



A Greeting of Grace and Peace

Today we begin our devotional journey through Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. Before digging into the opening greeting, it would seem some introductory comments are in order to help us understand the circumstances that occasioned the writing of this letter, quite possibly Paul's first canonical letter included in the New Testament.

The city of Thessalonica is a seaport on the northeastern coast of Greece. Paul first visited the city during his second missionary journey. He and Silas had been traveling through modern day central Turkey, encouraging the congregations that Paul and Barnabas had founded on their first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13:13-14:28; 15:36). As they traveled the Holy Spirit added young pastor Timothy and Luke, the physician, to their ministry team, and guided them to bring the gospel of Jesus across the Aegean Sea into Europe (cf. Acts 16:1-10).

But although the Lord had led them to a new mission field they were not met with open arms and overwhelming visible success. Not long after arriving at the city of Philippi Paul and Silas were seized by a mob, beaten, and jailed for preaching about Jesus and driving a demon out of a slave girl (cf. Acts 16:16-24). The Lord miraculously freed them from prison, but they were forced to leave the city.

Things started off on a better note in Thessalonica however. Unlike at Philippi, there was a synagogue, where Paul preached for three consecutive Sabbaths, and some Jews and many Gentiles believed, but soon thereafter the Jews became jealous. We're not told exactly why--possibly they didn't like that the Gentiles were admitted into the church on equal footing as they without any preconditions. These formed a mob and a riot broke out in the city so that Paul and Silas had to escape during the night.

Evidently it weighed on Paul's heart that he had been forced to leave so abruptly and these new believers were left in such a religiously and politically hostile environment. Months later Paul wrote this letter (most likely from Corinth--cf. Acts 18:5) with these concerns on his mind, encouraging them to stand firm in Christian faith and living even as they endured fierce persecution.

So much by way of introduction. Now on to Paul's greeting:

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

Paul begins his letter by identifying himself and his ministry companions as the senders and the Thessalonians as the recipients. He calls them "the church," meaning the congregation, the gathering of true believers, who are "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Through faith they were connected to God the Father and God the Son (and although unmentioned here, the Spirit as well). In the gospels Jesus repeatedly reminds us that he is the only way to the Father (Jn. 14:6), and no one can have God for their own if they do not give equal honor and glory to the Son (Jn. 5:23). Likewise, the Apostle John tells us that whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also and is in a right relationship with him (1 John

2:23). All this means that the church at Thessalonica, the church at Ascension, Plymouth, or anywhere else in the world, is not a matter of buildings or membership lists, it consists of all those who believe in Jesus.

As such, all believers in particular—and really all people, whether they know it or not—are the blessed recipients of God’s grace. In the first-century Roman world the standard letter began with *charin* (“greetings”), but under inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in the light of God’s infinite mercy made available to all the world at the cross of Christ, Paul cleverly tweaks his greetings to *charis* (“grace”). How much better and more powerful than mere human sentiment and interpersonal ethos is “grace” over “greetings”! The latter says, “Hello!” but the former saves a world of sinners from hell! What an excellent model Paul provides for our communication! How appropriate for us to always do whatever we can, whenever we can—in our conversations, phone calls, emails, and text messages—to remind one another to focus our attention the free favor of God, from whom all things come and have their being!

Paul also wanted the Thessalonians to have peace. *Shaloam* (“peace”) was the traditional Jewish greeting and most fitting in these circumstances because this congregation was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Yet humanly speaking peace may have been the last thing on their minds. The membership of the synagogue in Thessalonica where Paul had preached Christ had been split apart—and quite likely familial bonds and friendships right along with it—because some of the Jews became jealous (cf. Acts 17:5). Our Lord Jesus tells us to expect division (Luke 12:51ff) and persecution (John 15:20) wherever his name is preached, and the Thessalonians were experiencing the fulfillment of his words firsthand. As mentioned previously they were not only enduring persecution from their former fellow-worshippers but the general anger of the populace and the city officials as well.

However, the peace of which Paul was writing is not of this world. It is a peace that comes from God through Christ independent of our earthly circumstances. Through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus God’s righteous anger over our sins is not suspended, it’s gone. We have peace with God—the peace of forgiveness, the peace of his presence, the peace of his protection, the peace of his eternal purpose in our temporary pain, the peace of life forever to come! All the fires of persecution, pain, guilt, and ruined relationships are put out by the cool raincloud of God’s abiding peace.

Grace and peace from our God and Savior are yours. Yours to soak up and appropriate for yourself, and yours to share!

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, I am a sinner who needs your grace in Jesus today and every day. Keep me ever mindful that you love me just because you do, and not because I have earned or ever could deserve your favor. Fill me also with your unshakable peace, which you established in Christ. So that whether my day be smooth sailing or a storm-tossed sea, my heart can be still in you. Amen.