

# Greeting

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1

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### Introduction: the city and church of Thessalonica

#### The city of Thessalonica

- ❖ During the time of the New Testament, Thessalonica was an important and powerful city. Its importance went back hundreds of years to the 300's BC, when the Macedonian empire became powerful under the leadership of Philip II of Macedonia and his son, Alexander III, known as Alexander the Great. Just a few years after Alexander's death in 323 BC, Cassander, the new ruler of Macedonia and the territories it controlled, founded the city of Thessalonica in 316 BC.<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ The new city of Thessalonica had a number of natural advantages which allowed it to become strong and prosperous. It was built on one of the best natural harbours of the Aegean Sea, which gave it access by sea to the important islands and towns around the Aegean (see map on page 2). The surrounding regions hosted rich farmlands which produced an abundance of grain and fruit, in addition to providing good grazing land. In the city's vicinity were mines that produced gold, silver, copper, iron and lead; and the forests on the mountains around the city provided timber for building houses and ships.<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ About a century after the founding of Thessalonica, Macedonia came into conflict with Rome, which was rising as a world power at this time. From 214 to 168 BC three wars were fought between Rome and Macedonia, resulting eventually in the conquest of Macedonia by Rome. More than 25,000 of Macedonia's soldiers were killed, and 150,000 Macedonians were taken as slaves. In order to ensure that Macedonia could never challenge the power of Rome again, the Macedonian monarchy was brought to an end, the gold and silver mines were closed, cultivation of the great farming estates was forbidden, and Macedonia itself was divided into four districts which were prohibited from trading with one another.<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ After a couple of unsuccessful rebellions by certain Macedonians, Rome extended the territory of Macedonia and made it into a province of the Roman Empire in 148 BC; Thessalonica was established as the capital city. Interestingly, and a little surprisingly, important Macedonian cities like Thessalonica developed a remarkably favourable attitude towards Rome. Many Romans settled

<sup>1</sup> Green (2002:10); Hendrix (1992:523).

<sup>2</sup> Green (2002:6).

<sup>3</sup> Green (2002:10-14).



*The eastern Roman Empire in the time of the New Testament.*

in Thessalonica and became regarded as its benefactors. The city honoured them with inscriptions thanking them for their gifts to the city.<sup>4</sup>

- ❖ During the time that the church was established in Thessalonica, the city was again prosperous economically. The mines and forests had been re-opened and the city's strategic position was enhanced by its location on the Egnatian Way (see map on page 2). The Egnatian Way was a Roman road that crossed Greece from the west coast (on the Adriatic Sea) all the way to the Black Sea in the east. A short sea journey from Dyrrhachium across the Adriatic Sea to Brundisium led one to the Appian Way, and from there it was a relatively easy journey to Rome itself. Thus, a traveller could travel from Rome to the Black Sea area in four or five weeks using the Appian and Egnatian Ways. Thessalonica was the most important Aegean port on this route, so, whether one was travelling from Rome by land all the way to the eastern end of the Egnatian way, or one wanted to move from the capital to places like Ephesus and other ports in the eastern Mediterranean by land and then by sea, it would have been natural to travel through Thessalonica.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ In Paul's time Thessalonica was a free city, which meant that it was not required to pay tax to Rome, had no Roman troops stationed within its walls, and was allowed to govern itself according to its

<sup>4</sup> Green (2002:16-17,25-26); Weima (2014:3-7).

<sup>5</sup> Green (2002:4-5).

ancient customs<sup>6</sup> — but the underlying condition was always that the city should remain loyal to Rome; any question about this loyalty could threaten its privileged status.<sup>7</sup>

- ❖ Thessalonica was governed according to Greek tradition with some local variations. One of the important institutions in that tradition was the citizen assembly (known as a δῆμος/*dēmos* or ἐκκλησία/*ekklēsia*), which could meet to consider various matters important to the city. Overall leadership of the city was in the hands of between three and seven politarchs,<sup>8</sup> who had administrative and judicial functions. Between the citizen assembly and the politarchs was a council, which acted as the executive body of the citizen assembly. The Roman governor of the Province of Macedonia (known as a proconsul) also resided in Thessalonica, but he was not responsible for the government of the city.<sup>9</sup>
- ❖ Paul says of the Thessalonian believers that they “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Th 1:9). Archaeology and historical research have shown that there were indeed many cults and religions in Thessalonica when Paul, Silas and Timothy arrived there. In fact, it was part of one’s civic duty to participate in the worship of these gods, and the Thessalonian believers would have suffered persecution and rejection from their society for not participating in such worship.<sup>10</sup>

