

The Church of the Servant King

www.cotsk.org

Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians

(SB_1Thess_Lsn2_Chap1)

THE GREETING (1:1)

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.

Silvanus (Silvanus is the Roman equivalent and used by Paul; Luke uses Silas) and Timothy were Paul's primary companions on his second missionary journey during which the church at Thessalonica came into existence (Acts 15:40). We know more about Timothy's background than we do about Silas' background.

Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15). Paul probably led Timothy to faith in Christ on the first missionary journey (1 Tim. 1:2; Acts 13-14). Timothy's name means "honored by God" and is probably a reflection of the influence of his God-fearing mother Eunice.

Nevertheless, the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* has some interesting comments about Silas's background and ministry.

The second name included among the writers is that of Silas. The spelling found in v. 1 is actually "Silvanus," probably the Roman transliteration of the Jewish name given the Greek transliteration "Silas." In Acts, Luke consistently uses "Silas" (Acts 15:22, 27, 32, 34, 40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14, 15; 18:5); Paul always uses "Silvanus" (2Cor 1:19; 2Thess 1:1). At any rate, this colleague of Paul was most likely a Jew by birth, a gifted prophet, and highly esteemed among the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 15:22, 32). That he inclined toward the Hellenistic wing of Palestinian Christianity is supported on several grounds, such as, his hearty concurrence with the Jerusalem Council's decision concerning Gentile believers (Acts 15:22-32), his Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37), and his being chosen as Paul's fellow worker on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40-18:6). After the mission in Corinth, we find no further word of Silas's connection with Paul. He probably became associated with Peter, especially in the composition and sending of 1 Peter (1 Peter 5:12).¹

As we observed in our previous study, Silas and Timothy had remained in Berea after Paul left Berea for Athens. Silas and Timothy eventually linked up with Paul in Athens; however, almost immediately, Paul sent Silas to Philippi and Timothy to Thessalonica.

After visiting Thessalonica, Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth. Timothy brought news of conditions in the church there (3:1-2, 6). The "church" (Gr. *ekklesia* – ἐκκλησία) is used here as a reference to all of the assemblies of the believers in the city of Thessalonica as is the case in Romans 16:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:2.

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998), electronic version.

First and 2 Thessalonians are the only Pauline Epistles in which Paul did not elaborate on his name or the names of his fellow writers. This probably implies that his relationship with the believers in Thessalonica was stable.

This point is reinforced by the fact that Paul opens almost all of his letters with words to the effect of “Paul, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The only exceptions are Philipians (A.D. 60-62), 1 & 2 Thessalonians (A.D. 51-52), and Philemon (A.D. 60). The content and audience of these three letters indicate that the recipients had already accepted his apostolic credentials. In the other letters where Paul mentions his apostleship, the content is either in the nature of an admonishment or it addresses a doctrinal issue that was likely to be controversial – such as in Galatians which we have previously studied.

Grace to You and Peace

Paul opens his letter to the believers in Thessalonica in similar fashion with these words as he did to the believers in Galatia. These words are packed with meaning. Paul did not include them in the same sense that we ask people “how ‘ya doin’?” in passing without really wanting to know the answer.

Everywhere that Paul traveled, the sufficiency of salvation by grace alone and through faith alone was being challenged by a false gospel that promised bondage and slavery to works and effort and deeds that could never provide one assurance of salvation – similar to the more modern-day Calvinist understanding of “Perseverance” of the saints in the TULIP formulation of that system’s soteriology.

If one is not confidently at rest in the fact that they are eternally saved by grace alone, then how can one have peace?

Therefore, Paul wishes them “grace” and “peace” from the very start of his letter. These words would have immediately tweaked the ears of the listeners and highlighted the lack of any “grace” and “peace” in the message of the Judaizers who had chased Paul and his team from Thessalonica.

Furthermore, these words had resonance with Jew and Gentile alike. They would have reminded Jews especially and Gentiles who had a God-fearing or proselyte background of Yahweh’s words in Numbers 6:22-26.

22 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **23** “Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, ‘Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them:
24 The LORD bless you, and keep you;
25 The LORD make His face shine on you,
And be **gracious** to you;
26 The LORD lift up His countenance on you,
And give you **peace**.’
27 “So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them.” (Num 6:22-26)

Finally, it is very important to note that Paul’s greeting presumes the deity of Jesus Christ. The reference to “God the Father” and “the Lord Jesus Christ” is combined by the use of one preposition translated “in” and the connective conjunction translated “and.”

