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Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 1:1, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

In the second season of the science fiction television series, *Star Trek*, one of the episodes was entitled *The Omega Glory*. In this episode, Kirk and his crew find a deserted starship, the Exeter. On board they find that a disease destroyed the crew and that the only survivors are marooned on a planet embroiled in a civil war which resembled the cold war between the US and Russia. Instead of Yanks, one side was called the Yangs. And instead of the Communists, the other side was called the Kohms. So it was the Yangs against the

Kohms.

The episode climaxes with Kirk on trial for his life and the chief of the Yangs pulled out a “holy scroll” and read the sacred words which only could be read by a Yang Chieftain, “E Plebneesta, norkohn forkohn perfectunum...” It took a while, but Kirk eventually recognized the misread words as the Preamble to the Constitution, “We the people of the United States of America, in order to form a more perfect union...” Kirk then tells the Yang leaders that these principles and truths were intended for all the people, not just the Yangs. The Yang Chief swears to honor the “holy words.”

Sadly, that is how many today view the many salutations found in the Epistles.

Philippians 1:1-2, “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Colossians 1:1-2, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

The general approach to these passages is, “Let the theologian study the verse. Let’s get to the good stuff!” And this is a great mistake. The opening words of Paul’s epistles were masterfully crafted by the Apostle with an intended message for the church to which it was written. As there are no unimportant verses of Scripture, we must see that the salutation or greeting of the epistles are of great importance.

1 Thessalonians 1:1b, “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians...”

First Thessalonians was written by Paul from Corinth around 50-52 AD. Recall that Paul began his second missionary journey after he and Barnabas could not agree on whether John Mark should accompany them (Acts 15:36-40). Paul therefore took Silas and embarked on his second mission first by revisiting the churches planted on the first missionary journey.¹ When Paul and Silas arrived in Lystra, Timothy, who perhaps had come to faith on account of Paul’s first visit, joined the missionary effort.

This missionary trio then continued on west through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. Having been kept by “the Spirit of Jesus” from preaching the Word in the provinces of Asia or Bithynia, they came to Troas on the Aegean coast. Here Paul received the Macedonian vision.



Acts 16:9b-10, "...a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

With that, Paul, Silas, and Timothy travelled to Macedonia where they headed south through Greece preaching in the major cities along the way:

- Neopolis, Acts 16:11.
- Philippi, Acts 16:11.
- Amphipolis, Acts 17:1
- Apollonia, Acts 17:1
- Thessalonica, Acts 17:1ff
- Berea, Acts 17:10ff.
- Athens, Acts 17:16.
- Corinth, Acts 18:1ff.
- Cenchrea, Acts 18:18.

So why was this letter penned by Paul? What was going on that Paul felt it necessary to address the Thessalonians?

The church in Thessalonica was founded when after ministering in Amphipolis and Apollonia, Paul and his companions arrived in Thessalonica. Here they stayed at least three weeks (cf. Acts 17:2), most likely longer (Philippians 4:16).

Acts 17:2-3a, "And according to Paul's custom, [he went to the synagogue each Sabbath], and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead..."

The results of this were quite encouraging.

Acts 17:4, "Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."

As wonderful as was this response, nevertheless it brought grave opposition which resulted in a city-wide riot on account of which Paul, Silas, and Timothy had to slip away by night (Acts 17:5-10a), but not before Paul had had opportunity to instruct the Thessalonians concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

Paul and his companions then came to Berea where they had initial success until Jewish leaders from Thessalonica came and stirred up the crowds against him! Once again the disciples thought it best that Paul should leave. So leaving Silas and Timothy at Berea to complete the work, Paul was escorted by some of his Berean friends to Athens, where they left him. Now think about it, of the churches founded on Paul's Second Missionary Journey, if any were going to flounder, from all appearance it most certainly would have been the Thessalonians. First, the city enjoyed the status of being a free city of Rome; as such, it was quite loyal to Caesar.

Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia, and stood on the Via Egnatia (the Roman highway to the east). As such, it was an important city for all northern communication and commerce between Rome and the Northeast. It also was a port city on the Thermaic Gulf and so became the most populated city in Macedonia during Paul's day.²

During the civil war of Rome in which Augustus rose to power (42 BC), the city sided with Augustus. Thus Octavian awarded to Thessalonica the status of a "free city" which cemented their allegiance to Caesar! That is why when we read in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 that the Thessalonians "...turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God," we understand that this would have meant the rejection of the cult of Caesar which would have made the church an enemy of the state! In fact, notice the charge brought against the church leaders of Thessalonica after Paul and his companions left.