### The church in Thessalonica

- ❖ Acts 17:1-9 tells about the founding of the church in Thessalonica. After being humiliated in Philippi, Paul and Silas left that town with Timothy and travelled along the Egnatian Way to Thessalonica (Ac 16:16-40). As was his custom, Paul preached in the synagogue in Thessalonica, seeking to persuade the Jews that the man Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God’s long-awaited Messiah (Ac 17:2-3). Some of the Jews were persuaded, as were many “God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women” (Ac 17:4).
- ❖ From the Letters to the Thessalonians it would appear that the church was largely composed of Gentiles. For example, the statement that the Thessalonian believers had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Th 1:9) can only apply to Gentiles, not to Jews. The problem of sexual immorality (1 Th 4:3-8) was also a typically Gentile, rather than Jewish, problem.
- ❖ The God-fearers referred to in Acts 17:4 were Gentiles who came into contact with the Jewish religion and attached themselves to a Jewish community in order to benefit from the Jewish teachings and participate to a limited extent in Jewish religious observances. They did not, however, become full converts to Judaism (known as “proselytes”) by becoming circumcised and committing themselves fully to the Jewish religion and community.<sup>11</sup> When these people were persuaded by Paul, the Jews became jealous and looked for a way of driving Paul and his coworkers out of the city (Ac 17:5).

<sup>6</sup> Green (2002:19).

<sup>7</sup> This is why the charge of Acts 17:7 was regarded so seriously.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek term for “city officials” in Acts 17:6 is the word πολιτάρχες/*politarches*, usually translated directly as “politarchs”. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations are taken from the New International Version of 1984 (abbreviated NIV).

<sup>9</sup> Weima (2014:7-9); Green (2002:20-25).

<sup>10</sup> Weima (2014:9-11).

<sup>11</sup> For a survey of proselytes and God-fearers, see Trebilco & Stewart (1997).

- ❖ The Jews accomplished their goal by gathering some “bad characters” from the marketplace. When they could not find Paul and Silas, they dragged Jason — probably Paul’s host — and some other Christians before the “city officials”, i.e. the politarchs (Ac 17:5-7), who were the highest officials in the city (see previous section on the government of Thessalonica). The charge against Paul and Silas was that they were “defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (Ac 17:7). The charge was cleverly chosen. Thessalonica’s privileged position depended on her loyalty to Rome, so for someone to promote a king who would rival Caesar was a very serious matter indeed. It is therefore not surprising that “the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil” (Ac 17:8). Jason and his companions were forced to pay a kind of security — no doubt as an undertaking that Paul and Silas would not continue to promote such teachings — and as a result Paul and Silas were forced to leave Thessalonica (Ac 17:9-10).<sup>12</sup>
- ❖ Although Acts 17:2 speaks about Paul preaching in the synagogue on three Sabbaths, his stay in Thessalonica was probably longer than just three weeks. It could have been as long as a few months, since it seems unlikely that the Thessalonians could have become as well-established in the gospel as they were in the space of only three weeks (cf. 1 Th 3).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Paul left them when they were still very new in the faith and were vulnerable to confusion from incorrect teaching (1 Th 4:13-18) and also to tremendous pressure from persecution and opposition (1 Th 2:14; 3:2-5).
- ❖ Although some of the new converts in Thessalonica were from the upper classes, and would thus have been wealthy (Ac 17:4), most of them would have had much more modest means: they needed to resist the temptation of being dependent on the wealthier members of the church by working with their hands to earn their daily food (1 Th 4:11-12).<sup>14</sup> Paul himself, when he lived among the Thessalonians, worked with his hands (almost certainly at his trade of tent-making) so as not to be a burden on the community and to set them an example of hard work (1 Th 2:9; 2 Th 3:7-10).

