

TO THE THESSALONIANS

1 Thessalonians 1:1

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace (1 Thess. 1:1).

Everyone can use a little encouragement. When the famous painter Benjamin West was a boy, he decided to paint a picture of his sister while his mother was out. Gathering some bottles of ink and paper, he soon made an awful mess in the house. When his mother returned, she saw the mess but also her son's attempt at making art. Instead of scolding him, she picked up the portrait and declared, "What a beautiful picture of your sister!" and kissed her son. West later recalled, "With that kiss I became a painter."¹

PAUL'S ENCOURAGEMENT OVER THE THESSALONIANS

Encouragement is so valuable that even the apostle Paul needed it. Having recently arrived in the decadent port city of Corinth, Paul could only have been discouraged by his recent experience as an evangelist. Landing in Greece at the city of Philippi, Paul had gained noteworthy converts like Lydia and the Philippian jailor. But after a false arrest and beating, Paul and his colleagues were asked to leave the city (Acts 16:11-40). Moving along the Aegean coast, Paul next came to Thessalonica. After preaching in the synagogue there, some Jews and "a great many" devout Greeks came to faith in Christ (Acts 17:4). This success roused the anger of the Jewish leaders, who raised a disturbance against the Christians, so that Paul once again left town after only a short stay. On Paul went to

¹ Cited from Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 119.

Berea and then Athens, where he preached a famous sermon on Mars Hill but once again had to leave only a small band of converts behind.

While in Athens, Paul sent his young assistant Timothy back to Thessalonica to minister to the believers they had left there (1 Thess. 3:1-2). Shortly after Paul arrived in Corinth, Timothy returned with news that lifted the apostle's spirits: "Now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love... we have been comforted about you through your faith" (1 Thess. 3:6-7). "For now we live," Paul exclaimed, "if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thess. 3:8).

Paul wrote First Thessalonians to express this joy in the believers' faith. Based on information from the Book of Acts, scholars date this letter during the years 50 or 51 A.D., making it one of the oldest New Testament documents, with only Galatians having been written earlier. First Thessalonians is one of Paul's most encouraging writings, expressing his relief and joy, as Leon Morris comments:

[Paul] wrote in exultation of spirit, having just heard the good news of the way in which they were standing fast. He wrote to let them know how thankful he was. He wrote to let them know of his tender concern for them. He wrote to encourage them in the face of the opposition, even persecution, that still confronted them. He wrote to give them fuller information about matters in which their zeal had outdistanced their knowledge. He wrote to put them further along the Christian way that meant so much to him and to them.²

These are matters in which we, too, need to be encouraged and instructed, for which purpose the Holy Spirit inspired First Thessalonians and preserved it for generations of Christians.

PAUL AND FRIENDS

Our letters today normally begin by addressing the recipient: "Dear so and so." First Thessalonians follows the ancient practice of first identifying the author(s): "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy" (1 Thess. 1:1). These opening words remind us that this book is not an abstract theological treatise, but a letter. The teaching

² Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 23.

given here is not intended by highly-trained specialists but for ordinary Christians of all kinds. The letter served to bridge the gap of space between apostle and church for the sake of ministry. The same letter bridges the gap of time between Christians today and the apostles who were charged to provide the foundational teaching of doctrine and practice for the followers of Christ.

It is noteworthy that Paul's salutation includes the names of his two assistants, both of whom had helped found the Thessalonian church. Silvanus is a Greek rendering of Silas, who preached the gospel alongside Paul. Silas is first seen at the Jerusalem Council, where he is described as one of the "leading men" of the Jerusalem Church (Acts. 15:22). After the Jerusalem Council affirmed the acceptance of the Gentile churches, Silas was sent with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with this news. He is identified as a prophet (Acts 15:32), which means that while he was not formally invested with apostolic authority, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to provide revelation from God. After Paul and Barnabas disputed and parted ways, Paul joined up with Silas, whose character and gifts made him a valuable partner in evangelism and church-planting (Acts 15:40). Early in Paul and Silas' first missionary journey together (Paul's third journey), they encountered Timothy at the church of Lystra. Timothy was a young man of good reputation whose mother was a Jewish believer and whose father was Greek. He joined Paul and Silas as an assistant (Acts 16:1-3) and would go on to be Paul's ministerial son and most valued deputy, ultimately succeeding the apostle John as pastor of the strategically important church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3).