Acts 17:7b, "...they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

This no doubt was because the Thessalonians had "put away their gods!" So no doubt there would have been pressure from the Roman state! Secondly, the Jewish leadership in Thessalonica had a hatred for Paul and so a jealousy to attack not only Paul, but any and all associated with him. Again, they chased Paul to Berea (*50 miles away*)! Their disposition seemed to be that of Paul's before he was saved.

Acts 26:11, "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."

Finally, at this time in the ancient world there were many "pleaders for a cause"- men who travelled around teaching strange ideas and living off their disciples. They were viewed as unprincipled men. Would the Thessalonians view him as such? No doubt the Jewish leaders would have accused Paul of being nothing more than a greedy pleader with a cause looking for money!

Accordingly, Paul in Athens could only imagine what this young church in Thessalonica was going through. Would they endure? Would they remain true to Paul? Would they remain

loyal to the Lord? Not knowing and filled with anxiety, Paul sent word to Timothy to go back to Thessalonica to encourage the brethren there to remain true to the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, “Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith.”

Having wrapped up his ministry in Athens, Paul then moved on to Corinth where he would spend the bulk of his Second Missionary journey (18 months in all). And yet, sometime during his stay in Corinth, Timothy returned with incredible news (~51-52 AD)

1 Thessalonians 3:6-7, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us [In other words, Paul was not viewed by them as a “pleader for a cause”], longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction [prior to Corinth, the previous four endeavors at witnessing resulted in Paul being chased out of town] we were comforted about you through your faith.”

So overjoyed with Timothy’s news,³ Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to:

- (1) Express his love for the Christians there,
- (2) Praise God for preserving the body, and
- (3) Answer some lingering questions (the primary one revolving around the Second Coming of Christ). That’s The Church. Notice...

1 Thessalonians 1:1a, “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy...”

Who were these men? Let me introduce you to them. Paul, whose name means “little” in the Greek (recall his Jewish name was Saul)- was called by God in extraordinary circumstances. Before he was saved. Paul was one of the strongest opponents of Christ amongst the Jews in the early days of the church.⁴ In fact, Paul was so feared that when he came to Jerusalem, now saved, the Apostles hid from him (Acts 9:26)! God implanted in this man not only an incredibly sharp mind, but a zealously with which he obviously went about all things (Galatians 1:13-14)! Paul didn’t know the definition of moderation; he was either 400% or he was nothing at all!

Now driven and controlled by a fallen mind, this resulted in major hostility against the people of God (Acts 26:9-11). It wasn’t enough that he imprisoned Christians; they had to be killed (Acts 26:10). After his conversion, this would become one of his greatest regrets (1 Corinthians 15:9)!

Paul was saved in 32/33 AD as he was travelling to Damascus in order to persecute the

people of God.

Acts 9:3-4, “And it came about that as [Paul] journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’”

With this, Paul was saved. And so though he bore the name of the first King of Israel who at this time was well honored (Saul), nevertheless he chose rather to be addressed by his Roman name, “Paul”- which means “little,” “small,” or “insignificant.”

Upon his conversion, Paul became a most zealous servant of the Lord (2 Corinthians 11:22-27). God used Paul’s incredible intellect, his passion for truth, his zealous nature, and even his brokenness and humility to bring the glorious message of Christ to the nations! That was Paul. We also read about Silvanus.

Silvanus is better known throughout the book of Acts as “Silas” (Silvanus was his Roman name; Silas his Hebrew name). We don’t know much about this man; what we do know indicates that Silvanus was no light weight. He was a leading member of the church at Jerusalem as well as a prophet (Acts 15:22, 32). He also was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-39). In Acts, Silas was sent by the church at Jerusalem to welcome into fellowship the Gentiles converted through the church of Antioch (Acts 15:22–35). It was after this that he was chosen by Paul to accompany him on his Second Missionary Journey.

After staying behind in Berea as a minister, Silas made his way back to Paul who at the time was in Corinth (Acts 16–18). As such, he is mentioned in relation to Paul’s work in Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:19) and so also was referenced by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 & 2 Thessalonians 1:1. The only other reference to Silas is in 1 Peter 5:12 where we learn that he served as Peter’s amanuensis.

That is Paul and Silvanus. Lastly there was Timothy.