### The First Letter to the Thessalonians

- ❖ After being forced to leave Thessalonica, Paul, Silas and Timothy travelled to Berea. The Thessalonian Jews followed them there, and once again stirred up trouble for them. Again they were forced to leave (Ac 17:10-15).
- ❖ Paul went on ahead to Athens, but was deeply distressed at having been separated from the Thessalonian believers, who, he knew, were facing severe persecution. Concerned that they would give in to the pressure and even abandon their faith in Jesus, Paul sent Timothy to them from Athens to encourage and strengthen their faith (Ac 17:15-16; 1 Th 2:17; 3:1-3). It may well be that Timothy, rather than Silas, was sent because he had not been the direct target of the attack when Jason’s house was raided (Ac 17:5).
- ❖ After preaching the gospel in Athens, Paul moved on to Corinth. Some time after his arrival there, Timothy and Silas rejoined him after returning from their respective missions in Macedonia (Ac

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce (1982:xxii-xxvi); Green (2002:49-51); Weima (2014:30-35) for further detail on the charges brought against Paul and Silas.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Weima (2014:26).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Green (2002:31).

18:5).<sup>15</sup> At this time Timothy would have brought news of the Thessalonian congregation, recounting to Paul the wonderful news that the Thessalonian believers were standing firm in the faith and longed to see him, just as he longed to see them. In response, Paul was overjoyed; we can hear him saying, “This is the life! Seeing the Thessalonian believers standing firm in their faith makes all our sufferings worthwhile!” (cf. 1 Th 3:8). Timothy must also have informed Paul of some of the challenges which the Thessalonian Christians were facing: possible attempts to discredit the initial ministry of Paul and Silas;<sup>16</sup> temptations to continue the sexually immoral life that was completely normal in their society (1 Th 4:3-8); worries that believers who had died would not experience the resurrection of the body (1 Th 4:13-18); possible tensions in relation to leaders in the congregation (1 Th 5:12-13); laziness and undue dependence on the part of certain members of the congregation (1 Th 4:11-12; 5:14).<sup>17</sup>

- ❖ In response to all these things, Paul wrote the First Letter to the Thessalonians. He wanted to encourage the believers, telling them how grateful he was to God for their perseverance (1:2-3,6-10; 3:6-10); he wanted them to be assured that they were chosen by God, even if they were rejected by their fellow-citizens (1:4-6); he wanted them to be confident that his own ministry had been genuine (2:1-12); he wanted them to keep on trusting in God and in his Son, Jesus, to sanctify and save them (3:11-13; 5:23-24); and he wanted them to live the life that God wanted them to live (4:1-5:22).

## Form and structure of 1 Thessalonians 1:1

- ❖ When you write a letter in English there is a standard format which you usually follow: sender’s address, followed by the date at the top right; recipient’s address on the left hand side (if it is a business letter), followed by the greeting (“Dear . . .”), a heading (for a business letter), the body of the letter, and the closing greeting (e.g. “Yours sincerely”).
- ❖ In the New Testament world, letters also followed a fairly standard format, although the format differs somewhat from ours. The usual format of an ancient Greek letter starts (not ends) with the sender’s name, then gives the name of the recipient(s) followed by a greeting, possibly a prayer wish, the body of the letter, and a closing section.<sup>18,19</sup>
- ❖ 1 Thessalonians follows this format. In 1:1 we have the senders (“Paul, Silas, and Timothy”), the recipients (“To the church of the Thessalonians . . .”), and a greeting (“grace and peace to you”); following that we have Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving in verses 2-10. The main body of the letter follows from chapter 2 onwards.

<sup>15</sup> Evidently Silas had also been sent on a mission to Macedonia (perhaps Philippi), since Paul arrived in Corinth alone (Ac 18:1,5).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Weima (1997; 2002); Green (2002:52).

<sup>17</sup> Green (2002:51-52).

<sup>18</sup> Green (2002:73-74).

<sup>19</sup> It is much easier to recognize the different sections in a modern letter because of the clear layout and format. In the New Testament world paper (or its ancient equivalent) was expensive, so writers did not leave blank spaces, since doing so would have consumed too much of the valuable writing material. As a result, we must look carefully at the meaning of the actual words to find the divisions of the letters — although some modern translations do use the layout to some extent to indicate the different elements of the letters.

- ❖ Note that verse 1 has three parts: the sender formula, the recipient formula, and the greeting.

## Exposition

**Verse 1: “Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.”<sup>20</sup>**

Verse 1a, the sender formula: “Paul, Silas and Timothy”.