Paul's pattern of ministering as part of a team fits the overall New Testament pattern of joint rule by a plurality of spiritually gifted and qualified men. Not only did Paul usually minister as part of a team, but he gave instructions that teams of elders would be placed in charge of local churches after Paul departed (see Tit. 1:5). This practice reflects a general principle that is rooted in Christ's own instruction. Midway in his own ministry, Jesus sent out seventy-two evangelists, "two by two" throughout Galilee (Lk. 10:1).

The benefits of this team approach in ministry include emotional, physical, and spiritual support, a balancing of complementary gifts, and a combination of fellowship and accountability that reduces the likelihood of a leader falling into sin. Moreover, the modeling of

camaraderie among a ministry team encourages similar fellowship in the church and encourages all believers to participate in the work of spreading the gospel and building the body of Christ. Although Paul is plainly the principle author of this letter, we can imagine him consulting his partners and praying with them as they communicated their joint concern together for this fledgling church.

The leading author of First Thessalonians was the apostle Paul. Formerly known as “Saul of Tarsus,” this titanic figure of the New Testament is first encountered in the Bible as one of the chief persecutors of the followers of Christ. Saul was so zealous to oppose the gospel that he journeyed from Jerusalem to Damascus to root out the church there. Along the way, he was confronted by a vision of the exalted Lord Jesus, who called him to both faith and apostleship (Acts 9:15-16). With his conversion, Saul’s name was changed to Paul, meaning “little”, perhaps to convey the humility to which the proud Pharisee was called in service to Christ.

As the leading apostle to the Gentiles, Paul wrote thirteen biblical books, comprising just under a quarter of the New Testament. In most of his letters, Paul identifies himself as “an apostle” of Jesus Christ. The fact that he did not use this designation in First Thessalonians probably reflects how recently he had ministered there, so that his apostolic credentials were well known and accepted.

An apostle is “one who is sent,” and Christ’s apostles were sent to preach the gospel and form the initial churches. Most importantly, the resurrected Lord Jesus granted them authority to teach and rule on his behalf, empowering them with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:13; Acts 1:8). Peter O’Brien states, “As an apostle [Paul] has the authority to proclaim the gospel in both oral and written form, as well as to establish and build up churches.”³

Christ’s apostles consisted of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, with Matthias added to replace the betrayer Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:16-26). Acts 1:22 establishes the qualifications that an apostle must have been personally discipled by Jesus and be an eye-witness of the resurrection. These qualifications show that there can be no apostles

³ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 84.

today. Moreover, the work of the apostles in founding the church and establishing its doctrine was completed during the initial era of the church. Paul fulfilled the criterion for the apostolic office by means of his conversion and commissioning on the Damascus Road. What Jesus said to the twelve just before his ascension into heaven equally applies to Paul, “You will receive power... You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Paul’s writing, like that of the other apostles, is the exalted Christ’s own Word as the Holy Spirit inspired these official messengers from Christ to his church.

THE CHURCH IN GOD AND IN CHRIST

After identifying the senders, ancient letters stated the recipients. Paul addressed this letter, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:1).

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which has the general meaning of an assembly. In the Greek society of Paul’s audience, this word evoked images of the great democratic assemblies in which citizens met for shared rule. More generally, an *ekklesia* was any body joined together for political, social, or other purposes. The Christian church is a unique kind of assembly that has turned to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s later writings will convey the distinctiveness of the church by referring to his readers as “saints,” that is, holy ones who have been separated by God for faith, godliness, ministry and worship in Christ’s name. John Lillie comments: “Called out... from the surrounding mass, whether of unbelieving Jews or of heathen idolaters, and quickened individually with a new life, they were, as a church, incorporate one with another, set apart and furnished for holy service, and consecrated to a glorious destiny.”⁴

Most important to the meaning of “church” is the Old Testament background of Israel as the assembly of the Lord. The Greek translation of the Old Testament commonly used in Paul’s day (the *Septuagint*) used *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal*, which designated the gathering of Israel as the body of God’s people. Thus,

⁴ John Lillie, *Lectures on Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Tentmaker Classic Commentaries (Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent, UK: 1860, reprint 2007), 22.

