

1 & 2 Thessalonians



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E X P O S I T O R Y

C O M M E N T A R Y

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

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1 & 2 Thessalonians

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

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1 & 2 Thessalonians

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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ISBN: 978-1-59638-977-9 (cloth)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-978-6 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-979-3 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Phillips, Richard D. (Richard Davis), 1960-

1 & 2 Thessalonians / Richard D. Phillips.

pages cm. -- (Reformed expository commentary)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59638-977-9 (cloth : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-59638-978-6 (epub) --

ISBN 978-1-59638-979-3 (mobi)

1. Bible. Thessalonians--Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2725.53.P484 2015

227³.8107--dc23

2015017406

To L. Edgar Barnhill III,
with thanks for his stalwart friendship in Christ,
and to Him who is coming
when the final trumpet sounds (1 Thess. 4:16).

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica provide an enlightening snapshot of the life and concerns of the earliest Christian churches. Written from Corinth within weeks of Paul's sudden need to depart from his beloved Thessalonian converts, the letters express the apostle's joy that these believers excel in the most important of graces: faith and love. From this perspective, 1 and 2 Thessalonians set forth vital teaching on what makes for a good church. Paul's converts did not have political power, financial resources, or perhaps even great numbers. But having received the gospel "not as the word of men but as . . . the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13), they possessed true spiritual riches and power. In this way these two letters, among the earliest of the New Testament, provide an excellent primer on what constitutes a healthy and thriving church, even amid adversity and with a need for continued spiritual growth. As such, these letters are a vital study for pastors and especially those called into church-planting, and also for every Christian who longs for a healthy and growing Christian life.

The letters to the Thessalonians are particularly known, however, for their concentrated doctrinal teaching regarding the second coming of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul's eschatology in these letters is of primary importance for those seeking a firm understanding of end-times teaching. It is my conviction that Paul's teaching here reproduces in a doctrinally clear fashion the teaching of Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24–25 and Luke 21. Thessalonians also provides an essential doctrinal grid for approaching the book of Revelation. As such, the apostle's clear and orderly teaching in these letters is a vital resource not only for properly understanding Christ's return but also for inciting a joyful anticipation that agrees with the earliest Christians' fervent desire. In my view, one of the great tragedies today is that

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so many Christians have been led to face the thought of Jesus' return with fear and dread. But for Paul and his Thessalonian readers, Christ's coming is nothing less than "our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). This joyful expectation of Christ's return is clearly communicated in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, so that a careful study of this material will lead to a life-and-death transformation of our hope for the future in the Lord.

The expositions in this commentary were preached to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina. I thank this beloved congregation, with special thanks for the encouragement I have received from the session for my commitment to study and writing. I am always grateful for the ministry partnership of my wife, Sharon, together with the blessing of our five children. This volume is dedicated to L. Edgar Barnhill III, who for many years has been a devoted friend and who is a stalwart servant of Christ and his church. Most of all, I thank and praise the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who will soon return "with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). To him be glory forever.

Richard D. Phillips
Greenville, South Carolina
June 2015



1 Thessalonians

STANDING FAST IN THE LORD

1

TO THE THESSALONIANS

1 Thessalonians 1:1

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



Everyone can use a little encouragement. When the famous painter Benjamin West was a boy, he decided to paint a picture of his sister while his mother was out. Gathering some bottles of ink and paper, he soon made an awful mess in the house. When his mother returned, she saw the mess but also her son's attempt at making art. Instead of scolding him, she picked up the portrait and declared, "What a beautiful picture of your sister!" and kissed her son. West later recalled, "With that kiss I became a painter."¹

PAUL'S ENCOURAGEMENT OVER THE THESSALONIANS

Encouragement is so valuable that even the apostle Paul needed it. Having recently arrived in the decadent port city of Corinth, the apostle could only

1. Quoted in Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 119.

To the Thessalonians

have been discouraged by his recent experience as an evangelist. Landing in Greece at the city of Philippi, he had gained noteworthy converts such as Lydia and the Philippian jailer. But after a false arrest and savage beating, Paul and his colleagues were asked to leave the city (Acts 16:11–40). Moving along the Aegean coast, he next came to Thessalonica. After preaching in the synagogue there, some Jews and “a great many” devout Greeks came to faith in Christ (17:4). This success roused the anger of the Jewish leaders, who raised a disturbance against the Christians, so that once again Paul left town after only a short stay. On the apostle went to Berea and then Athens, where he preached a famous sermon on Mars Hill but once again had to leave only a small band of converts behind.

