

Grace and Grit
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4
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Amen and amen. Thank you. At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church. And as we together proceed forward, we have now finished with the first letter to the Thessalonians. We proceed on to the second letter to the Thessalonians written shortly after the first letter. And this is Paul's continued encouragement to them as he has received reports of their advancement, of their growth, of their challenges. And he begins in this greeting to remind them of their foundation, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. But also, to encourage them as he is encouraged by their grit.

This is a letter that begins with grace and grit. My hope is, this morning, that you are encouraged and strengthened not just individually, but corporately. He's writing this letter to the church corporate. Not everyone was equally relying on the grace of God. Not everyone was strong and courageous in Christ in the midst of their suffering. But together, they were. And regardless of where you are in that, whether you're struggling to trust the grace of God or even if you trust it, your endurance is failing, or if you are strong – whatever it might be, this is why we are a part of a body of people. We need one another. This is where the gospel is lived out. This is where we are sharpened. This is where we are strengthened.

This is his encouragement to the church at Thessalonica and it is an encouragement to us. Grace and grit. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, hear now God's word.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us and for you.

Heavenly Father, we come to you. We come to you and are reminded that we come with empty hands. We do not offer you anything except a response to what you have already done. But we come to you, Lord. And I pray on behalf of your people, this part of the body of Christ worldwide, that you would feed your people, that you would encourage them, that you would strengthen them, that you would fill them with your Holy Spirit. Help us individually but also corporately to be a people who are grounded in grace and whose grit is growing every day. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As you look at this passage this morning, in these brief few words it is easy for us – if you have not already done this before – if you're familiar at all with the letters that Paul writes or any of the New Testament letters to the churches, we are often tempted to skip over the introductions and go straight to where the heading in our Bibles are often already labelled. It is partly because of the way we understand greetings in our own culture. "Dear so and so," "How are you doing?" You know. We often give greetings not because we're being disingenuous, but the greeting is often something we get through to get to the stuff we really want to talk about. But for Paul, the greeting is where it all begins.

Perhaps you remember, pastor Allen Harris probably said to you many, many times, as I have said to you and want to remind you, that Paul moves from indicative to imperative: who we are before what we do. This is where Paul begins. So, we're going to look at the greeting, we're going to look at growth,

and we're going to look at grit. Three G's, I hope you can remember that: greeting, growth, and grit. And some of you draw pictures as I preach. So, I want to see those because I love what you're doing with that.

First, the greeting. He's very clear in establishing to the Thessalonians and reminding them of something that is of paramount importance for Paul and, indeed, the entire gospel. He wants to greet them and remind them of two things, grace to you and peace to you. This idea of "grace to you" has within it a great treasure trove of meaning which stretches from the Old Testament to the New. Part of it is a blessing and asking in the sense of giving them a blessing. He's actually in some sense already praying for them that God would pour out His loving kindness.

So, one element of this grace is an Old Testament idea of "hesed," "God's loving kindness." It is most certainly there. And his desire is that they would be able to experience and know God's loving kindness towards them. There's another aspect of which Paul goes throughout his letters to unpack which is grace in a more technical term related specifically to their salvation. That is, God's unmerited favor. That is, we receive salvation through Jesus Christ out of no merit on our own, but as a gift of God, it is unmerited, and it is favor. And that, too, is most certainly true. But if we must go further one more wrung down, grace is more than God's loving kindness. Grace is more than unmerited favor. Grace is grace through the Lord Jesus Christ to a people who looked at God and said, I do not need you and nor do I want you. It is grace in the midst – let me use another word – of demerit. God, who once displayed His marvelous grace in Adam and Eve and, indeed, in all of our sin, we are saying, no. Yet God still is gracious. Alleluia, that Jesus is our savior and His grace is unmerited. His favor is His loving kindness which does not change, but it comes in the face of my sin.

Look, if somebody wants to give me a bag of money – and if you brought any with you, I'll take it – but if you want to give me a bag of money, and you just want to give it as a gift. I haven't done anything, it's just like, here. That's unmerited favor. But if you give me money after already before I've torn up the check and thrown it back in your face and yet, you still come back at me, that's a whole other level of giving. This is all the grace that Paul means when he says, "Grace to you."