Paul sees the Christians to whom he is writing as an extension of the ancient people of God who were redeemed in the exodus and called out as a pilgrim nation to serve and worship the Lord. Gregory Beale observes: “In this light, the Thessalonian church was part of the true Israelite congregation of God’s people who had been established by Messiah Jesus’ latter-day redemptive work.”⁵

Seeing it as the great assembly of God’s people throughout history highlights the church’s importance to the Christian faith and life. To be a Christian is to be part of the church, both locally and universally. The church provides the communal context for Christian evangelism, discipleship, worship, and ministry. When Christians are saved out of the world they are saved into Christ’s church, which serves “to establish group boundaries between saved and unsaved humanity.”⁶

Paul wrote his letter to a group of Christians at a particular place and time. His original audience was “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1). Christian life and ministry will always have a local feel and flavor. There is a tendency today, however, to exaggerate these differences when it comes to the witness of the gospel. When we think of Paul’s various places of ministry, we should note that Paul’s strategy varied little, and his doctrine not at all, despite the wide variety of cultural and social contexts in which he served. Paul explained to the Corinthians that he came to preach “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). In a city with a large Jewish population, like Thessalonica, Paul would begin preaching in the synagogue, proving from the Old Testament that Jesus was the promised Messiah. In a city without many Jews, like Athens, Paul still preached in order to declare Jesus as Savior and Lord. After his preaching had caused conversions, Paul then disciplined and organized a local church to continue preaching the message of Christ.

As the chief city of the northern Greek region of Macedonia, Thessalonica was a strategically important church, with probably a

⁵ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 42.

⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 71.

quarter million residents. Since its main street was the primary East-West highway of the Roman Empire, a strong church in Thessalonica would be well situated to spread the gospel to others. This strategic potential did not cause Paul to change his ministry approach, but it may account in part for the interest and attention he showed to this important church.

Paul's audience may have been located in Thessalonica, but their identity came from God. Paul thus refers to it as "the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1). The worldly city of Thessalonica had proved to be inhospitable to the Christians, causing Paul and his friends to leave and exposing the church to persecution (see Acts 17:1-9). How encouraging it was for them to know that their life was rooted in God himself, who through Jesus Christ had become their loving Father. Thessalonica might reject them but God had accepted them as children.

Thessalonica might vilify and persecute them, but God the Father would provide for and save them. Paul's language of being "in God the Father," emphasizes that the church dwells in God, "as not merely the ground of her existence, but as her fortress and high tower, and her eternal home."⁷ Although these Thessalonians are "newborn Christians, freshly converted from either Judaism or paganism," though their beliefs and "moral standards have been recently adopted," and though "they are being sorely tested by persecution," Paul is still confident of their perseverance "because he knows it is God's church, and because he has confidence in God."⁸

In addition to their grounding in God the Father, the church is also in "the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1). By placing Jesus alongside God the Father, Paul emphasizes the full deity of Christ. This expression, penned a mere twenty years after Christ's death and resurrection, identifies the deity of Christ as an essential article of faith for believers. Paul further notes the deity of Christ by referring to him as "Lord." The title *kurios*, or *Lord*, was used in the Greek

⁷ John Lillie, *Lectures on Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 23.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 26-7.

translation of the Old Testament for *Yahweh*, the personal and covenant name God had revealed to his people. This divine name is now given to Jesus. As Lord, Jesus is sovereign over his people and church. As *Christ*, which means *Messiah*, or *anointed One*, Jesus is the Savior who has atoned for our sins and reconciled us to God. With Jesus as Lord and Savior, the church is to respond obediently to Christ's Word through his apostles, rely on his saving work as the ground of our blessings from God, and draw near to him as the source of our vitality and joy. Since the church is rooted, saved, and enlivened "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," then the way for a church to most powerfully experience the life and blessings of Christian salvation is to be a God-centered and Christ-captivated church.

PEACE TO YOU

Having identified himself and his partners and then having biblically defined his audience, Paul concludes his salutation with an expression of divine blessing. Writing out of the encouragement they have given him, Paul encourages the Thessalonians with God's rich blessing: "grace to you and peace" (1 Thess. 1:1). Paul interjects theology into all of his greetings, and here he puts notes the two great themes of salvation: grace and peace.