Timothy, whose name means, “One who honors God” is first mentioned in Acts 16 as a disciple and companion of Paul during his Second Missionary Journey. Though he was reared in a God-fearing home (the product of a mixed marriage⁵) we know that it was during Paul’s First Missionary Journey that Timothy was converted.⁶ It was during Paul’s Second Missionary Journey that Timothy joined Paul and Silas (Acts 16:1).⁷

In the providence of God, Timothy would become one of Paul’s closest friends (Philippians 2:20-22) such that the disciple would be requested by Paul to join him at the end of the apostle’s life (2 Timothy 4:9). He was called by Paul: “my fellow worker” (Romans 16:21), “God’s fellow worker” (1 Thessalonians 3:2), and “faithful in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:17). Accordingly, He was

- Sent bearing Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 4:17).
- Sent on behalf of Paul (1 Thessalonians 3).
- With Paul on his last recorded journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4).
- At Paul's side during His imprisonment (Philemon 1).
- Included as the origin of many of Paul's letters (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; etc.)

And yet there was a side to Timothy that many might call weak, I call it being human. He was affectionate (2 Timothy 1:4) but very timid (2 Timothy 1:7ff.), needing not a few personal admonitions from Paul. He was warned by Paul not to give way to youthful lusts (2 Timothy 2:22) and not to be ashamed of the gospel (2 Timothy 1:8). For all his weaknesses, it is significant that no other companion of Paul was so warmly commended for his loyalty.⁸ It truly was fitting that Paul's final epistle should be addressed so affectionately to this reluctant successor! And that brings us to the message of 1 Thessalonians: our identity is inseparably bound to God.

1 Thessalonians 1:1c, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..."

The expression "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" is an odd way of speaking, isn't it? In fact, we see this language throughout the New Testament where Paul or another writer roots the benefits we have as believers to a relationship described as:

- "In Christ."
- "In Jesus."
- "In Christ Jesus."
- "In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Is this just semantics, the way Paul spoke? Or is there something behind this language? There most certainly is something behind this expression! "In God the Father"/"In Jesus" references the "In-Christ" relationship described by the doctrinal phrase, "Union with Christ." Found throughout Scripture, this expression indicates that there is a real union that exists between the child of God and their Lord. It is a literal, real, yet non-material union in which the believer is attached to Christ. Dr. Robert Reymond, commenting on this union put it this way:

The Scriptures make it clear that, though it is spiritual and mystical, this nonmaterial union with Christ is *as real as though there were in fact a literal umbilical cord uniting them*, reaching "all the way" from Christ in heaven to the believer on earth. (Reymond, 1998)

This is why Paul said,

1 Corinthians 6:15: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!"

Think of it in this way. One of the most beloved promises that we read in Scripture is the fact that in and through all things, God is with us. It's what we celebrate during Christmas, "'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23) Accordingly, we comfort our hearts with such passages as these:

Deuteronomy 31:6: "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you."

Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Matthew 28:20: Christ ended the Great Commission with these words, "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." - or perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of this promise...

2 Kings 6:16: before the Lord opened the eyes of Elisha's servant to behold the myriad of angels surrounding and protecting the prophet, Elisha told his servant, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

God is indeed with His people! We never are alone! God is ever and always there!

Yet you must see..., that the Doctrine of Union with Christ takes this promise to another level. Not only is God with us, but because we are "in Christ," we are always with Him (we lit. are attached to Him "in Christ")! Accordingly we must come to know and understand that every calling, promise, benefit, and responsibility exhorted in this epistle is do-able/attainable... because we are connected to Christ! Likewise, every burden proclaimed or warning issued is mitigated and lessened, because we are connected to Christ! Every word of hope or consolation of love is rooted in the In-Christ relationship!

Does God care about you? Is He burdened when you are burdened? Does He rejoice when you rejoice? Yes, because we have become spiritually and mystically united to Christ! That's Our Identity. Notice our foundation.

1 Thessalonians 1:1d, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace."

At first glance this little phrase might seem trite and so something again to be read over

quickly to get to the “good parts” of this epistle! Yet if you had received this epistle from Paul in the first century, the words you read here would have been quite striking!

The ancient world, just like ours, had forms and social conventions which included the way a person was addressed in a letter. And so, for example, if you were Greek, you’d write, “rejoice”/χαίρειν. If you were Jewish, you’d write, “peace”/שָׁלוֹם. Accordingly, to receive a letter which contained this drastic alteration would make you sit up and take notice!

Truly, what Paul wrote here was intended to instruct/encourage/build up the body of Christ; again, this wasn’t the standard greeting of the day! It here is changed which makes this salutation quite significant! “Grace to you and peace” conveys the foundation upon which everything else flows in the Christian life!

Grace to you. Grace is God’s unmerited or undeserved favor. When we think of this favor, the first thing that ought to come to mind is that undeserved favor of God whereby we are saved.

Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”

Yet “grace” in Scripture also is used to describe the *Practical Benefits* which flow from a saving relationship with Christ. It is grace that which enables the Christian to:

- Conduct themselves in “holiness and godly sincerity,” 2 Corinthians 1:12.
- Exercise the spiritual gifts he has been given, Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 1:4ff; 1 Peter 4:10.
- Have “joy” in the midst of trials, 2 Corinthians 8:1-2.
- Have all their needs “sufficiently met,” 2 Corinthians 9:8.
- Glorify Christ, 2 Thessalonians 1:12.
- Have “eternal comfort” and “good hope,” 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17.
- Have “help in time of need,” Hebrews 4:16.
- Be “strengthened and established” even in the midst of incredible suffering, 1 Peter 5:9-10.

Now you must see that these practical benefits do not come in their fulness upon salvation. They are the by-product of something we do as Christians! Paul is writing to ones who had already received the saving grace of God. Thus for Paul to wish that they might enjoy more of that grace indicates that it is NOT something that everyone in Christ receives automatically. Rather, this grace is reserved for those in Christ who do something!

What is that “something”?

John 1:17, "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ."

We begin with the conviction that if ever we are going to know the grace of God it will only be through Christ. Grace is realized only through Him! So we have to be saved! Yet how do we come to know this grace *more and more* in our lives? We read of Stephen, "performing great wonders and signs among the people" because he was "full of grace and power." How did He get such grace? What was it that enabled Him to do such powers?

The answer is found in Acts 7.

Acts 7:55-56, "But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

All that Stephen did and for that matter all that Paul, Peter, the Prophets and Holy Men of Old did was on account of his gazing at the Lord which strengthened/encouraged him in the faith! Now how can we so gaze upon Christ? Through the word! Paul told the Ephesian elders this:

Acts 20:32, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Truly, if we are going to enjoy the benefits of grace, like Stephen, we must gaze upon Christ, in His word! Do this and you will grow more and more in the grace of God! Notice the second foundation upon which we live, move, and have our being is "grace to you and peace."

In the Scripture, the order is never reversed: "peace" always follows "grace."⁹ It is only because of God's saving grace that we can have peace. What is this "peace"?

The Greek world understood this to refer to the "absence of war or strife." But in the Bible the word is used in a positive way. It denotes one or both of the following,

- (1) The STATE of being reconciled with God (Romans 5:1-2), and...
- (2) The resulting CONDITION of contentment, knowing that all is well (Philippians 1:6)!

In this context, the emphasis is on the spiritual well-being that results from gazing upon Christ! In Christ, united to a Sovereign, Omnipotent King, the believer has the assurance that regardless of what is occurring in the world and in his life, all is well for our God reigns! This is what it means in the Psalms where we read this:

Psalms 124:8, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

David knew the character of his God and so took comfort! What was it about God's character that encouraged him? The fact that He is "the maker of heaven and earth!" Solomon wrote:

Proverbs 18:10, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe.”

Trusting in our God, it is as though we have locked ourselves in a strong tower that could never be compromised. Accordingly, we live throughout our lives knowing “peace!” Yet this sounds passive. Know that it actually denotes a life of some passion. Notice the disposition of David:

Psalms 20:7, “Some *boast* in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God.”

So the “peace” spoken about in our passage is the glorious knowledge that in and through all things, God has you in His hand, it is well with your soul, and “nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!” It is upon this foundation, Union with Christ and the Grace/Peace of God- that Paul addressed the Thessalonians and us!

Bibliography

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End Notes

¹ Evidently the church in Antioch approved of the arrangement since Luke tells us that Paul and Silas were “commended by the brothers to the grace of God” before they left (Acts 15:40).

² By the 2nd century it would be called the greatest city of Macedonia.

³ He really was; most epistles contain a note of thanksgiving at the beginning; in this epistle Paul continues to express his gratitude thru chapter 3 (cf. 1:2–5; 2:13; 3:9–13)!!

⁴ cf. Galatians 1:13; Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2, 13-14; 22:4-5; 26:9-11.

⁵ 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15; Acts 16:1.

⁶ 2 Timothy 3:10-11; cf. also 1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Timothy 1:2.

⁷ Paul referred to prophetic utterances which confirmed Timothy’s being set apart for this work (cf. 1 Timothy 1:18; 4:14). At this time, Timothy received a special endowment for his mission, communicated through the laying on of the hands by the elders and Paul (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). And to alleviate any needless opposition from local Jews, Timothy was circumcised before setting out on his journeys (Acts 16:3).

⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:10; Philippians 2:19ff.; 2 Timothy 3:10ff.

⁹ cf. 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Philemon 3; 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:2; 2 Jn. 3; Revelation 1:4.