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Paul greets the Thessalonians

Please read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Paul's greeting (1:1)

When I see a letter on the doormat, the first thought that crosses my mind is: 'Who is it from?' Sometimes the handwriting on the envelope will tell me. If it comes from a part of the country where I don't know many people, the postmark may provide a clue to the identity of the sender. But if the franking is blurred, I may have to rely on the address at the top of the letter. Nevertheless, I often find I have to turn to the end of the letter before my curiosity is satisfied and I can begin reading it. If all else fails, I can expect to find the name of my correspondent there. In the ancient world, things were done differently. Letters usually began with the name of the sender, which is why Paul wrote his name before he wrote anything else. Two other names are mentioned, those of Silas, who is called by the Latin form of his name, Silvanus, and Timothy. These two men had worked alongside Paul during his stay in Thessalonica.

It was also a convention of first-century letter-writing to include a prayer, seeking the blessing of the gods on the recipient. No doubt a considerable measure of tact was sometimes involved in remembering which of the many deities available was the favourite of the individual concerned. The apostle, however, did not need to ransack the enormous catalogue of pagan gods to find a point of contact with his readers. Instead, he expressed his desire that they might enjoy grace and peace *'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'*.

In writing as he did, Paul echoed the conventional form of words in use at the time. Instead of the Greek word for 'greeting' he used a similar-sounding word which means 'grace'. To this he added the Greek version of the familiar Jewish greeting, *'Shalom'*, or 'Peace'. This was much more than mere formal politeness. Grace and peace are two of the loveliest words in the Christian vocabulary.

Grace is the undeserved favour of God, his kindness to those who merit his wrath and condemnation. Human sinfulness means that we are entitled to feel the weight of divine anger against sin. What a relief to know that God is merciful! Grace prompted him to send his Son into the world to live and die in the place of sinners.

Peace follows naturally on from grace. Because God is gracious, it is gloriously possible for those who have offended him to be reconciled to him. Where once there were enmity and estrangement, now there is peace, and since God no longer has a quarrel against his people, they can be at peace within and among themselves. It follows that the word 'peace' involves more than the absence of war: it includes what Leon Morris calls 'a flourishing state of soul'.

Paul's friends in Thessalonica had already experienced the grace of God in their lives, together with the peace which flows from it. Had this not been the case, they would not have been Christians at all. Nevertheless, it was his earnest longing that they might enjoy these blessings to a much greater degree.

The church of the Thessalonians (1:1-4)

Paul clearly had a good memory. It seems that he was in the habit of praying for his friends in Thessalonica in a disciplined and conscientious way. He prayed for them all. No one was left out. We learn something of the content of his prayers for them later in the epistle (3:11-13), but at this stage the dominant thought in his mind was thanksgiving. He was very grateful to God that his saving mercy had brought these people into his life. For what did the apostle give thanks? There were certain qualities evident in the lives of these believers which showed that God was at work. In this respect, the church at Thessalonica was typical of every local gathering of believers ever since.

1. A church rooted in God

The believers in Thessalonica could have been excused if they had felt that their situation was precarious. The church was a few months old at most. Unlike many churches today, there was no core of experienced members who could provide maturity and stability. There had been little time to acquire a grasp of Christian teaching or to come to terms with the demands of Christian behaviour. They were still raw recruits. Moreover they faced the additional pressures of being denied access to Paul himself, combined with persecution from the wider community. It would have been very tempting to have been seized by pessimism.

How could a handful of inexperienced believers, ignorant

of the finer points of doctrine and still adjusting to their new Christian lifestyle, hope to weather the storm of persecution? Paul understood that it would certainly help if they could acquire a firm grasp of their true identity. This explains his choice of words in verse 1. They were not merely the church in Thessalonica; they were a church *'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'*.

The word *'church'* is itself highly significant. The way in which it is used in everyday speech is rather confusing. Most people use it to describe a building where religious services are held. ('Turn left just after the parish church.') Paul had something else in mind. He used a Greek word which referred to a gathering of people who had assembled for some shared purpose. His friends had come together because they had something in common.

