

“Grace”
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4
(Preached at Trinity, May 24, 2020)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. During the years 49-51 AD Paul was active conducting his second missionary journey and the world was being stirred powerfully through the powerful preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul had entered into the Macedonian city of Thessalonica and the city was turned upside down. The opposition increased to the point that Paul finally had to flee, but not before many had turned to Christ and a church was planted. Paul was forced to flee for his life, but can you imagine how overjoyed Paul was in witnessing the power of the Gospel. Leaving Thessalonica, Paul journeyed through Athens and then to Corinth.
2. From Corinth Paul sent Timothy to observe and strengthen this small fledgling church and to bring back word to Paul regarding their condition. Paul was greatly pleased in hearing of their faith and love. Paul's first epistle to this church was in response to Timothy's report.
1 Thessalonians 3:5-7 NAU - "For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. 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, ⁷ for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith;"
3. This second letter was written within months of Paul's first letter to the church of Thessalonica. As a continuation of 1 Thessalonians, Paul maintains his focus upon their persecution and gives additional teaching on the second coming of Christ. He also confronts the disobedient and undisciplined life of some in the church.
4. Paul begins this letter in a manner similar to his other letters. Paul followed the format that was common in the letters of the 1st century:
 - It was customary to open with the identity of the sender and recipient of the letter: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians
 - This was followed by some form of greeting
2 Thessalonians 1:2 NAU - "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
 - After the greeting it was customary to give an expression of thanksgiving.
2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren"

5. While Paul followed the typical form of first century letters, as I've stated in the past, his words were never mere formality. In addition, Paul gave a particular Gospel quality to his letters.

For example, it was customary for most 1st century letters, especially in the Hellenistic world, to give an expression of "peace." But it was not customary to include an invocation of "grace" in the greeting. Paul is often referred to as the "Apostle of Grace." Grace was at the heart of his ministry. He uses the word often. Not only does he use it to open all of his letters, he also used it to close his letters.

6. Although a reference to grace is included in all of Paul's letters, we shouldn't arbitrarily see each reference as having a particular emphasis. On the other hand, for Paul grace carried such significance that we should not overlook the context of Paul's words.
7. Grace is at the heart of everything in our lives as Christians. To give a general definition of grace, it is God providing us blessings we do not deserve and cannot earn. As sinful human beings we have no claim upon God's blessings.
- a. Fallen men often complain as if the comforts of life are theirs by right. We've heard such complaints often during this pandemic. What we deserve is God's wrath. We are under God's just condemnation.
 - b. This is hard for us to accept. We deserve no blessing, no creature comfort, none of things we enjoy in this life. They are all given by God's grace and grace is always undeserved.

8. In this salutation Paul invokes the blessing of grace upon the Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 1:2 NAU - "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

In **Verses 3-4** Paul sets some parameters around the grace he has in mind. He expresses his gratitude to God for His blessings, all of which are tokens of His grace upon these Christians. Paul has his focus upon a particular dimension of God's grace.

- First, Paul expresses gratitude for their saving faith—the grace of salvation.
2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged"
- Second, Paul directs attention to the grace of sanctification – the enlarging of their faith and the increasing of their love.
2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater"

- I. Paul expresses gratitude for their saving faith—the grace of salvation.

2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged"

- A. Paul is expressing his gratitude to God for His grace of faith
 1. Before their faith could grow and enlarge they had to have faith
 2. One of the reasons Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica was to determine if they possessed genuine, saving faith.
 3. This is the starting point. Saving faith is the fruit of God's grace.
- B. As Christians we must never cease to be amazed at God's grace.
 1. As Christians we should never cease to marvel.
John Newton's words must be our own –
"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

2. Too often we diminish or fail to marvel at God's amazing grace. We fail to comprehend the magnitude of sin. We fail to recognize our just condemnation. Hell is right for deserving sinners.
 3. Most people presume that all people deserve heaven. They see human beings as being basically good. It is right for God to send them to heaven. They see it as consistent with God's character. Hell seems inconsistent with the character of a loving God. They fail to take into account God's infinite holiness.
What is amazing is that God would choose to save any.
 4. There is nothing in God's character that demands our salvation. If all of us received the just penalty for our sin it would not be a blemish upon God's love or His goodness or any of the other attributes that define His Divine essence.
 5. Some are troubled by this truth. One Arminian author writes:
"Limited atonement contradicts the love of God, making God not only partial but hateful toward the non-elect."¹
 6. Such thinking exposes a faulty comprehension of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It is not hateful for God to bring His just penalty upon sin.
- C. As we read Ephesians 2, we catch a hint of the magnitude of our sin. Paul concludes that all of us are children of wrath. Wrath was as much a part of us as our arms and legs. God's fierce, infinite anger is kindled upon us. But then we come to **Verse 4** and read the words,
"But God, being rich in mercy"
And then Paul describes the riches of God's grace ending in **Verses 8-9**
Ephesians 2:8-9 NAU - "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."
- D. Grace is put on display in God's redemptive purpose. God has chosen to impart salvation to undeserving sinners.
1. We often refer to Calvinism as the "Doctrines of Grace." This is because grace defines it. As soon as you speak of Total Depravity you are left at the mercy of God.
 2. Arminian theology says that Jesus came and died for all making salvation possible for all but definite for none. A man is saved because he determines to exercise faith towards Christ.
This fails to take into account the extent of our depravity. Total depravity simply refers to "total inability." The Bible describes him as a dead man. The dead man has no interest in embracing Christ. He will not and cannot turn to Christ and trust Him. This is why our faith must come from God – it is a gift from God. It is by God's grace alone.
 3. It boils down to the distinction between monergism and synergism.
 - a. Monergism says salvation is by God's grace alone. It is His work alone. God must enable a sinner to believe or to turn to Christ by faith. Regeneration is transforming the sinner from spiritual death to life. **Jonah 2:9 KJV** - "Salvation *is* of the LORD."

