You are enduring—to hold oneself up

We see this played out for us in our own local body. We weep with those who weep. We try to meet the needs precipitated by deep trials, sorrows, and sufferings. Cards and texts, meals, financial gifts, prayer, hugs, words of kindness. Yet how often it is that when we get in close with our brothers and sisters navigating deep troubles, we are treated to a front-row seat on how God is sustaining them and blessing them in the middle of the storm. We go away praising God, boasting in His goodness, amazed at the resilience He so often chooses to give His suffering saints. That's what is happening here. *Paul is joyful not that his beloved brothers and sisters face trouble and suffering. He is joyful that they are thriving in their faith in the face of it all.* That indomitable faith, that steadfastness, unveils God to be doing a work in them, because it's not natural, it's supernatural.

Paul is boasting in the cross of Christ (Galatians 6). God turned an instrument of excruciating suffering designed for criminals into the emblem of His love for humanity and His way of ransoming them from the sin, death, and wrath. In the same way, God is

turning the persecutions and afflictions of the believers in Thessalonica into a megaphone to shout out to all the world the amazing power of the gospel in the lives of those who trust Jesus and follow Him no matter what it costs them.

Applications

- Who do you know is proving steadfast in their faith despite great suffering?
- How can you boast more often in what God is doing in the lives of other believers and of other churches?
- Who among the believers you know is aware that you praise God for what He is doing in their lives?

Conclusion

What Paul describes in these opening verses is not unique. It's normative. It's what authentic Christianity is supposed to look like in every time and place. It is a display of the power of the gospel to save to the uttermost those who trust in Christ Jesus. Could Paul write the same things about you and our church family? By the grace of God, I think yes.

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Closing Song: Grace Unmeasured

Summary of Applications

- In what ways can you remind yourself each day that your chief identity is one who is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?
- What are ways you can keep in the forefront of your mind that you have freely received the infinite blessing of God's grace?
- In what ways does the relationship of peace you enjoy with God flow out to your relationships with others?
- Where do you see growing faith in the lives of your brothers and sisters?
- Where do you see increasing love in their lives?
- How can you make it a habit to give thanks to God for these supernatural blessings you're seeing in them?
- Who do you know is proving steadfast in their faith despite great suffering?
- How can you boast more often in what God is doing in the lives of other believers and of other churches?
- Who among the believers you know is aware that you praise God for what He is doing in their lives?