- ❖ Three people are mentioned as the senders of this letter, and this raises the question as to whether we should regard them all as co-authors of the letter, with each making a significant contribution to its contents. In light of the frequent — almost consistent — use of “we” throughout the letter, it is tempting to conclude that Paul, Silas and Timothy were indeed co-authors. However, there are some passages in which it is clear that Paul is speaking on his own behalf: 2:18; 3:1-2,5; 5:23. These passages suggest that the “we” is, perhaps, not to be taken literally. In fact, a study of ancient letters shows that authors often did use the pronoun “we” even when there was only one author. This is sometimes called a “literary plural” and gives a “warmer tone” to the letter, especially when it is read out aloud (Malherbe 2008:89).<sup>21</sup>
- ❖ If Silas and Timothy were not co-authors of the letter, one might well ask why Paul mentions them in the letter opening. The answer would seem to be that he wants to remind the Thessalonians of how they were converted through the work of Paul and Silas (Ac 17:1-9), and how they were encouraged through the work of Timothy (1 Th 3:1-5). He wants them to know that Silas and Timothy (who had recently joined him in Corinth) share in his love and concern for them. By reminding the Thessalonians of the ministers who brought them the gospel, Paul strengthens the relationship between the believers and their spiritual shepherds.<sup>22</sup> Mentioning Silas and Timothy also indicates that Paul has their support in what he writes to the Thessalonians. This provides a good foundation for the encouragement and exhortation which follow in the body of the letter.<sup>23</sup>
- ❖ In most of his letter openings, **Paul** adds to his name a description or title such as “apostle of Christ Jesus” or “servant of Christ Jesus”, so it is noteworthy that he does not do that in this letter. The reason may be that in this case he was well-known to his readers (unlike in the case of Romans), and there were no questions about his apostolic authority (as in the case of Galatians and 2 Corinthians). It is significant also that Paul de-emphasized his apostolic status in 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7.<sup>24</sup>
- ❖ **Silas**<sup>25</sup> is not as well-known as Paul, but he was an important minister of the gospel in the New Testament church. Silas first appears in connection with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He was chosen, along with Judas called Barsabbas, to take the letter from the Jerusalem church to the believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Luke (the author of Acts) calls Silas a “leader among the brothers” and a prophet (Ac 15:22,32). Paul would have had time to get to know Silas’s character

<sup>20</sup> The New International Version of 1984 (abbreviated NIV) will be used as the basis for these notes.

<sup>21</sup> See Blass, Debrunner & Funk (1961:§280); Malherbe (2008:86-89); Wanamaker (1990:67-68); Weima (2014:66).

<sup>22</sup> Compare the “we know . . . you know” in 1:4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Malherbe (2008:89); Wanamaker (1990:68).

<sup>24</sup> Malherbe (2008:97); Wanamaker (1990:68).

<sup>25</sup> In Paul’s letters the name is spelt as “Silvanus” in Greek (cf. ESV spelling), and in Acts as “Silas”.

and teaching ability during the time he and Judas spent in Antioch explaining the decision of the council and encouraging the believers (Ac 15:32). Paul must have developed a respect for Silas; after his disagreement with Barnabas at the beginning of his second missionary journey, he chose Silas as his co-worker (Ac 15:36-40). The narrative of Acts 16-17 shows that Silas had a prominent role alongside Paul in proclaiming the gospel in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. He also had an important role in Corinth (2 Cor 1:19).

- ❖ **Timothy** is probably the best-known associate of Paul. It seems likely that he was converted on Paul's first missionary journey,<sup>26</sup> and he joined the apostle as a coworker when Paul passed through Lystra on his second missionary journey (Ac 16:1-3). Timothy is mentioned frequently in Paul's letters, and it is clear that a very warm and trusting relationship developed between him and Paul. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul refers to Timothy as "my son whom I love", and some of his last instructions, just before his death, were given to Timothy (2 Tim 4:9-20). Timothy became a skilful and faithful minister of the gospel, with the result that Paul entrusted him with some important and sensitive tasks: he was sent to Thessalonica when Paul could not go there in person (1 Th 3:1-5); later on, Paul sent him to Corinth to provide additional teaching and guidance regarding the matters dealt with in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 4:17); he was left to guide the church in Ephesus when Paul had to move on to Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3). Timothy was not merely a channel for communicating Paul's instructions and teachings to the churches; he was a minister of the gospel (although not an apostle) just as Paul was. To the Corinthians Paul says that "he [Timothy] is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am" (1 Cor 16:10), and to the Thessalonians that he is "God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ" (1 Th 3:2); in Philippians 2:20 Paul states that he has no one else like Timothy.

Verse 1b, the recipient formula: "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ".