And then he says, "Peace to you." It isn't just that God is caring about our need for forgiveness. He's not concerned about just whether we are able to fully receive His loving kindness. He actually desires for us to experience well-being. That's what peace is about. It's about flourishing. It's not just about the sliver of your spiritual life. It's your relational life, it's your work life, it's your family life. It's life. And to know that grace is to be brought into a peace, a peace of relationship without the presence of hostility. It's a relationship with God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is Paul's establishment of our union with Christ. To be in union with Him is what it means to learn how to finally be a human. God does not have it out for us. He desires for us to flourish.

And Paul's letter to them is reminding them that their circumstances may call out and scream at them that maybe that's not the case. So, we know that God's peace – His desire for us to flourish, this idea of a full sense of shalom, well-being – is not always depicted by the circumstances we are presently experiencing. But that doesn't mean that God's peace is absent. It means that in the midst of these circumstances, I can experience well-being and peace and grace of God and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is just the greeting. Good morning. How goes it with your soul? The Lord is saying to you, church at Columbia Presbyterian, visitor, member, regular attender alike, grace and peace to you in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the grounding that he gives us in the greeting. Is that your grounding? I know it's not always mine. I need this this morning.

I need it, because as I was sitting in the back row this morning, I could hear that the sound was only coming out one side of the auditorium. And guess where my mind goes? I'm not following what John is leading us to in worship. I barely remember anything that elder Dick Stum said this morning. Let's just be real. I was not feeling peaceful and I was not feeling gracious. May my family be protected from my anxiety. Because you know what I'm thinking about? I'm beginning to project, "I think I'm going to get some comments." How are people hearing it? Will people come back? I need this greeting this morning. I

asked pastor PD to pray for me before I came up on this stage because I was distracted. I need grace and peace. And I bet if I do, you do.

It is also about this growth that Paul begins to talk about in verse 3 when he says, “We ought to always 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.” He’s now saying, we give thanks for what is evident in you that you are growing, and what you are growing in is faith and love. It is important for us to establish that when he says you are growing in faith and he says so “abundantly,” first, he means your trust. Faith is not a discreet list of doctrinal truths which we believe. It certainly encompasses that, but it is not that. He’s talking about, what is your trust?

And also, when you hear the words, “your growth in grace abundantly,” we automatically hear that and start thinking about size. This was something that the disciples also thought, that it was about the size of faith. And he says if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. It’s not about size. And yet, we continue to think about it. If I just had more faith. And I think I know what we mean, but I kind of sometimes don’t think we know what we mean. It’s not about the overall size. It’s about the content. It’s about the nitty gritty. It’s what’s inside of it. It’s about the ingredients. What makes up your trust?

We were talking this last week about something that mineralogists, who study minerals, have realized about Roman concrete. Do you know this? That ancient Romans built concrete sea walls that have withstood pounding oceans and their waves for more than 2,000 years. Now, an international team, as one report gave, has discovered a clue to that concrete’s longevity. It’s a rare mineral that during chemical reactions between the concrete and sea water is strengthened. That has enabled those sea walls to stand for hundreds of years. Our modern concrete is different. It uses paste of water and Portland cement. Portland cement is a fine powder made mostly of limestone and clay to hold together small rocks, but it degrades within decades – hello, our tax dollars filling pot holes – especially in harsh marine environments. There could be a conspiracy. Instead of Portland cement, the Romans discovered that there’s a mix of volcanic ash and lime to bind rock fragments.

This is what they have discovered with regard to these Roman sea walls. It’s not the size of the sea walls. It’s not necessarily what they were trying to protect. It was what made up the wall that then interacted with what it was coming into contact with. And so is the case with our being made to trust stuff outside of ourselves. We can’t live unless we are trusting in something outside of ourselves. We were made to be in relationship. We were made to be in trusting relationships.

And so, what Paul is saying, your growth in grace is that the content of your faith is what is markedly different and what is growing. That you recognize that the Lord is worthy of trust. In His faithful promise, in the midst of trial and tribulation, He has demonstrated His faithfulness. He has provided. And so, our faith gets stronger. And as that faith gets stronger because it is reliant more and more not on what we know, but who He is and what He has said, we can withstand waves. And it is the Lord who establishes us. And this is his thanksgiving prayer. Thanks be to God that your faith is growing.

But he said it isn’t just your faith, it is also your love for one another. Now, here he’s talking about the love of those in the church for others within the church. It is interesting that he says to them that “the love of every one of you for one another is increasing,” that love is a demonstration that it is love that demonstrates the content of the faith which he just talked about their growing in. If we are growing in our trust of who the Lord is and what He has done by establishing – as he mentioned in the greeting – grounding us in grace and peace, then you know that your love for others is reflective of your reception of the love that Christ has had for you. His loving kindness, thanks be to God, not just when we’re good, but when we don’t want Him.

