

1 Thessalonians 1 (1) – Grace to You & Grace with You

Thessalonica was the largest city of Macedonia. On the map, Macedonia is part of modern-day Greece. Macedonia would be the northern part of Greece (where Thessalonica, Berea, and Philippi were), with Achaia (where Corinth and Athens were) being the southern part. Thessalonica is about 100 miles west of Philippi, and about 200 miles north of Athens.

To see the background to this letter, let's turn to Acts 17:1-9. I'll read that and then give you a brief summary. Paul and Silas had visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, having passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, since there were no synagogues there (Acts 17:1). He preached for "three Sabbath days" (Acts 17:2). This was more than three Saturdays, because the custom for the first century synagogues was to have meetings on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. So, "three Sabbath days" could mean three weeks, and then that would mean Paul would have preached several times, perhaps as many as nine times.

Paul's preaching had made many converts, a small number of Jews, many "God-fearing" Greeks, and some leading women, who were probably Gentiles (Acts 17:4, cf. 17:12). The unbelieving Jews were jealous of Paul, so they gathered a mob and started an uproar (Acts 17:5), claiming that Paul and Silas were supporting another king besides Caesar (Acts 17:7). The reason that people got worked up over this was because Thessalonica was a free city. But if Rome heard that they were supporting a new king, Rome would act, and Thessalonica would lose its free status.

Acts 17:1-9 seems to say that Paul had been preaching about Jesus as king. Surely, he must have been preaching about Jesus' coming kingdom. And the jealous Jews took advantage of this, and provoked a riot. The city authorities took security money from Jason (Acts 17:9) in order to keep the peace, and keep Paul out of town. Paul wanted to return to Thessalonica, but was unable to (1 Thessalonians 2:18). The new converts also seemed to misunderstand Paul's words about Jesus as king and his coming kingdom. They thought Paul

meant this would happen very soon. This is why Paul talks about the end times in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Paul had a brief but fruitful stay in Thessalonica. But Paul and Silas were cut off from returning there by the monetary pledge which Jason had to make to keep the peace. If they came back, Jason would be financially ruined. However, Timothy's name is absent from Acts 16:6 to 17:13. So Timothy was not with Paul and Silas on their visit to the city. This is why Paul was able to send Timothy back to the Thessalonians, to encourage them, since Paul and Silas couldn't go back. Now, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were together again. And Timothy's report was encouraging (1 Thessalonians 3:6).

1 Thessalonians has several purposes. Paul wanted to express his joy that the church was doing well. He wanted to confirm his ministry and the Thessalonians' conversion. He wanted to correct some misunderstandings about eschatology. And he wanted to give instruction on certain moral and practical matters. All of this with an eye for the Lord's return.

Vs.1 – *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*

Paul and Silas (Silvanus) had visited Thessalonica for about three weeks. They had been kicked out, but they sent Timothy, who came back with a great report about what was going on with the Thessalonian church. And in this letter, Paul was going to be specific about why he was encouraged. But he starts with his standard greeting for all his letters: *Grace to you and peace.*

Now, I want you to notice something. At the beginning of the letter Paul speaks of grace *to* you. But at the end of the letter, in 1 Thessalonians 5:28, he says – The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be *with* you. Grace *to* you is how Paul starts this letter. And grace *with* you is how he ends this letter. And this is basically how Paul starts and ends all his letters. And this is not mere routine; this was done for a purpose, to communicate something very important. It is something you might have heard before, something repeated

often in Christian circles, and something you may already know. But it is something we all need to be reminded of, something you need to get down into your heart, to be convinced of, and to be consistent and constant with. I cannot stress this enough, that Paul stresses this idea of grace to you and then grace with you in every letter as a lesson you need to heed.

Grace to you, and then grace with you. What does this mean? Well, when Paul says “grace *to* you,” he is using that phrase as a prayer for divine power to come to the reader. And when Paul says “grace be *with* you,” he is saying that his letters are channels of God’s grace. At the beginning of his letters, Paul says I *pray* that God’s grace will flow to you. And the end of his letters, Paul says if you stay in this word, I *know* that God’s grace will flow to you.

God’s word is a means of God’s grace. And Paul knew he was writing God’s word. As he says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 – *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.* So, at the beginning of his letters, he writes “grace to you,” because he was about to deliver God’s word, and impart God’s grace. But Paul also knew that people must continue with God’s word to continue receiving the benefits of God’s grace through it. So, at the end of his letters, he writes “grace be *with* you,” because abiding in God’s word causes us to abide in God’s grace. Grace to you, and grace with you. And as we abide in God’s word, God’s grace abides with us in our daily lives.

Here is the point: Get the word in you so the word will flow through you.

We all know that we need God’s grace. It is by grace we are saved, through faith. And we are called to grow in the grace of God. By the grace of God, we are who we are in Christ. So, we know we need God’s grace.

But we all want God’s grace, too. We want God’s help to get us through our trials and troubles with our faith intact. We want God’s grace to help us deal with the pitfalls and perils and problems and persecution and pain and

pressures of this life. I want God's grace. I need God's grace. And in God's word, I have God's grace. God's word is a means of grace.

Now, what do we mean when we say "means of grace?" The means of grace are God's appointed instruments by which the Holy Spirit enables believers to receive Christ and the benefits of redemption. In other words, the means of grace are the ways that God delivers his grace to us, for salvation, sanctification, blessing, warning, protection, direction, for everything that pertains to our lives in Christ. Reading, teaching, and preaching God's word, prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, these are the means of grace.

How do the means of grace work? Not on their own. They work by the Spirit of God in the hearts of God's elect through faith. Regarding salvation, Ephesians 2:8 says – *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.* And Romans 10:17 says – Faith comes by hearing the word of God. As James 1:18 says – *God...brought us forth by the word of truth.* And as 1 Peter 1:23 says – *...you have been born again...through the living and abiding word of God.* So, we know that the word of God is a means of saving grace.

But the word of God is also a means of growing in grace. God uses his word to sanctify us, to grow us in holy living, grow us in the knowledge of him, and grow us in our works of faith for him, his people, and his kingdom. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells you that Scripture was breathed out by God for your profit, so that you may be complete, and equipped for every good work. 2 Peter 1:3-4 says – *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.* Divine power, divine promises, divine nature – the word of God brings the power, the promises, and the nature of God to our lives. The word of God is what you need to live the life God wants you to live. Ephesians 6:17 says to take up *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* God's word helps you stand firm in God's victory. That is why we sing...

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
Bound to Him eternally by love's strong cord,
Overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

If you really want to grow in grace, you must rely on God's appointed means for that growth. Think about this. God has told us what he uses to grow us, bless us, direct us, and protect us. Instead of searching for some new or novel or secret way, you should approach these regular means with faith, like a dependent child, knowing that God has promised to add his blessing to them as we use them with repentant and believing hearts.

Paul ends vs.1 with *Grace to you and peace*. Grace and peace go together. Grace is the fountain and peace is the stream. God's peace flows from God's grace, which flows from God's word. Everyone wants peace. But everyone needs grace. Because there is no true peace without grace first. And God's word is a means of grace that brings God's peace. Are you truly at peace with God? Peace comes by faith. And faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. All is well in the kingdom. Grace to you, and grace with you. Amen.