

GRACE AND PEACE

5-6-07

Ken Peterson

1 Thess. 1:1

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Yancey in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace? tells about a British conference on comparative religions where experts from around the world were discussing whether there was any one belief unique to Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Could it be incarnation? While not the same, other religions had versions of the gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had legends (not real fact) of returns from death. The debate went on until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room and asked, "What's all the rumpus about?" When they explained their topic about Christianity's unique contribution among world religions, Lewis responded immediately, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

After more discussion, the conferees all agreed. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim law code— each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

Grace is a huge word in the vocabulary of Christianity. Yet, we grow accustomed to it and often fail to really understand its implications and impact on our daily living. I grew up in the midst of some of the most spectacular scenery in our nation— in Northwestern Montana, near Glacier National Park. But living amongst it, you can easily grow accustomed to it, taking it all for granted. As others would visit us and we'd show them the sights, we needed their fresh sight and exclamations of excitement, awe, and wonder to help us see them again as for the first time.

Here, the Apostle Paul is a wonderful tour guide for us. As we begin this series of sermons on the first letter Paul wrote, we are confronted with two words he used in every salutation in his letters, "grace and peace." A couple of weeks ago, as I talked about Paul's conversion, remember his passion was to destroy the church and kill and imprison anyone who was a follower of Christ. Then, he was knocked to the ground on the road to Damascus with a vision and a question from the risen Jesus. Paul's life was turned around from being the chief destroyer of the church to the chief missionary, spreading the Gospel around the world. That is God's unconditional grace in action. No wonder that Paul never recovered from the impact of grace. It is stated right up front every time he writes— grace and the practical result of grace in our lives, peace.

Paul is sometimes referred to as "the Apostle of Grace." We find the word used 86 times in his letters. All the rest of the New Testament contains only 37 uses. So, while Paul wrote only 30%

of the New Testament, he has 70% of the usage of the word “grace.” So, as we begin this letter to the church at Thessalonica, I think it is important to drink in some great droughts of the fresh alpine air of this vast high country of God’s grace expressed to us in Jesus.

AMAZING GRACE

Dr. David Seamands was Polly’s and my pastor during our seminary years. He was an amazing preacher and a gifted counselor. Sitting under his ministry was as important as any course in seminary. Much of his preaching was informed by deep insights into our human condition gained in his extensive counseling. He says:

“Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness, and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people.... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that’s not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated our emotions.”

It is through Jesus that we begin to understand the wonders of God’s grace to us. As we affirmed in our call to worship from John 1:16-17

from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Through faith in the work of Christ on the cross, our sins are forgiven and we are restored to a right relationship with God. No matter how badly we’ve sinned, no matter how much damage our rebellion against God and His purposes has done, through accepting Christ as our Savior and Lord the slate is totally wiped clean. As I’ve heard Moody pastor, Erwin Lutzer say, “There is more grace in God’s heart than there is sin in your past.” In Rom. 5:8, Paul says sin can never outdo the power of grace. He says that where sins abounds, through Christ, grace “super-abounds.”

Grace means that we don’t have to make up for anything in our past and don’t have to pay a penalty for it. This goes against every our human intuition that says transgressions should be made-up for, atoned for. If I damage something or someone, I should pay for it. But the Bible lets us know that the nature of our sin is so great that there is absolutely no way we can pay for it. But God loves us so much, He sent His Son to take the penalty we deserve and save us from our sins. It is our sin that has separated us from God. So, with forgiveness, we enter into a restored relationship with Him.

Yet, many in our world still strive to be good enough, accepted by God. But all our efforts fall vastly short. Indeed, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. As Paul declares in Eph 2:8-9,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast.

I once heard a good illustration of this at a Young Life Camp. If you picture our separation from God like the distance between California and Hawaii. What is that, a couple of thousand miles? Here we have three people setting out to try and swim to Hawaii. One can’t swim and drowns almost immediately. Another is an okay swimmer and makes it two miles before drowning. And

the third swimmer is quite good and makes it five miles. But, how good they are really doesn't matter in the end because what is required is really impossible. Likewise our salvation is impossible for anyone to achieve. Even the most disciplined, moral person cannot be good enough. "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3:21). "All" means everyone. It is only by God's grace through faith we are saved.

Shortly after the Korean War, a soldier had a brief affair with a Korean woman leaving her pregnant and abandoned. She gave birth to a little girl who had light-colored, curly hair. Because she didn't look like other Korean children, she was ostracized by the community. In that culture, children of mixed race were rejected. Women sometimes killed their babies because of this. But this woman tried her best to raise this little girl. But it was just too much for her and finally she gave up and abandoned the seven-year-old girl to the streets. The little girl was ruthlessly taunted with the ugliest word in the Korean language, meaning "alien devil." After two years of living on the streets, she was taken in by an orphanage.