- ❖ There are two possible meanings for the word **church** (ἐκκλησία/*ekklēsia* in Greek) in the recipient formula: (a) it could refer to the people who comprise the church in Thessalonica — i.e. all the baptized believers in that city; or (b) it could refer to an actual gathering, or assembly, of those people. The first meaning would be favoured by a comparison with 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1, where Paul addresses himself to the "church of God in Corinth", and where he is clearly addressing people as such, rather than a particular gathering of those people. (This is clear because Paul goes on, in 1 Cor 1:2 and 2 Cor 1:2 to address *people* — "all those everywhere" or "all the saints"). There are, however, three reasons for accepting the second meaning in this case: (a) it is noteworthy that, in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, Paul writes not "to the church of God *in Thessalonica*", but "to the church *of the Thessalonians*", a form of expression not found anywhere else in the Pauline letters except 2 Thessalonians 1:1; (b) the Thessalonian Christians would have been very familiar with the citizen assembly (called an ἐκκλησία/*ekklēsia* in Greek) since it was very much a part of their lives;<sup>27</sup> (c) the Thessalonian believers would not have received printed copies of Paul's letter as would be the case today; they would have heard it being read to them when they were gathered together as believers — note how Paul charges them in 5:27 to have the letter read "to all

<sup>26</sup> Bruce (1982:6).

<sup>27</sup> See page 2 above on the government of Thessalonica. Compare also Acts 19:32,39 where ἐκκλησία/*ekklēsia* refers to an actual gathering of people.

the brothers”.<sup>28</sup> We can therefore imagine the Thessalonian believers gathered together listening to this letter being read out to them.

- ❖ The word *ἐκκλησία/ekklesia* is an important word in the Septuagint.<sup>29</sup> It is used to refer to the people of God, often as they were gathered together in assembly to hear the word of God (e.g. Deut 9:10; 18:16). Many of the Thessalonian Christians (the Jews and God-fearers) would have been familiar with this translation through teaching in the synagogue, and would have understood that Paul was viewing the Thessalonian believers as part of the historic people of God (i.e. the Jews) by calling their gathering an *ἐκκλησία/ekklesia*. This was remarkable: even Gentiles who had up to this point in history been excluded from the covenant people had now become part of the covenant people (cf. Eph 2:11-13)!<sup>30</sup>
- ❖ The “church of the Thessalonians” is characterized as being **in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**; this is a very important phrase, full of meaning on different levels. In the first place, it *distinguished the Christian assembly of Thessalonians from other assemblies of Thessalonians*. The recipients of the letter would have been familiar with the citizen assembly — as well as other assemblies — in Thessalonica, which would have gathered in the name of the goddess Roma or any of a multitude of other gods and goddesses. They, however, were gathered “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”, since they had “turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1:9-10). What an encouragement to the fledgling church! While they groaned under the pain of rejection and persecution from their fellow Thessalonians, they could take courage in the fact that they belonged to the God of heaven and earth, and to his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup>
- ❖ Secondly, the phrase *expresses something of the relationship between the Thessalonian believers and God*. The phrase “in God the Father” is not easy to interpret. It is common for Paul to speak about believers being “in Christ” (see, e.g. Eph 1:3-14), thus indicating their union with Christ and the fact that every blessing in the Christian life flows out of that union; but the phrase “in God” is virtually without parallel in the rest of Paul’s writings. While we may not be able to resolve the grammatical technicalities of this expression, its main thrust is clear: everything that the Thessalonian believers are and have comes from God. God is to be thanked for their faith, their love and their hope, their labour and their endurance (1:2-3); they are his because he chose them, not because Paul, Silas and Timothy persuaded them (1:5); and they will be fully sanctified because God is faithful (5:23-24).<sup>32</sup>
- ❖ Thirdly, this phrase *links God the Father and Jesus Christ in a way that can only point to the deity of Christ*. To understand this point, consider how blasphemous it would be to write “in God the Father and Paul the apostle”, placing Paul on a level with the Father. By naming Christ alongside God as objects of the same preposition (“in”), Paul indicates that Christ shares in the Father’s power and

<sup>28</sup> Donfried (2002:139-145); O'Brien (1993:124) favour the sense of “gathering” for “church” in this instance.

<sup>29</sup> The Septuagint is the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was widely used throughout the Greek-speaking world in New Testament times.

<sup>30</sup> See also Fee (2009:15); (Weima 2014:68).