THE EXAMPLE OF THE BELIEVERS OF THESSALONICA (1:2-10)

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and

Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved of God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 you also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Verse	Phrase	Notes
2	"We give thanks to God always..."	Paul's thanksgiving was ceaseless. From Paul's perspective of life, there was nothing more gratifying or fulfilling than seeing the people (Gentiles) whom he had led to Christ still pursuing the Lord in spite of the very visible and obvious attacks from the Jewish unbelievers.
3	"...work of <u>faith</u> and labor of <u>love</u> and steadfastness of <u>hope</u> ..."	Paul highlights three characteristics of these believers – faith, love and hope. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Faith</u> – they had turned to faith in Jesus and were eternally saved • <u>Love</u> – they demonstrated their faith through their love of the brethren • <u>Hope</u> – they endured tribulation and persecution from unbelievers (primarily Jews) because of their faith; yet, their confident expectation in the Lord's deliverance allowed them to endure.
4	"...knowing, brethren beloved of God, His choice of you..."	God's choice of these believers occurred in eternity past prior to the creation of the first man. We have studied at length the subject of predestination and election in another series, so I will only reference the Scriptural understanding that was supported in that series. In eternity past, God elected all those who would choose to place their trust in Christ for their eternal deliverance from condemnation and receipt of live everlasting.
5	"...for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction..."	Paul's message was presented in humility since Paul considered himself the chief of sinners. So, if there was any transforming power in Paul's message, it was not because of who he was or what he had accomplished in life or his reputation or standing. Rather, it was because the power is in the Truth. <p>There is a convincing role that is played by the Holy Spirit in the life of an unbeliever who is positive and receptive to the Truth of the Gospel.</p> <p>The message of these men was presented with full assurance on their part of the validity of its Truth. When it comes to the Gospel of Salvation, there can be no compromise or uncertainty.</p>
5	"...just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."	The verbal testimony of these men was bolstered by the humble and non-imposing quality of their lives. They did not go to the Thessalonians seeking money or wealth or fame. They went simply to proclaim the truth. When Paul wrote this letter, he was residing in Corinth and supporting himself as a tent maker. <p>You may have heard the expression that "it is not the man,</p>

		but the message.” That is true in the sense that a man’s personality or physical characteristics is not the ultimate determiner of the validity of the message. However, to the extent that a man’s character is not consistent with his message is the extent to which the Lord cannot use him.
8	“...you became an example...” “...your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything...”	The believers in Thessalonica gladly received the gospel message even though it meant much suffering and persecution for them. During the 1 st Century A.D., suffering was taken for granted as a fact if one was to embrace the Truth regarding salvation by faith alone through Jesus’ propitiatory death alone. Their faith became an example for the other believers of Macedonia. These believers gave financially out of their own poverty to the believers in Corinth (2 Cor 8:1-8).
9	“...how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God...”	This phrase indicates that there were a number of Gentile believers among the converts in Thessalonica since idolatry was a Gentile vice and not a Jewish vice.
10	“...Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come...”	The meaning of this phrase is heavily debated among theologians of all persuasions. (See “Examples of Differences” section below). Briefly, if Paul had made no other eschatological references in this epistle, then those (amillennialists or premillennialists) who believe this to be a general reference to God’s judgment of unbelievers at the end of human history would perhaps a stronger basis. However, references to God’s “wrath” toward unbelievers does occur in Scripture and when it occurs such as the trumpet and vial judgments of Revelation 9 and following, there has been direct opposition toward God and alignment with Satan’s purpose of keeping God from fulfilling His greater redemptive purpose in history. These unbelievers have rejected the provision of God’s love, i.e. His Son, and have become so hardened that they are aligned with Satan. For examples of references to this period of wrath, see Matt 3:7; 24:21; Luke 21:23; Rev 6:16, 17; 7:14; 20:11-15. However, as we shall see, Paul will spend considerable space writing about the period of the Tribulation (4:13-18; 5:1-11). Therefore it seems that this is the first reference to that period in the epistle (cf. 2:16; 5:9). In 1 Thessalonians, as we shall see later in more detail, Paul presents a pre-Tribulation Rapture position.

Examples of Differences

For example, William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 57, an amillennialist, believed Paul was speaking generally. However, Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, pp. 40-41, and *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 64, also an amillennialist, wrote that Paul referred to a specific event, the judgment associated with the second coming of Christ. In the amillennial scheme of things this judgment will end the present age. Premillennialists also disagree with one another on this point. John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 17, took Paul’s words as a general reference. However, D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 71, also a premillennialist, believed

Paul had in mind the Tribulation, which for a pretribulationist is the next great outpouring of God's wrath in history.²

How will God keep believers "away from" His wrath as He pours it out during the tribulation period? Pretribulationists say He will do so by taking us to heaven before the Tribulation begins. Midtribulationists say we will enter the Tribulation, but God will take us to heaven before the outpouring of His wrath that will occur only during the second half of the Tribulation. Posttribulationists believe we will go through the entire Tribulation and God will protect us from the outpouring of His wrath during that time.³

² Taken from Dr. Thomas Constable, *Notes on the Book of Revelation*,
www.soniclight.com

³ Ibid.