From Athens, Paul sent his young assistant Timothy back to Thessalonica to minister to the believers whom they had left there (1 Thess. 3:1–2). Shortly after Paul arrived in Corinth, Timothy returned with news that lifted the apostle’s spirits: “Now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love . . . we have been comforted about you through your faith” (vv. 6–7). “For now we live,” Paul exclaimed, “if you are standing fast in the Lord” (v. 8).

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to express his joy in the believers’ faith. Based on information from the book of Acts, scholars date this letter during the year A.D. 50 or 51, making it one of the oldest New Testament documents, with only Galatians and James likely to have been written earlier. First Thessalonians is one of Paul’s most encouraging writings, expressing his relief and joy. Leon Morris comments:

[Paul] wrote in exultation of spirit, having just heard the good news of the way in which they were standing fast. He wrote to let them know how thankful he was. He wrote to let them know of his tender concern for them. He wrote to encourage them in the face of the opposition, even persecution, that still confronted them. He wrote to give them fuller information about matters in which their zeal had outdistanced their knowledge. He wrote to put them further along the Christian way that meant so much to him and to them.²

These are matters in which we, too, need to be encouraged and instructed, for which purpose the Holy Spirit inspired 1 Thessalonians and preserved it for many generations of Christians.

2. Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 23.

PAUL AND FRIENDS

Our letters today normally begin by addressing the recipient: “Dear So and So.” First Thessalonians follows the ancient practice of first identifying the author(s): “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy” (1 Thess. 1:1). These opening words remind us that this book is not an abstract theological treatise, but a letter. The teaching given here is not intended for highly trained specialists but for ordinary Christians of all kinds. The letter served to bridge the gap of space between apostle and church for the sake of ministry. The same letter bridges the gap of time between Christians today and the apostles who were charged to provide the foundational teaching of doctrine and practice for the followers of Christ.

It is noteworthy that Paul’s salutation includes the names of his two assistants, both of whom had helped to plant the Thessalonian church. *Silvanus* is a Greek rendering of *Silas*; one bearing that name preached the gospel alongside Paul. Silas is first seen at the Jerusalem Council, where he is described as one of the “leading men” of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22). After the Jerusalem Council affirmed the acceptance of the Gentile churches, Silas was sent with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with this news. He is identified as a prophet (v. 32), which means that while he was not formally invested with apostolic authority, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to provide revelation from God. After Paul and Barnabas disputed and parted ways, Paul chose Silas, whose character and gifts made him a valuable partner in evangelism and church-planting (v. 40).

Early in Paul and Silas’s first missionary journey together (Paul’s third journey), they encountered Timothy at the church of Lystra. Timothy was a young man of good reputation whose mother was a Jewish believer and whose father was Greek. He joined Paul and Silas as an assistant (Acts 16:1–3) and would go on to serve as Paul’s ministerial son and most valued deputy, ultimately serving as pastor of the strategically important church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3).

Paul’s pattern of ministering as a team fits the overall New Testament approach of joint rule by a plurality of spiritually gifted and qualified men. Not only did Paul usually minister with partners, but he also gave instructions that a plurality of elders would be placed in charge of local churches after he had departed (see Titus 1:5). This practice reflects a general principle

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that is rooted in Christ's own instruction. Midway in his own ministry, when Jesus commissioned seventy-two evangelists, he sent them throughout Galilee "two by two" (Luke 10:1).

The benefits of this team approach to ministry include emotional, physical, and spiritual support, a balancing of complementary gifts, and a combination of fellowship and accountability that reduces the likelihood of a leader's falling into sin. Moreover, the modeling of camaraderie among a ministry team encourages similar fellowship in the church and encourages all believers to participate in the work of spreading the gospel and building the body of Christ. Although Paul is plainly the principal author of this letter, we can imagine him consulting with his partners and praying with them as they communicated their joint concern together for this fledgling church.

The leading author of 1 Thessalonians was the apostle Paul. Formerly known as *Saul of Tarsus*, this titanic figure of the New Testament is first encountered in the Bible as one of the chief persecutors of the followers of Christ. Saul was so zealous to oppose the gospel that he journeyed from Jerusalem to Damascus to root out the church there. Along the way, he was confronted by a vision of the exalted Lord Jesus, who called him to both faith and apostleship (Acts 9:15–16). With his conversion, Saul's name was changed to *Paul*, meaning "little," perhaps to convey the humility to which the proud Pharisee was called in service to Christ.