<sup>31</sup> Donfried (2002:143-145).

<sup>32</sup> Fee (2009:15); (Weima 2014:69).

work. This point is reinforced by the frequent mention of Christ alongside the Father in the Thessalonian letters (see 1 Th 3:11-13; 5:18; 2 Th 1:1,2,12; 2:16; 3:5).<sup>33</sup>

- ❖ The use of **Lord** (Greek κύριος/*kurios*) to refer to Jesus further reinforces the deity of Christ. This was the term regularly used in the Septuagint to translate “Yahweh”, the covenant name of God,<sup>34</sup> and its application to Christ shows that Paul thought of Jesus as God.<sup>35</sup>

Verse 1c, the greeting formula: “Grace and peace to you.”

- ❖ As was common for ancient letters, Paul followed the sender and recipient formulas with a greeting, in this case **grace and peace to you** (χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη/*charis humin kai eirēnē*). It is difficult to discern with certainty the precise origins of Paul’s greeting, but he seems to have been influenced by three sources: (a) the usual greeting in Greek letters was χαίρειν/*chairein*, which simply means “greetings”; a small change would have led to the similar-sounding χάρις/*charis*, which means “grace”; (b) a common Jewish blessing formula read ἔλεος καὶ εἰρήνη/*eleos kai eirene*, meaning mercy and peace; (c) the standard Jewish greeting was *shalom*, meaning “peace”. However Paul arrived at “grace and peace”, the result is a distinctively Christian greeting in which “grace” and “peace” express some of the essential blessings of the gospel.<sup>36</sup>
- ❖ “Grace” is God’s undeserved kindness, made possible through the death of Christ, which he lavishes on undeserving sinners. It includes the gift of forgiveness as well as the gift of God’s power to overcome sin and do the good works which God has called us to (cf. 2 Cor 8:1-9; Eph 2:1-10).
- ❖ “Peace” is not merely a state of inner calm; it represents a Hebrew concept which refers to the wholeness that comes through being reconciled to God and being at peace with him. Such peace is one of primary fruits of Christ’s work as it is proclaimed in the gospel (cf. Rm 5:1-2).
- ❖ Thus “Paul undoubtedly intended ‘grace and peace’ to evoke in his readers a sense of divine blessing upon their lives characterized by God’s freely given favor and the sense of completeness or wholeness . . . that results from reconciliation with God through Christ’s death.”<sup>37</sup>

## Application

### We need to work together in gospel ministry.

- ❖ The sender formula — “Paul, Silas and Timothy” — shows us that Paul did not attempt to do the work of the gospel on his own. Even after his fall-out with Barnabas (Ac 15:36-41) he did not attempt to set off on his own, but sought out another brother — Silas — who could be his coworker in the gospel. And then, as they passed through Lystra, they had Timothy join them. It must have been a great help to Paul to have Silas with him in Thessalonica. When they faced opposition they could encourage one another to look to the Lord; when Paul was busy with his tent-making and unable to preach or attend to the needs of the new believers, Silas and Timothy could share in the

<sup>33</sup> Fee (2009:16); (Weima 2014:69-70).

<sup>34</sup> Most translations use the capitalized form “LORD” to translate “Yahweh” in the Hebrew (Old Testament) text.

<sup>35</sup> Fee (2009:16); (Weima 2014:69-70).

<sup>36</sup> Wanamaker (1990:71); Green (2002:85-86); Fee (2009:17); Weima (2014:70-71).

<sup>37</sup> Wanamaker (1990:71).

work; overall, they could get a lot more done together than Paul could have done on his own. Later, when Paul was in Athens and worried about the Thessalonian believers, he was able to send Timothy back to encourage and strengthen them, something that he himself would not have been able to do after Jason and others had had to pay security to ensure that there was no disturbance in the city (Ac 17:6-9).