When we think of the peace of Christ's salvation, we should first think of receiving *peace with God*. The Bible shows that mankind's greatest need is to be restored to a relationship of peace with the God we have alienated and offended by our sin. The great problem of humanity is not caused by illiteracy, disease, or bad government. Our true problem is that having rejected God's rule we are at war with the sovereign Creator. Paul writes that "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7, NIV). As a result of our guilt for breaking God's law, all men and women are justly condemned under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-2). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul explains (Rom. 3:23), with this dreadful result: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Given this great problem of alienation and condemnation, our great need is the peace with God that Jesus came to provide. The angels proclaimed at his birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Lk. 2:14). Jesus

reconciled sinners to God by dying to pay the penalty of our sins, so that through faith we may be justified before God. Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Along with peace *with* God, Christ ministers the peace *of* God in our hearts. The world thinks of peace as the cessation of hostilities: we sign peace treaties and the fighting temporarily stops. The hatred is still there, however, the causes of strife are unrelieved, and no unity or true love arises. But Jesus gives a true and abiding inward peace, producing unity and harmony among men and women. Jesus told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn. 14:27).

The biblical idea of peace is designated by the Hebrew word *shalom*, the deep and abiding peace that results when people are right with God. Leon Morris has defined it as “a flourishing state of soul.”⁹ This is the peace about which David rejoiced in Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd,” he sang. “I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell with the Lord forever.”

This peace comes only through the resurrection power sent by the exalted, reigning Jesus Christ, who restores us to God and gives us his own peace. Paul says, “He himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Do you know peace with God? Are you conscious of his favor and love? Do you love him in return, longing to do his will and know him better? Peace with God comes by confessing your sin to God, trusting Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for your salvation, and surrendering your life to “the God of peace,” who will “sanctify you completely” through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

GRACE TO YOU

⁹ J. Philip Arthur, *Patience of Hope: 1 and 2 Thessalonians Simply Explained*, Wellwyn Commentary Series (Ross-shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1997), 22.

It is a wonderful thing to know that we can have peace with God. It is especially encouraging to know that this peace comes as a gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This is why Paul blesses the Thessalonians with the greeting, "grace to you and peace." It is by grace that we receive the peace of God through Jesus Christ.

The first way for us to think about grace is as a description of what God is like. Grace is often defined as God's unmerited favor. This is true, but it does not go far enough. Grace is God's favor to us when we have merited his condemnation. We have earned God's hatred and wrath, yet he causes us to be forgiven and made his precious children. God gives that which is most precious to himself, his only Son, that he might remove our guilt on the cross, reconciling us to his love. The measure of God's grace is the costliness of his gift, and in the giving of Jesus to die for our sins God has shown himself to abound in grace for sinners.

God's grace finds expression in an unstoppable plan of grace for our salvation. Paul refers to this plan in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." This states that God graciously chose his people in advance (see Eph. 1:4), sent Jesus into the world to achieve their salvation, and then when the apostles came to preach that good news, God's grace granted them to believe and be saved. The entirety of salvation is the work of God's grace. How encouraging it is to the beleaguered Christian today, like the Thessalonians of old, to know that our salvation is the free gift of God, according to his sovereign and eternal plan of grace! We may therefore rely utterly on God's grace, giving God all the glory for our blessings in Christ. Though we have all sinned, believers "are justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

Grace describes God's unmerited favor and his way of saving sinners. Finally, grace is God's power working in us for newness of life. Later in this letter, Paul will exhort the Thessalonian believers to live in a holy manner that pleases the Lord. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification," Paul says, "that you abstain from sexual immorality" and "that no one transgress and wrong his brother" (1 Thess. 4:3-6). They were no longer to live in the sinful and harmful manner they

previously had lived as unbelievers, and which their society, like ours, had come think is inevitable and unavoidable. How can morally depraved sinners change so as to live in a holy and loving way? Paul says at the end of First Thessalonians that the God of peace will “sanctify you completely” (1 Thess. 5:23). What an encouragement it is to know, Paul says, the power of God’s grace to empower us to live in a way that pleases the Lord and brings blessing to us.

IN THE FACE OF CHRIST

I mentioned Benjamin West, who was encouraged to be a painter by his mother’s kiss. Something similar occurred to Mercedes Ruehl when she attended her first Broadway play as a little girl. The star actress on the stage noticed young Mercedes gazing at her with adoring eyes, and looked back directly at the girl, holding her gaze for several moments. Mercedes considered that her invitation to fulfill her dream to be an actress and with that encouragement she went on to be one of the few stage performers to win both the Academy Award and the Tony Award in the same year.

If you will look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Bible, you will gain from him the greatest encouragement as God’s grace invites you into his heavenly peace. For when you look to Jesus, the “star” of all history looks back to you with grace, revealing himself as the Savior who died for your sins. Jesus invites you to believe in him, to enter the church over which he is Lord, and, encouraged by his grace, to extend his offer of peace to the sinful, broken world in which you live.