As the leading apostle to the Gentiles, Paul wrote thirteen biblical books, making up just under a quarter of the New Testament. In most of his letters, Paul identifies himself as "an apostle" of Jesus Christ. The fact that he did not use this designation in 1 Thessalonians probably reflects how recently he had ministered there, so that his apostolic credentials were well known and accepted.

An apostle is "one who is sent" or "commissioned," and Christ's apostles were commissioned to preach the gospel and form the initial churches. Most importantly, the resurrected Lord Jesus granted them authority to teach and rule on his behalf, empowering them with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; Acts 1:8). Peter O'Brien states, "As an apostle [Paul] has the authority to proclaim the gospel in both oral and written form, as well as to establish and build up churches."³

3. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1999), 84.

Christ's apostles consisted of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, with Matthias added to replace the betrayer Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:16–26). Acts 1:22 establishes the qualifications that an apostle must have been personally discipled by Jesus and an eyewitness of the resurrection. These qualifications show that there can be no apostles today. Moreover, the work of the apostles in founding the church and establishing its doctrine was completed during the initial era of the church. Paul fulfilled the criteria for the apostolic office by means of his conversion and commissioning on the Damascus road. What Jesus said to the Twelve just before his ascension into heaven applies equally to Paul: “You will receive power . . . , and you will be my witnesses” (v. 8). Paul's writing, like that of the other apostles, is the exalted Christ's own Word as the Holy Spirit inspired these official messengers from Christ to his church.

THE CHURCH IN GOD AND IN CHRIST

After identifying the senders, ancient letters typically stated the recipients. Paul addressed this letter: “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:1).

The Greek word for *church* is *ekklesia*, which has the general meaning of “assembly.” In the Greek society of Paul's audience, this word evoked images of the great democratic assemblies in which free citizens met for shared rule. Speaking generally, an *ekklesia* was any body joined together for political, social, or other purposes. The Christian church is a unique kind of assembly that has turned to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul's later writings will convey the distinctiveness of the church by referring to his readers as “saints,” that is, holy ones who have been separated by God for faith, godliness, ministry, and worship in Christ's name. John Lillie comments: “Called out . . . from the surrounding mass, whether of unbelieving Jews or of heathen idolaters, and quickened individually with a new life, they were, as a church, incorporate one with another, set apart and furnished for holy service, and consecrated to a glorious destiny.”⁴

Most important to the meaning of *church* is the Old Testament background of Israel as the assembly of the Lord. The Greek translation of the

4. John Lillie, *Lectures on Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Tentmaker Classic Commentaries (1860; repr., Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Tentmaker Publications, 2007), 22.

To the Thessalonians

Old Testament commonly used in Paul's day (the Septuagint) used *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal*, which designated the gathering of Israel as the congregation of God's people. Thus, Paul sees the Christians to whom he is writing as an extension of the ancient people of God who were redeemed in the exodus and called out as a pilgrim nation to serve and worship the Lord. G. K. Beale observes: "In this light, the Thessalonian church was part of the true Israelite congregation of God's people who had been established by Messiah Jesus' latter-day redemptive work."⁵

Seeing the church as the great assembly of God's people throughout history highlights its importance to the Christian faith and life. To be a Christian is to be part of the church, both locally and universally. The church provides the communal context for Christian evangelism, discipleship, worship, and ministry. When Christians are saved out of the world, they are saved into Christ's church, which serves "to establish group boundaries between saved and unsaved humanity."⁶

Paul wrote his letter to an assembly of Christians at a particular place and time. His original audience was "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1). Christian life and ministry will always have a local feel and flavor. There is a tendency today, however, to exaggerate these differences when it comes to the witness of the gospel. When we think of Paul's various places of ministry, we should note that his strategy varied little, and his doctrine not at all, despite the wide variety of cultural and social contexts in which he served. Paul explained to the Corinthians that he had come to preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). In a city with a large Jewish population, such as Thessalonica, Paul would begin preaching in the synagogue, proving from the Old Testament that Jesus was the promised Messiah. In a city without many Jews, such as Athens, Paul still preached in order to declare Jesus as Savior and Lord. After his preaching had caused conversions, Paul then disciplined and organized a local church to continue preaching the message of Christ.