- ❖ The need for working together also comes from the way God appoints gifts within the body of Christ. As Paul explained to the Corinthians: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. . . . Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?” (1 Cor 12:7,29). There is no one member of the body who has all the gift necessary for building up the body. Therefore we need to work with our brothers and sisters so that God’s people receive the full range of ministry which God intends them to receive.
- ❖ Many years ago, during a short-term mission trip to the Comoro Islands, I saw and experienced for myself the importance of this kind of partnership. I worked with two ladies who had already been on the islands for over seven years. They lived in a small village half an hour’s journey from the main centre, and at one point they needed to attend a conference for missionaries on one of the other islands. I stayed in their house while they were away to look after it. During that time (about a week) I really felt very isolated, surrounded by people who did not know Christ and who, in addition to being Muslims, engaged in religious practices that were quite scary! Over the weekend, I travelled to the main centre for the church service, even though there was very little of it which I could understand (it was in French!); I just had a need to be amongst brothers and sisters who shared my faith in Jesus. It was for good reason that the mission had a policy of never sending their missionaries out to work alone! As we read in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

- ❖ William Carey is well known for his work as a missionary in India. Indeed, he is often called the father of modern mission. What is less known is that he had a number of coworkers whose contribution was essential to the success of the mission. Two of these coworkers stand out: Joshua Marshman and William Ward. Shortly after their arrival in India, Carey wrote about them:

Brother Ward is the very man we wanted, he enters into the work with his whole soul. I have much pleasure in him, and expect much from him. Brother Marshman is prodigy of diligence and prudence, as is also his wife: learning the language is mere play to him; he has already acquired as much as I did in double the time. I believe all their hearts are entirely set on their work.<sup>38</sup>

One of Carey’s biographers describes the partnership between Carey, Marshman and Ward in these words:

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<sup>38</sup> Walker (1951:177).

Soon they came to be known as the “Serampore Triad,” and they were so closely united in their labors that it is impossible to separate them or to write a life story of one that is not equally that of the others also. For twenty-three years they labored in unbroken comradeship.<sup>39</sup>

- ❖ As pastors we are often tempted to develop a one-man ministry that centres around ourselves. Sometimes we adopt the mindset of the business world which sets the boss above everyone else; sometimes we follow the pattern of a culture which exalts human leaders. We feel we must do everything that needs doing in the church — at least the tasks which give one status and prominence — because we are more competent than anyone else and because we want to maintain a position of status and control. If this is how we think, we need to change our attitude and look for ways of including other people in the work; we need to recognize that they have gifts that we don’t have, and that they can make a contribution that we cannot make. We must cultivate the mindset of Paul, who said of Timothy, “he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am” (1 Cor 16:10), and of himself and Apollos, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Cor 3:7).

**God’s people form a body that is distinct from the world, and which finds its identity and hope in God.**

- ❖ The Thessalonian Christians experienced a radical change in their lives and thinking. Most of them had simply gone along with the value system and lifestyle of their culture. They had worshipped idols and participated in meetings and rituals which honoured those idols. By rejecting those idols to serve the living and true God, they had taken a stand which would isolate them from their culture and incur the anger and rejection of their fellow-citizens. They now belonged to the “assembly of the Thessalonians *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” It is not hard to imagine the pressures which they would have felt, and Paul’s letter to them confirms that they did indeed suffer much persecution (see 1 Th 1:6; 3:3-4).
- ❖ In the midst of their suffering, their encouragement and hope consisted in the fact that they belonged to God and to his Son. Knowing him and being assured of his love and acceptance was enough to make up for the rejection which they experienced from their culture.
- ❖ In today’s world there are many Christians who live in cultures that are hostile to Christ and his gospel. Very often people won’t object to family members being Christians *as long as they are willing to practice their family’s traditional religion as well.* This was the case in Thessalonica too; if the Christians had been willing to continue worshipping Roma, Dionysius, Cabirus, and the other traditional gods, there would have been little objection to their faith in Jesus. It was the rejection of those gods, and the *exclusive allegiance* to the living and true God, which led to such severe persecution. So too in our world believers in Jesus need to understand that he claims their exclusive allegiance. As difficult as it may be to withstand persecution and societal pressure, we need to realize that there is only one living and true God who calls us to worship him *alone.* As Moses appealed to the Israelites, “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (Dt 4:39).
- ❖ Believers who experience the rejection of people they love need to be encouraged to cling onto the great privilege that they have of being “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. They need to remind one another continually of the reality of God’s love and presence — and to pray that God

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<sup>39</sup> Walker (1951:186).

would make himself real to them — so that the rejection of the world seems far less significant than the privilege of belonging to God.