There is the challenge, when he talks about love for one another. It’s not love in the high places. It’s love in the hard places. To grow in love means we are growing in love when it requires forgiveness, when it requires hard conversations. Love is the fruit of the content of our faith. To trust in a loving heavenly

Father through whom He gave His Son who died for us and has poured out His grace on us even in the midst of our sin, and He has loved us, how much more then ought that not to change the way you and I love one another? This is the testing ground. And Paul is encouraging them that this is what I see in you, your love for one another is growing.

Now, note this. It's growing, which is a process. We hurt one another. And it's so tempting, is it not, to be the place where we close the door. But that is the testing ground. That's the testing ground where our love for one another actually grows – when we have that hard conversation, when we say in loving kindness difficult things because we've hurt one another. We need to ask for forgiveness, and yet we still walk in love. That is the demonstration of that growth. And that takes time. Parents to your children, children to your parents, loving one another, yes, because you are family. Yes, and amen. But that can't be the content merely of your love, merely because you are family. It has to be out of a place of deeper reservoir that you have been loved despite your sin, and you can turn to one another and ask for forgiveness and be forgiven and to forgive and to love. It is hard work and it is a process of growth and it takes time. But this is the fruit of the content of our faith. And he is abundantly grateful that he can see it in them.

What a calling for us, what a reminder, what a challenge. As one of our elders led in trustees yesterday as he reminded us as we were meeting, it isn't the content of our theology which we are so tempted in thinking as the marker of our growth and maturity. It is the evidence of our love for one another that the best theology leads us to. If our theology is not inclining our hearts towards loving one another, then that theology needs to be questioned. The best theology leads us to a more humble and dependent love in who He is and what He has done for us. But if it does not turn and cause us to love each other more, then what is wrong?

But we are growing. You are growing. We are praying for your growth as you would pray for us. This is what the Lord wants for us.

From greeting and growth, he turns to grit. He says, "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all of your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring." You see, it has an internal logic, this passage does. We cannot take verse 4 and have it make any sense at all if we don't have the other two prior. The greeting reminds them of their union with Christ, their grounding in grace and peace which is then brought forth a very changed life that the content of their faith is who He is, not who they are. And it's changed the way that they love. It is the grounding in the gospel of Jesus Christ that has enabled this people to face very difficult persecutions and afflictions.

Angela Duckworth, whose written a book on grit says these things. She's not writing from a faith perspective. She says,

"My research focuses on two traits that predict achievement. Two things show how well you will do: grit and self-control. Grit is the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals. Self-control is the voluntary regulation of impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations. On average, individuals who are gritty are more self-controlled. But the correlation between these two traits is not perfect. Some individuals are paragons of grit but not self-control, and some exceptionally well-regulated individuals are not especially gritty."

So, after lots of research, they've understood that grit, the ability to sustain endurance in a long, central direction with a goal, and a degree of self-control allows one to really grow. And in her words, experience achievement.

Now, here, Paul is writing about grit, their ability to endure afflictions and persecutions. But not in a sense of trying to have an achievement in terms of worldly success. The achievement is relying and

trusting in who Christ is and not in their circumstances. Their grit and endurance is based not on their own talents or abilities, but it is on who the Lord is in providing for them.

There are two such examples I would draw your attention to. Not far from here, just to our northwest, is an area of Pittsburgh which was a part of the early settlements in the 18th century. And this is just one brief story of Christians and churches that were seeking to be established. This is one diary entry from a pastor of that time, just south of Pittsburgh.

“When I came into this country, the cabin in which I was to live in had no roof on it, no chimney, no floor in it. However, people were very kind and assisted me in preparing my house. And on the 16th of December 1778, I moved into it. But we had neither a bed nor chairs nor stools nor buckets. All these things we had to leave behind us. There being no wagon road at that time over the mountains, we could bring nothing with us but what was carried on pack horses. We placed two boxes on each other which served as a table. Two kegs served for seats. And having committed ourselves to God in family worship, we spread a bed on the floor and slept soundly till morning.