As the chief city of the northern Greek region of Macedonia, Thessalonica was a strategic location, with probably a quarter-million residents. Since its main street was the primary east-west highway of the Roman Empire, a

5. G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42.

6. Charles A. Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 71.

strong church in Thessalonica would be well situated to spread the gospel to others. This strategic potential did not cause Paul to change his ministry approach, but it could account in part for the interest and attention he showed to this important church.

Paul's audience may have been located in Thessalonica, but their identity came from God. Paul thus refers to them as "the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1). The worldly city of Thessalonica had proved to be inhospitable to the Christians, causing Paul and his friends to leave and exposing the church to persecution (see Acts 17:1–9). So how encouraging it was for them to know that their life was rooted in God himself, who through Jesus Christ had become their loving Father. Thessalonica might reject them, but God had received them as children. Thessalonica might vilify and persecute them, but God the Father would provide for and save them. Paul's language of being "in God the Father" emphasizes that the church dwells in God, "as not merely the ground of her existence, but as her fortress and high tower, and her eternal home."⁷ Although these Thessalonians are "newborn Christians, freshly converted from either Judaism or paganism," though their beliefs and "moral standards have been recently adopted," and though "they are being sorely tested by persecution," Paul is still confident of their perseverance "because he knows it is God's church, and because he has confidence in God."⁸

In addition to its grounding in God the Father, the church is also in "the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1). By placing Jesus alongside God the Father, Paul emphasizes the full deity of Christ. This expression, penned a mere twenty years after Christ's death and resurrection, identifies the deity of Christ as an essential article of faith for believers. Paul further notes the deity of Jesus by referring to him as *Lord*. The title *kurios*, or *Lord*, was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for *Yahweh*, the personal and covenant name that God had revealed to his people (Ex. 3:14–15). This divine name is now given to Jesus. As Lord, Jesus is sovereign over his people. As *Christ*, which means "Messiah," or "Anointed One," Jesus is the Savior who has atoned for our sins and reconciled us to God. With Jesus as Lord and Savior, the church is to respond obediently to Christ's Word through his

7. Lillie, *Thessalonians*, 23.

8. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 26–27.

apostles, relying on his saving work as the ground of our blessings from God and drawing near to him as the source of our vitality and joy. Since the church is rooted, saved, and enlivened “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” then the way for a church to most powerfully experience the life and blessings of Christian salvation is to be a God-centered and Christ-captivated church. This includes making the Great Commission that Jesus gave us to proclaim the gospel to the world our overarching concern.

PEACE TO YOU

Having identified himself and his partners, and then having biblically defined his audience, Paul concludes his salutation with an expression of divine blessing. Writing out of the encouragement that they had given to him, Paul encourages the Thessalonians with God’s rich blessing: “Grace to you and peace” (1 Thess. 1:1). Paul interjects theology into all his greetings, and here he notes the two great themes of salvation: grace and peace.

When we think of the peace of Christ’s salvation, we should first think of receiving peace *with* God. The Bible shows that mankind’s greatest need is to be restored to a relationship of peace with the God whom we have alienated and offended by our sin. The great problem of humanity is not caused by illiteracy, disease, or bad government. Our true problem is that, having rejected God’s rule, we are at war with the sovereign Creator. Paul writes that “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom. 8:7 NIV). As a result of our guilt for breaking God’s law, all men and women are justly condemned under God’s wrath (Eph. 2:1–2). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul laments, with this dreadful result: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Given the great problems of alienation and condemnation, our great need is the peace with God that Jesus came to provide. The angels proclaimed at his birth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). Jesus reconciled sinners to God by dying to pay the penalty for our sins, so that through faith we may be justified before God. Paul concludes, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Along with peace *with* God, Christ ministers the peace *of* God in our hearts. The world thinks of peace as the cessation of hostilities: we sign peace

treaties and the fighting temporarily stops. The hatred is still there, however, the causes of strife are unrelieved, and no unity or true love arises. But Jesus gives a true and abiding inward peace, producing unity and harmony among men and women. Jesus told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27).