- ❖ One of the first converts to Christianity under the ministry of William Carey and his associates in India was a Hindu guru by the name of Krishna Pal. Krishna was converted after approaching the missionaries for medical assistance. Later, he gave testimony of his conversion in these words:

I followed the Hindu worship. I bathed in the Ganges, I worshipped dumb idols . . . I visited holy places . . . But it brought me little relief from my sin. Then I heard of Jesus Christ, that He became flesh and dwelt among us, and was as one that served and even for our ransom gave His life. What love, I thought, is this? And here I made my rest.<sup>40</sup>

- ❖ One of the ways in which the Indian converts had to depart from their traditional customs was to break caste,<sup>41</sup> since the social divisions of the Hindu caste system were unacceptable for disciples of Jesus — who had united his people in one body. Krishna and a few other converts broke caste by eating a meal with the missionaries, thus demonstrating their exclusive allegiance to Christ. Not unlike the situation in Thessalonica, a riot broke out and two thousand people gathered outside the converts' houses. Krishna and another convert were dragged to a magistrate. Krishna's faith did not waver; he continued to follow the Lord Jesus and to associate with his fellow-believers — who at that stage were mainly missionaries and foreigners. Shortly before he died in 1822, Krishna was asked if he still loved Christ; his reply: "Yes, but not as much as he loves me."<sup>42</sup> Krishna Paul understood what it meant to belong to the church which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!<sup>43</sup>

#### **Grace and peace are the "atmosphere" in which we live the Christian life.**

- ❖ Paul's greeting to the Thessalonian believers was not simply, "Hello!" He greeted them with the blessing "Grace and peace to you". By this he drew attention to the essential blessings of the gospel which form the foundation of the Christian life.
- ❖ Grace and peace are wonderfully combined in Romans 5:1-2: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this *grace* in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." The result of our justification<sup>44</sup> is that we have peace with God, and because we have peace with God we have "gained access . . . into this grace in which we now stand". We can imagine here a picture of God on the throne, with the door of the throne-room permanently open to those who have been justified and who have peace with God. They have permanent access<sup>45</sup> into his presence and can come and go freely because they stand in grace. In other words, access into God's presence is never based on what we have done or how much we deserve his kindness; it is always

<sup>40</sup> Houghton (1982:176).

<sup>41</sup> To "break caste" means to associate in forbidden ways with people of a different social class in Hindu society.

<sup>42</sup> Houghton (1982:177).

<sup>43</sup> Walker (1951:181-185); Houghton (1982:174-176).

<sup>44</sup> To be justified means to be declared righteous by God. Those who are justified are viewed by him as righteous, not because of what they have done but because of who Christ is and what Christ has done.

<sup>45</sup> The verbs translated "have gained access" and "we now stand" are in the perfect tense in Greek; this indicates a permanent state of affairs (Blass *et al.* 1961:§§340-342).

based on grace, God's favour that we do not deserve. And never forget that it is "through our Lord Jesus Christ"!

- ❖ This has important implications for the living out of the Christian life. Any sincere believer is deeply aware of his/her sins, failures and shortcomings. It is easy to live with a sense of unworthiness before God (which is not necessarily a bad thing!), but often this sense of unworthiness makes us feel separated from God and cut off from his presence; we feel we cannot enjoy his presence and acceptance until we reach a certain standard of holiness. However, the reality according to Romans 5:1-2 is that we stand "in grace"; in other words, God's ongoing acceptance of us is because he continues to be kind, and continues to treat us as we are in Christ, not as we deserve. In this sense, grace and peace are the "atmosphere" of the Christian life. Just as the earth's atmosphere provides the air that we breathe and the medium that keeps us alive, so God's grace is what sustains our spiritual life. It is God's grace that ensures our ongoing peace with God, and it is that peace which allows us to live in fellowship with him. We might well ask ourselves: Are we breathing the atmosphere of grace or the atmosphere of works? In the latter case we will never experience and enjoy peace with God.
- ❖ Many Christians struggle to live by grace, and the way we deal with each other often promotes a works mentality in our relationship with God. Instead of accepting each other unconditionally in Christ, we place all kinds of demands on one another before we are willing to show acceptance. We have to be "good enough" before we can be accepted. This mentality runs contrary to the gospel and cuts us off from the power of God to sanctify us and make us holy. Only when we breathe the fresh air of God's grace, only when we live at peace with God because of what Christ has done, can we experience his power at work in us transforming us and making us holy. "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Rm 6:14).
- ❖ We must encourage one another, by our words and our actions, to understand that God accepts us in Christ by his grace; because of his grace we have peace with him. As we breathe the atmosphere of grace and peace we will experience his power at work in us, transforming us into the image of Christ.

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