“The next day, a neighbor coming to my assistance, we made a table and a stool. And in little time, we had everything comfortable for us. Sometimes, indeed, we had no bread for weeks together. We had plenty of pumpkins and potatoes and all the necessities of life. As for luxuries, we were not much concerned about them. We enjoyed health, the gospel, and its ordinances, and our Christian friends. We were in the place where we believe God would have us to be. And we did not doubt that he would provide for us everything that was necessary.”

When you go back to that time, there was not a single church dwelling in the entire region, much less the county in which they were. And yet, they believed this is where God had led them. This is where God would bring them, and God would provide for them with luxuries. But their luxuries were mere necessities. And yet, they sought to endure because this is where they believed God had called them to be.

This was much like what the Thessalonians were experiencing. This is where God had placed them. They had been converted to the Lord Jesus Christ. They were now disciples, and yet family members, friends who they once knew, had now rejected them. They were left out of the social circles. They were looked down upon. And yet, they endured. And yet, even in the midst of that, their grit and endurance grew not because of anything in themselves; it's because of what the Lord had done. And that was their trust.

Now, to a very different person at a very different time, in this last century. Now, here note that the challenge that this person would write about is not the challenge that comes from outside the church of Jesus Christ, but the challenge that comes within the church of Jesus Christ. It's Martin Luther King, Jr., in his letters from a Birmingham jail. He says these things. He says,

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years, I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that a black man's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the white citizen's counsellor or the Klu Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice, who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice. Who constantly says, I agree with you in your goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods or direct action. Who paternalistically believes that he can set the time table for another man's freedom, who lives by a mythical concept of time, who constantly advises the

black man to wait for a more convenient season. Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding of people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

He faced, as did many African Americans during that time, fellow brothers and sisters who claimed Christ who were absolutely silent to their plight. This, he says, is far more bewildering than outright rejection. And yet, the grit of grace grew.

It is not about having grit that says, I have no fear. Grit is not just acting like everything’s just fine. Grit is the embracing that sometimes life is, quite frankly, really overwhelming and difficult and broken. And I’m exhausted, and I am frustrated, and I am angry. And sometimes, that fight comes from without. Other times, it’s the afflictions that frankly are a part of being human. And other times, it’s persecutions and feeling utterly alone by even those who claim faith. Grit is the embracing of that reality. But grit, grounded in grace, is a grit that says this is bigger than me, but not Him. Grit is, I can say it is not going well with me, and I am concerned; and yet, my God reminds me as William Cowper said in the midst of his depression, “Sometimes a light surprises.” And in the midst of this challenge and enduring difficult circumstances, whatever they may be, is the only place aided by God’s grace that the church of Jesus Christ can become a place of grace and grit.

Listen to what William Cowper said, as I finish this morning.

“Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings. It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings. When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again a season of clear shining to cheer it after the rain. Tomorrow can bring us nothing, but He will bear us through, who gives the lilies clothing will clothe his people, too. Beneath the spreading heavens, no creature but is fed. And He who feeds the ravens will give His children bread. Though vine nor fig tree, neither their wanted fruit should bear. Though all the fields should wither nor flocks or herds be there. Yet God, the same abiding, His praise shall tune my voice. For while in Him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.”

Grace, when it is at work. Peace when it is blessed and given. Growth in faith and trust that then produces a love that loves even in the hard places is a grace that will enable you as a professing Christian in the church of Jesus Christ to endure. Many of you are doing that today, and you are a testimony of God’s grace in giving you grit. As I look around this room, many of you are in the midst of acute suffering of various kinds.

So, the reality is that you in the midst of this acute suffering need to hear what I heard as my friend, who I have not spoken to in at least a decade, as I caught up with him on the phone this week. As he prayed, he said, “Lord, I ask for Randy and me that you would spend us today because tomorrow has nothing to do with us, yet. But today, may you spend us. But spend us for your glory because your grace is enough.”

Some of you feel spent. But I want you to know, we see the grace. We are with you. And we want to serve you. We want to pray with you. We want to walk with you. And we want to say, you’re right, life actually often stinks. But the Lord is sweet, and He is good to all that He has made. May the Lord give to you today grace and grit for His glory. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word, for your word reminds us and points us to you for you are good, and you are loving, and you are gracious. Lord, help us, we pray, to experience this grace more and more and more, that we might know our union with Christ. And may you give us, we ask, a greater love for you and for one another even in the hard places. But may we, Lord, be equipped by your Spirit to be a people who are growing with grit not because we have the strength in and of

ourselves, but because you are at work and you are the source. Do this, we ask, to your glory. In Jesus's name. Amen.