Each one knew what it meant to be *'in God'* and *'in Jesus Christ'*. This is rich terminology. We first meet it in John 15:1-8, where Jesus pictured his disciples as the branches of a vine. He, of course, is the vine and the branches are in him and must continue to draw their life from him. In similar fashion, Paul himself describes Christians as being *'in Christ'* in the same way that limbs and organs are part of a human body (Romans 12:5). Both ideas, the branches of the vine and the parts of the body, do more than say that believers belong to God. They make the point that the relationship between God and his people is extraordinarily close. They share in his life. While it was undoubtedly true that the Christians in Thessalonica were green and untried, they still had considerable grounds for encouragement. Had not the Lord himself identified with them in the closest measure? In the same way, modern believers facing an uphill struggle can comfort themselves with the thought that though they may be very weak, God is committed to them and

will no more discard them than a mighty oak would jettison one of its branches or a strong man his right arm.

2. *A church characterized by faith, love and hope*

One of the most impressive aspects of Paul's service for Christ was his prayer life. His friends in Thessalonica were a small fraction of a numerous company of people who never left his thoughts. His prayers for them were marked by a deep sense of thanksgiving (1:2-4). He rejoiced with gratitude because certain qualities were evident in their lives. Three qualities stood out, and these are as essential for the well-being of a church now as they were then. They are faith, love and hope.

Faith. A true church is made up of people who have faith in Jesus Christ. People without such faith are not Christians, and any collection of individuals without it, however religious they might be, is not a church. Faith includes the idea of confidence; it is convinced that Jesus can be trusted. I can rightly claim to have such faith if I am confident that a holy God will accept his sinless life in place of my lifetime of moral failure. I can rest assured that when the Son of God died at Calvary, he took my place, willingly enduring the wrath of God so that I need not do so. The Christians at Thessalonica had entrusted their eternal well-being to the Lord of glory, convinced that he loved them and had given himself for them (Galatians 2:20). Do you have faith? Be assured that no one will ever ask you a more important question. You can answer in the affirmative if you have entrusted all that you are to all that Jesus is, if you are relying upon his life and death in the place of sinners to atone for your sins and secure your peace with God.

Paul thanked God for his friends in Thessalonica because their faith was *productive*. He spoke of their '*work of faith*'. Paul

was often in the habit of contrasting faith and works. It was necessary that he should, for the human heart has a persistent tendency to seize hold of the idea that we can work our way into the favour of God. Nevertheless, true faith is not sterile, but active. Elsewhere, Paul said that it works 'through love' (Gal. 5:6). James tells us that 'Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead' (James 2:17). He went on to insist that the only solid proof that a person truly has faith in God is his life of obedience to God (James 2:18).

Love. A true church is made up of people who love God and who love one another. The apostle John tells us that the person who does not love in this way 'does not know God' (1 John 4:8). This is because love of this kind does not arise naturally in the human heart. Until we are transformed by the grace of God, we are incapable of it. When such love is present, it is the response of a renewed heart to the love of God. 'We love him because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). The love of Christ for his people brought him from the glory of heaven to the squalor of Bethlehem's stable, kept him steadfast throughout a life of sorrow and delivered him up to the horror of Calvary, a horror that included not only wounds and bleeding, hunger and thirst, but also the undiluted wrath of God against the sin of his people. Who could not love him in return? The fact that some people cannot find it in themselves to do so is a sad commentary on the hardness of human hearts.

It also needs to be observed that when the love of God is shed abroad in a believer's heart (Romans 5:5), there will be love for other Christians. In the first place, it is a moral necessity: 'If God so loved us, we also *ought* to love one another' (1 John 4:11, emphasis added). Secondly, when a person who claims to have a stake in the love of Christ cannot find it in himself to love other

believers, it poses a question about his genuineness: 'He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?' (1 John 4:20).