Soon after she arrived, word came that an American couple was coming to adopt one little boy. She said everyone got excited, because at least one boy would have a family. This nine-year-old girl worked all day cleaning up the little boys, giving baths, combing their hair. When the couple came, she said the man looked like a giant to her. She watched him as, with his huge hands, he lifted up the baby boys. She saw tears running down his face and she knew if he could he would take all of them. Then, she says, "He saw me out of the corner of his eye. Now let me tell you, I was nine years old, but didn't even weigh 30 pounds. I was scrawny, I had worms in my body, boils on my skin, lice in my hair, and I was full of scars from my years on the street. I was not a pretty sight. But then he came over to me and began saying words I didn't understand in English. I looked up at him and he took this huge hand and laid it on my scared face. He was saying, 'I want this child. This is the child for me.'"

That is a picture of grace. God chose each of us— not because of our merits, abilities, or goodness. He chose us and redeemed us simply because He loves us. He saved us, adopted us into His family, cleaned us up and gave us an inheritance.

But, there is even more. This grace applies also to our daily living.

GRACE APPLIED TO LIVING

Not only are we saved by grace, but we live by grace. When we become Christians, God, through the Holy Spirit moves into our lives to work in and through us. So it is no longer a question of just our abilities, but our willingness to let the Spirit work through us. So, Paul is not bragging when he says, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (Phil 4:13). It is not Paul's power, but Christ's. And this is not mere semantics, but reality. With Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are promised adequacy in all that God calls us to do. One way I look at it is, if we have 10% in our own ability of what is needed for the situation God is calling us to, then the Holy Spirit supplies the other 90%. If we have 60% of what is needed, God then supplies the 40%. Whatever the need, God covers it— patience, joy, love, the ability to speak, the ability to remain silent, healing, a miracle, strength for the day, wisdom, guidance— as long as we let go in

trusting Him, giving Him all that we have and are. Dr. E. Stanley Jones used to express it, “My all for His all.” That is grace in our daily living and following Jesus. In 1 Cor 15:9-10, Paul expresses the ongoing wonder of all this in His life,

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them— yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Paul’s dependence upon that grace in his statement, *But by the grace of God I am what I am* has been referred to as “the Popeye verse.” Some of us who are old enough will remember the Popeye cartoons and his thematic line, “I am what I am and that’s all that I am. I’m Popeye the sailor man.” But there is a huge freedom in acceptance and in knowing that God is in charge of our lives and whatever we are, *by the grace of God I am what I am*. Has that acceptance penetrated your feelings of self-worth?

This letter is an example of living in that awareness of God’s daily grace and provision. Paul’s ministry at Thessalonica was prematurely cut-off by evil people. In Acts, we learn that the church was established through Paul’s teaching and preaching for three Sabbaths. His ministry may have lasted only three weeks before being run out of town by a riot. At any rate, most scholars working out the chronology of Paul’s missionary journeys limit his stay there to less than six months. Certainly this isn’t enough time to birth a church that can survive. But, Paul has a broader view. He understands the power of God and His grace. Paul knows it’s all His work and can continue, even thrive under humanly impossible conditions. He affirms this in his first sentence in our text,

*To the church of the Thessalonians **in** God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* This is not Paul’s work or Paul’s church. It is Christ’s church and He is well able to care for it.

Of course, Paul has been concerned about how they are doing, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he at times didn’t have second thoughts about fleeing under the cover of darkness. Should he have stayed and faced jail-time or risked his life? He did in other places. And some apparently in Thessalonica doubted the sincerity of Paul since he had “run out” on them. But, in spite of all this, there is that underlying certainty that it is Christ’s church in Thessalonica. Paul is also free in knowing he doesn’t have to second guess his own actions because of the power of grace, *I am what I am!*

GRACE DISPENSERS

Because of the grace we’ve received, we also need to extend that to everyone else. Most of us are eager to be recipients of grace, but want justice for those who transgress against us. Jesus is “full of grace” and “rich in mercy” (Jn. 1:16 ; Eph. 2:4). This then means that we too should be grace-full. Remembering all the Christ has forgiven us is the basis of our extending forgiveness to all who sin against us. Paul, in his salutation, always extends grace and peace to those to whom he is writing. Are we extending grace and peace to all we know and meet?

While I have said little about peace because of the time, the link to grace is fairly obvious. If we

are extending grace and forgiveness and living in the lively awareness of the grace and forgiveness we've received from God, our hearts will be at peace. There is nothing to trouble us, for we know His grace surrounds us and cares for us.

John Newton rebelled against God and lived a life rife with great immorality, including the cruel, inhumane treatment of slaves. When he repented and reached out to Christ for salvation, the transformation was radical– the wonder of which he reflects in his hymn, “Amazing Grace.” He became a pastor, and near the end of his life, hardly able to preach anymore, said to his friends,
“My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

May we never forget that either!