

The Church of the Servant King

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

(SB_2Thess_Chapter 1)

Paul’s comments in chapter 1 of 2 Thessalonians are focused upon commending the believers for their past progress in the faith. In so doing, Paul contrasts their destiny with that of their persecutors – those who have denied Paul’s gospel and in their denial, they persecute those of “the Way.” The basic outline of chapter would look something like the following:

- Greeting (1:1-2)
- Paul’s Thankfulness for Their Faithfulness (1:3-5)
- Assurance that God’s Justice Will Respond (1:6-10)
- Paul’s Prayer for Their Glorification (1:11-12)

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12

Greeting (1:1-2)

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verses 1 and 2 are almost identical to 1 Thessalonians 1:1. You may recall from our study of 1 Thessalonians that Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15) and Paul led Timothy to faith on his first missionary journey.

Silas was most likely a Jew by birth, a gifted prophet, and highly esteemed among the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 15:22, 32). He was probably of the Hellenistic wing of Palestinian Christianity – an observation that seems to be supported by such things 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) – a journey deep into Gentile dominated regions of the Roman empire. 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

Paul opens his 2nd letter to the believers in Thessalonica in similar fashion with these words as he did to the believers in Galatia and his 1st letter to the believers in Thessalonica. These words are packed with meaning.

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 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.

Point of Interpretation: The Judaizers promoted a distorted gospel and a distorted understanding of grace. Gentile unbelievers would not be eternally saved if they accepted the Judaizer’s gospel. Gentile believers were being confused by the message of the Judaizers which was leading to ineffective witness, lack of assurance, lack of grace-orientation, and a reversion to a Mosaic Law-based rule of life. (This was tantamount to a rejection of God’s plan since

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

effectively, it was an attempt to hold onto a Jew-centric administration instead of realizing that the mantle had been passed to a Gentile-centric administration in accordance with God's sovereign will and due to en masse rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Paul addresses this point of God's sovereign prerogative to temporarily set aside Israel and the Jew as central to the administration of His purpose on earth in Romans 9-11 – a passage, or at least portions thereof, commonly misinterpreted and applied and used in an attempt to support a Calvinistic view of individual election of the believer of the present dispensation).

Principle: There is an inverse correlation between works-orientation and grace-orientation in regard to the believer's understanding of Phase 1 realities.

Principle: There is a direct correlation between grace-orientation and the "peace" that surpasses all understanding that is a potential for the believer.

Principle: If the believer does not fully comprehend grace, then the believer will not experience rest and assurance.

Application: 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" – "to the church of the Thessalonians **in** God our Father **and** the Lord Jesus Christ." These predominately Gentile believers of Thessalonica have been brought into union with God the Father **and** Jesus Christ through their non-meritorious faith in Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice that satisfied God's righteous requirements.

Paul's Thankfulness for Their Faithfulness (1:3-5) ²

3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; 4 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all

² In the Greek text, verses 3-10 constitute one sentence.

your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. 5 This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

In his earlier epistle to the Thessalonians Paul had urged these young believers to grow in faith and to increase in love (1 Thess. 3:12; 4:10). He now rejoiced that they were doing both of these things.

12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and **abound in love for one another**, and for all people, just as we also do for you. (1 Thess 3:12)

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 **for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia but we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.** (1 Thess 4:9-10)

In the *New American Standard Version*, we read Paul's statement as "*we ought to give thanks.*" The Greek word used is *opheilo* (Gr. ὀφείλω). This verb provides us with insight into how Paul viewed his duty to God. This word "implies an exclusive personal responsibility."³ Paul's motivation was rooted in the gratitude he had for his eternal salvation and the price paid by the One whom he had once so opposed. Therefore, this statement ("we ought to give thanks") could more appropriately be translated "*we must give thanks*" or "*we are compelled to give thanks*" (cf. 2:13). Paul was not saying he knew he should give thanks but did not, but he was obligated to give thanks for the rapid rate of growth by these believers.

Principle: One's perseverance in ministry to others is directly correlated to one's sense of gratitude and sense of personal responsibility toward God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as one walks in the power of the Holy Spirit and Truth. (There is no other reason Paul persevered in ministry given the continual opposition he faced).

Principle: The believer's appreciation of the personal sacrifices made by those who persevere in ministry is directly related to the believer's continuing and daily sense of gratitude for all that God has provided through Christ.

Paul began each of his epistles except Galatians with thanksgiving for the spiritual growth and advance of his readers. Paul describes their faith as "*greatly enlarged.*" The word translated "greatly enlarged" is the Greek word *hyperauxanei* (Gr. ὑπεραυξάνει). This compound word only occurs in this verse in the Greek New Testament. It means to "*increase beyond measure*" or "*to grow to the limit.*"⁴ This was not a rate of growth that was common or the norm. It was unusual growth. The Thessalonians were a model congregation. This uncommon rate of growth was not true of just select, distinguished individual members of the body – it was true of every one of them. Paul frequently mentions the close connection between "faith" and "love" (1 Cor 16:13, 14; 2 Cor 8:7; Gal 5:6; Eph 1:15; 3:17; 6:23; 1 Thess 3:6).

13 Be on the alert, stand firm in the **faith**, act like men, be strong. 14 Let all that you do be done in **love**. (1 Cor 16:13, 14)

7 But just as you abound in everything, in **faith** and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the **love** we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious

³ Frank E. Gaebelin, general editor, *Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, electronic edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976-1992).