When Paul thanked God for the love that was evident in the lives of his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, he was not referring to something abstract and insubstantial but something tough and practical. He wrote about their '*labour of love*'. This expression has a slightly different meaning in modern English from the one that Paul intended. Nowadays, a labour of love is a generous action performed purely for the sake of it. Many a man gives up an evening or two a week to coach a boys' football team for no other reason than that he enjoys doing so! The love that Paul had in mind, however, was the self-giving love that characterizes God himself, the love that reached out to us 'while we were still sinners' (Romans 5:8). In effect, the believers in Thessalonica had begun to imitate the Saviour. Both within the church and outside it, they were making a determined effort to love the unlovely and to do so with strenuous exertion.

Hope. Like faith and love, hope is an essential component of the make-up of every true believer. Once again we need to recognize the fact that the word 'hope', as we use it in everyday English, does not really convey what Paul intended. Nowadays the word has a speculative ring to it. 'Shall we have a white Christmas this year? I hope so!' The person who says such things means that he is not certain how things will turn out, but feels optimistic. Our modern usage of the word is neatly summed up in that sarcastic remark that 'Marriage is a triumph of hope over experience.' Here is a person who ought to know better, but in spite of the evidence of failed marriages all around him, retains his sunny optimism that his wedding day will usher in a lifetime of shared happiness!

Paul had something very different in view. It was his conviction that the Christian can anticipate a golden future with complete confidence. It is not a matter of likelihood or probabilities but of absolute certainty. Jesus will return and make all things new. The matter is not in doubt. Michael Faraday, the eminent Victorian physicist, made no secret of his Christian faith. While he lay on his deathbed, he was chided: 'Where are your speculations now, Michael?' 'Speculations?', he retorted, 'I'm dealing in certainties!' The same mood had gripped the believers in first-century Thessalonica.

This hope of theirs was *patient*. The patience in question is not the resignation of the stoic, the 'grit your teeth and get on with it' attitude of the person who likes to appear completely unmoved by adverse circumstances. The Christian anticipates the return of his Saviour with calm confidence. Buoyed up by this hope, he can endure the shocks of life in a resilient and cheerful spirit. Whatever things might be like in the short term, it will all turn out well in the end.

3. A church chosen by God

Like all the people of God in every era of Christian history, the men and women who made up the fellowship in Thessalonica had been chosen by God. The word '*election*' simply means choice. No more than five years may pass in the United Kingdom without a general election being held so that those people who are entitled to vote can say whom they would prefer to represent them in Parliament. A nationwide secret ballot ensures that the choice of the majority is respected in each constituency. The biblical doctrine of election simply means that God ordains to eternal life all who come to faith in Christ (Acts 13:48). He did so 'before the foundation of the world' for no other reason than the 'good pleasure of his will' (Ephesians 1:4-5). Election, however, is

not arbitrary, a random choice along the lines of 'Eeny-meeny-miny-mo'. While God saves those whom he is pleased to save, he does so because he loves them. This is not to say that he loves and therefore chooses certain people because they are worthy of it. No one deserves the electing love of God. Christians are not chosen because they are holy. They are chosen in order that they might become holy (Ephesians 1:4).

Some believers appear to be very nervous when they are confronted with the Bible's teaching on this subject, as though they fear that their repentance from sin and faith in Christ might all turn out to be futile because, in spite of it all, they were not among the secret number of the elect. No Christian need ever give way to such fears. Paul said that he knew that his friends in Thessalonica were chosen by God. He knew it, not because he had secret access to the heavenly equivalent of classified information, but because election has consequences. Chosen people exhibit faith, love and hope. No one who has entrusted himself to the mercy of Christ, who finds himself overwhelmed with a sense of love and gratitude to God for all that Jesus has achieved and who looks forward with longing to the Saviour's return will ultimately find that none of this counted for anything because the mystery of divine election had passed him by. His faith in Christ, love for Christ and confident expectation that Christ will come again as he has promised are proof positive that he is among the chosen of God.