¹ Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co, 2011), P. 137.

- b. Synergism says the sinner must cooperate with God in order for faith to be activated in the sinner's life.
The Arminian teaches that God gives grace to all men, even stating that God partially regenerates men enabling them to freely choose or not choose Him.
As Roger Olson writes in his book against Calvinism:
"Arminians believe that prevenient grace restores life to the person dead in trespasses and sins. In Arminian theology a partial regeneration does precede conversion, but it is not a complete regeneration. It is an awakening and enabling, but not an irresistible force. Being saved . . . is only a matter of not resisting. This is a passive act; it could be compared to a drowning person who decides to relax and let his rescuer save him from drowning."²
- c. The problem with this view is the presumption that dead men have the ability to cooperate.
This cooperation denies that salvation is by grace alone. Salvation becomes God's work plus the free-will action of man.
4. In our salvation God does a marvelous work in us. He takes dead sinners and breathes in them spiritual life enabling them to see the excellence of Christ. By God's grace we embrace Jesus Christ as our Savior and King. Our only hope is the redeeming grace of God.
5. The faith that saves is given by God as an act of His grace. Only this faith is then enlarged and increased and this too by grace.

- II. Paul directs attention to the grace of sanctification – the enlarging of their faith and the increasing of their love.
2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever greater*"
- A. As we saw in 1 Thessalonians, Paul saw faith and love as the evidence of their salvation
1 Thessalonians 3:6 NAU - "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love"
1. Paul knew of their faith and love but also knew they needed to be strengthened. It is evidence that their faith is genuine. Paul was greatly pleased and filled with gratitude to hear the report that their faith and love was increasing.
2 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "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*"
2. Christians are expected to grow. Like our mortal bodies, where there is life there is growth. Babies do not stay babies. Christians are expected to increase in faith and love.
2 Peter 3:18 NAU - "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity."

² Ibid., Pages 171-172.

3. We should always examine ourselves to see the evidence of God's grace. Have your faith and love been enlarged? Are you growing as a Christian? Are your spiritual appetites increasing?
 4. Sanctification is God's work. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ our faith and love are increased. Where our salvation is God's work alone, we participate in our sanctification. We cooperate with God's work in us.
- B. We never diminish the human aspect of sanctification
1. We must understand the human duty to live holy lives before God
 - a. We are to discipline ourselves gaining control of our flesh.
1 Cor. 9:27 NAU - "but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified."
 - b. We are to diligently pursue righteousness and flee from all forms of sin.
2 Timothy 2:22 NAU - "Now flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."
 - c. We must apply ourselves to God's means of grace – we must have a steady diet of the word of God.
Spurgeon: "If you would have your little faith grow into great faith, you must *feed* it well. Thou tellest me thou hast little faith. I ask thee whether thou art given to the meditation of God's Word, whether thou hast studied the promises, whether thou art accustomed to carry one of those sacred things about with thee every day?"³
 2. But every Christian understands clearly that it is beyond our power to live a holy life. We cannot increase our faith and love. And yet we must grow.
 - a. We need God's work in us to live and grow in holiness. This is by His grace.
 - b. Our faith is greatly enlarged by God's grace
Our love grows by God's grace
1 Thessalonians 3:12 NAU - "and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another"
 - c. Faith and love cannot be increased by human effort alone. We need the Holy Spirit to work mightily within us.
Galatians 5:22-23 KJV - "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, ²³ Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."
 - d. Since it is by God's grace Paul expresses gratitude to God for it.

³ Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, eds. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 275.

Conclusion:

1. God is continuing to lavish His grace upon us
2. Your salvation was by God's grace. Your progress in the Gospel is by God's grace
3. God is continuing to increase your faith that you might be strong in faith, confident in assurance, mighty in works, joyful in affliction.
4. You are continuing to increase in holiness by God's grace. God is continuing to transform your appetites—all by His grace.
 - a. He is continuing to increase your love for Christ. This is at the heart of the Christian life. You are becoming more and more Christ-centered. This is your highest aspiration—and it's by God's grace.
 - b. God is continuing to make you more gracious and forgiving—further evidence of His grace upon you.
 - c. God is continuing to give you greater and greater understanding of His Word.
5. God's blessings upon our church are by His grace.
 - God makes His Word effectual by His grace.
 - Our members will prosper under the Gospel by God's grace.
 - God will add to our number by His grace.
 - God provides our every need by His grace.
6. But we must never diminish the equally important aspect of human responsibility.