⁴ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996.

work also. (2 Cor 8:7) *[The context is Paul's teaching on giving – the “gracious work” to which he refers and one of the principles that emerges from Paul's teaching is that how we handle material wealth and blessing is a barometer of our spiritual health].*

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but **faith** working through **love**. (Gal 5:6)

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the **faith** in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your **love** for all the saints. (Eph 1:15)

17 So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through **faith**; and that you, being rooted and grounded in **love**. (Eph 3:17)

23 Peace be to the brethren, and **love** with **faith**, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 6:23)

6 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, longing to see us just as we also long to see you. (1 Thess 3:6)

Because their growth had come amidst persecution, Paul cited the Thessalonians to other churches as an example to follow. Paul would have been (and was) extremely encouraged by the continuance in the faith of these believers since the easier course would have been to maintain their status quo and avoid the persecution that attended their newfound allegiance to this radical gospel that departed from 2000 years of tradition. These believers had nothing to gain in this world by accepting the gospel and teaching of Paul. Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus stated the principle on more than one occasion that those who are attached to the things of this world and its riches have the most difficulty accepting and pursuing the things of God.

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt 6:19-21)

23 And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matt 19:23-24)

"Faith" usually refers to faith in someone or something, but often it means "faithfulness" (e.g., Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22; Titus 2:10), i.e. the application of Truth to one's circumstances and the demonstration of that application through a decision or an action. In view of the persecutions that these believers were enduring (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; Acts 17:5-9), it has the latter meaning here. This interpretation is reinforced by the combination of the word "faith" with "persevere."

Late in Paul's ministry, just prior to his execution, Paul addresses the concept of the faithfulness of the believer and its relationship between Phase 1, 2 and 3 of the believer's existence.

11 It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him [Phase 1 – positional; Phase 2 – experiential], we will also live with Him [Phase 3 is the primary focus]; 12 if we endure [Phase 2 faithfulness], we will also reign with Him [Phase 3]; if we [believers] deny Him [Phase 2], He also will deny us [Phase 3 rewards for the believer]; 13 if we are faithless [Phase 2], He remains

faithful, for He cannot deny Himself [*Phase 3 – eternal security of the believer in spite of unfaithfulness in time*]. (2 Tim 2:11-13)

In verse 5, what did Paul mean when he stated – “This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering?” Paul was not trying to indicate that these believers deserved this suffering and that it was God's judgment upon them. Rather, the context, as indicated by the following verses (vv. 6-10) reveal that Paul was focusing his thoughts and the thoughts of his readers upon the truths related to God's essence and His ultimate judgment of unbelievers at the time of His coming. Like Jesus, when we are focused upon the Truth related to what is set before us, we are empowered with that Truth and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to face persecutions and trials in time due to our faith.

Assurance that God's Justice Will Respond (1:6-10)

6 For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, 8 dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed.

This passage is a reference to Christ's coming at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Ps. 2:1-9; Matt. 25:31) – not the Rapture. There is no judgment of unbelievers that occurs at the Rapture of the Church Age Body of Christ.

When Jesus returns at His 2nd Advent to establish the Messianic, millennial kingdom of God on earth, the unbelieving earth-dwellers will be punished.⁵ Many passages, too numerous to cite, allude to this fact (e.g. Ps. 2; Ezek 20:33-38; Joel 3:1-2, 12; Zeph 3:8; Zech 14:1-19; Matt 25:31-46).

At that time, unbelieving earth-dwellers will be killed and ultimately suffer "eternal destruction" (not annihilation). Their fate is eternal separation from the person of Christ and the manifestation of His glory (i.e., eternal death). This is Paul's most explicit reference to the eternal duration of unbelievers' judgment in all his writings.

This passage highlights why it is so important for the believer to understand eschatology and, in particular, prophecy. God insured that we were provided enough revelation regarding the outcome of the events associated with the end times to provide us with confidence that we are on the winning side as we deal with pressure, persecution and perhaps even the temporary defeat of death at the hands of unbelievers. Knowledge of the ultimate outcome of the events of human history provides us with some of the relevant Truth that encourages us to endure and respond to adversity in time appropriately. This is why Paul and the writer of Hebrews later quotes Moses (Deut 32:35 cf. Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30).

⁵ It is important to note the distinction between the slaughter of unbelievers in their physical bodies at the 2nd Advent of Christ and the eternal separation from God and Christ that occurs when unbelievers are judged in their resurrection state at the beginning of the eternal state. These are two separate events separated by 1000 years. Contrast Revelation 19:11-21 (events associated with the 2nd Advent) with 20:11-15 (the Great White Judgment Throne after the end of the 1000 year reign and the defeat of Satan and his allies at the end of human history).

35 'Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them.'
(Deut 32:35)

19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. (Rom 12:19)

30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY " And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." (Heb 10:30)

A knowledge and understanding of eschatology has always been an essential component of the body of Truth to be possessed by the believer so that the inevitable pressure and suffering of this life is addressed with the poise, confidence and assurance that is characteristic of God's people. We are victors in Christ in more ways than one and our lives should reflect that reality. God understood the importance of insuring that we have an understanding of eschatology; otherwise, it would not be such a prominent component of Scripture. Consider how important it was to David who endured persecution that typified what would later be endured by Jesus and Paul (e.g. Psa 37, 40, 46, 52).

Paul's Prayer for Their Glorification (1:11-12)

11 To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,
12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's prayers for these believers were ceaseless – "we pray for you always." Paul truly cared for and labored for these new believers. There is no implication of uncertainty of their ultimate acceptance by the Lord; rather, Paul is concerned with the testimony of their lives, their continuance in the faith, and their receipt of reward (cf. v. 5).

Among believers, there should be great sadness when a fellow believer waivers or departs from the faith as a result of temptation, trials or persecution. When we observe other believers gossiping, joking or making light of such failure, we should separate ourselves from such behavior. Where possible, we should also come alongside such wayward believers and provide encouragement to return to the path of endurance and faithfulness – taking care lest we ourselves become discouraged or disheartened.