The biblical idea of peace is designated by the Hebrew word *shalom*, the deep and abiding peace that results when people are right with God. Leon Morris has defined this peace as “a flourishing state of soul.”⁹ This is the peace that David celebrated in Psalm 23: “The LORD is my shepherd,” he sang. “I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

Inner peace comes only through the resurrection power sent by the exalted, reigning Jesus Christ, who restores us to God and gives us his own peace. Indeed, “he himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Do you know peace with God? Are you conscious of his favor and love? Do you love him in return, longing to do his will and know him better? Peace with God comes by confessing your sin to God, trusting Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for your salvation, and surrendering your life to “the God of peace,” who will “sanctify you completely” through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). Having received God’s peace in Christ, we then are to pursue peace in our relationships and in the world. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged each believer to make a practical commitment to peace: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).

GRACE TO YOU

It is wonderful to know that we can have peace with God and especially encouraging to know that this peace comes as a gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. This may be why Paul blesses the Thessalonians with the greeting, “Grace to you and peace.” It is by grace that we receive the peace of God through Jesus Christ.

9. Quoted in J. Philip Arthur, *Patience of Hope: 1 and 2 Thessalonians Simply Explained*, Wellwyn Commentary Series (Ross-shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1996), 22.

To the Thessalonians

One way for us to think about grace is as a description of what God is like. *Grace* is often defined as “God’s unmerited favor.” This is true, but it does not go far enough. Grace is God’s favor to us when we have merited his condemnation. We have earned God’s hatred and wrath, yet he causes us to be forgiven and makes us his precious children. God gives that which is most precious to himself, his only Son, that he might remove our guilt on the cross, reconciling us to his love. The measure of God’s grace is the costliness of his gift, and in the giving of Jesus to die for our sins, God has shown himself to abound in grace for sinners.

God’s grace finds expression in an unstoppable plan of grace for our salvation. Paul refers to this plan in 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” This states that God graciously chose his people in advance (see Eph. 1:4), sent Jesus into the world to achieve their salvation, and then, when the apostles came to preach that good news, granted them his grace so that they would believe and be saved. The entirety of salvation is the work of God’s grace! How encouraging it is for beleaguered Christians today, like the Thessalonians of old, to know that our salvation is the free gift of God, according to his sovereign and eternal plan of grace. We may therefore rely utterly on God’s grace, giving God all the glory for our blessings in Christ. Though we have all sinned, believers “are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24).

Grace describes God’s unmerited favor and his method of saving sinners. Finally, grace is God’s power working in us for newness of life. Later in this letter, Paul will exhort the Thessalonian believers to live in a holy manner that pleases the Lord. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification,” he will announce, “that you abstain from sexual immorality” and “that no one transgress and wrong his brother” (1 Thess. 4:3–6). The Thessalonians were no longer to live in the sinful and harmful manner in which they had previously lived as unbelievers, and that their society, like ours, had come to think was inevitable and unavoidable. How can morally depraved sinners change so as to live in a holy and loving way? Paul says at the end of 1 Thessalonians that the God of peace will “sanctify you completely” (5:23). What an encouragement it is to know, Paul exults, the power of God’s grace to empower us to live in a way that pleases the Lord and brings blessing to us.

IN THE FACE OF CHRIST

This chapter began with an incident from the life of Benjamin West, who was encouraged to be a painter by his mother's kiss. Something similar occurred to Mercedes Ruehl when she attended her first Broadway play as a little girl. The star actress on the stage noticed young Mercedes gazing at her with adoring eyes, and looked back directly at the girl, holding her gaze for several moments. Mercedes considered that gaze an invitation to fulfill her dream to be an actress, and with that simple encouragement she went on to be one of the few stage performers to win both an Academy Award and a Tony Award in the same year.

If you will look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Bible, you will gain from him the greatest encouragement of all as God's grace invites you into his heavenly peace. For when you look to Jesus, the "star" of all history looks back to you with grace, revealing himself as the Savior who died for your sins. Jesus invites you to believe in him, to enter the church over which he is Lord, and, encouraged by his grace, to extend his offer of peace to a sinful, broken world.

“With theological precision and the care of a seasoned pastor, Richard Phillips reveals the sure biblical path through the underbrush of end-times confusion and explains the relevance of Paul’s letters for today. Readers will be instructed and encouraged to follow Christ anew, trusting in the God who sovereignly directs history. Highly recommended.”

— BRANDON D. CROWE, *Assistant Professor of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia*

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ISBN: 978-1-59638-977-9

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