

**Thanksgiving Through Transformed Lives**  
**based on 1Thessalonians 1:1-10, David Jahnke, 10/26/14**

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest Christian writing we have, written about 20 years after Jesus' death. And the letter opens with the words "Grace and peace be with you." So the earliest words in the Christian scriptures are grace and peace.

I decided to look at all of Paul's letters and every single one of them opens up with a greeting of "Grace and peace..." It may have just been a formulaic greeting. But why this formula to both faithful and errant churches? I think has everything to do with Paul's understanding of God and salvation. Paul's opening words are, in a sense, God's opening words to the world. In the beginning things came into being out of God's grace—the world did not have to come into existence. You and I did not have to either. Creation is a gracious gift. And so are all of us. We were created to be a gift to the world, and receive gifts from the world; and thus live in peace with each other and creation.

The world's peoples did not do such a great job of that and instead turned to idols. And yet God's words God's Word to the world at the pinnacle of creation were Grace and peace are in the person of Jesus Christ who welcomed all. He said to the sinners of his day. "Would you please join me for a meal? I have some things to show and teach you. You are God's children and he loves you no matter what. And from now on, why don't you follow me into God's Kingdom of God's of peace.

So in the beginning and at the pinnacle of history are Grace and Peace and come back home to my intentions for you. Grace and peace will be spoken to creation at the end of time as well. They will be offered to all who struggle to be the graceful peacemakers that Jesus called us to be. God will say something like what the risen Jesus said to the disciples who had just abandoned him to were hiding in the upper room. Jesus said, "Grace and peace be with you." And while Jesus sent them out into the world to share mercy and peace, in the end, God's grace will call us to into the world of perfect peace that God always planned."

Paul's emphasis on grace reminded me of my final examination for ordination. I had to write a statement of faith and go before the committee on preparation for ministry. And this nice group was quite affirming. But the chair of the committee said she was surprised that I did not have the word grace in my statement of faith. She said that she had read lots of these and this was the first one to not include that word.

I shrugged my shoulders and thought for a few seconds and came up with a clever response. “Maybe it’s because grace is a part of every aspect of this statement of faith. I think everything that God does is an act of grace so it was hard to specify...maybe?” They seemed to like that answer.

I will come back to this illustration at the end of the sermon. But the point for now is that everything is a gracious gift from God; and his grace and peace are ever-present and inviting us to be at ease; they are always recurring and calling when we are not at peace.

Now these gifts must be received in faith as the Thessalonians did. The almost unfathomable thing is that seems to be a work of God as well. Paul says the Thessalonians were chosen by God. And Paul knew this because His essentially Jewish Word to these Greeks was received so well; and it transformed the community to such an extent that it must have been God’s Spirit at work.

So some questions for you: 1. Have the Word and Spirit of God convinced you that there is a Power greater than the powers of this world? That Isis, Ebola, corrupt politicians and greedy executives are miniscule when compared to an almighty God? That there *is* a Presence greater than the emptiness you feel? A Love greater than the loneliness you feel? A Grace more powerful than the sins you commit? And a life more powerful than death?

The Thessalonians had come to believe in these and they had turned from idol worship. They were persecuted by their fellow Greeks and some in their church had died. This was one of the reasons Paul was writing to them— to praise them for their faithfulness and that steadfast hope.

I was watching a documentary on the rock band The Eagles the other night and, of all people, their guitarist Joe Walsh, the craziest of the bunch had some wise words in looking back on the 70s. He remembered an anonymous philosopher who said that as you go through life, it is like giant waves crash upon you over and over again and toss you hither and thither but as you get through it and look back upon it, you see how the waves were like sound waves that formed a symphony.

I heard a Patti Griffin song yesterday that sums this up:

Can you hear the voice inside you?  
It calls you back to where you belong  
Can you see the one beside you?

Who's been standing there all along?  
Time will tell you, what you can't hear now

This was where I was some in my mid 20s. I was following the most common idol of the modern world— the self. You see if life is not a gift from God, then we are our own. Our bodies are ours to treat and our lives ours to live as we see fit. And if creation is not a gift from God to be used according to God's purposes, then we might as well gain as much of it as we can and we use it as we see fit, typically to serve me and mine— my family, my community, my nation— all of which become idols. War, greed, poverty, destruction of the environment result.

I was starting to see the error of a self-centered way in my mid-20s and was intrigued by Jesus' self-giving teachings. But there was no conviction or motivation or power to do so; that is until my life started to unravel through things beyond my control. Some of those life waves started to rock my world. And I could not take it so I decided to cry out for a lifeline even though I did not believe anything was there. I kind of let go and went under and I was flooded with peace.

A Word assured me that I was not on my own. And all of the senseless crap that had me reeling was all for this moment; for the sake of coming to know this truth and to feel this peace which went beyond understanding.

All of this was an incredible gift; one that I had to respond to. And I now had the reason to believe and to love and bless others that was lacking before.

Similar waves crashed into the Thessalonians. The world was trying to put them down and instead, they persevered in offering up works of faith and love. Their continual love of their neighbors made them models of how to live not only to their non-believing neighbors but to other Christians in the area as well. And Paul was just amazed at what the Spirit was doing in and through them.

I feel the same way as I look at you all and think back to all that you have been through. You refuse to let go of God and you thus persevere in labors of love for this community and beyond.

Here in six weeks we will: 1. walk with and for the hungry, 2. put shoes on their feet, 3. donate blood to them, 4. buy livestock for them, 5. And put thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas hams on their tables for the holidays. And we do none of this with any expectation of receiving anything in return other than the joy of giving and knowing others are being blessed. That, my friends, is the definition of a labor of love and a work of faith.

You are a wonderful example, not only to each other, but to nominal Christians in this area. That is what the Thessalonians were to believers in their area.

There is one place where we *all* can learn from the Thessalonians was their pointing to the source of their works of faith and labors of love. Paul said that “the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place...”

Now we might be clever enough theologians to realize that Jesus pervades all good things just as grace pervades all God’s works. And thus we might neglect to name Jesus just as I neglected to name grace in my statement of faith. And while, in the end, God’s Will will be done no matter what, our cleverness should never keep us from becoming a part of God’s Will to make his Son known in the present. It is indeed right to give our thanks and praise and to give credit where they are due and thus point people away from idols and toward the living God who raised Jesus from the dead. Our life’s work is to point to the love and grace and peace of the risen Christ who came once and will come again to make all things right. So to the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...