

## Special Delivery

Isaiah 37:8–20, 2 Thessalonians 1:1–2

Old timers might remember when, for the sender paying an extra fee, a local post office would deliver urgent mail immediately upon receipt, rather than waiting for the next regular delivery to the addressee. This was called Special Delivery.

I use this illustration to remind you that 2 Thessalonians, which we are beginning today, was originally a *letter*. There was no post office back then, so letters had to be sent by private courier. Acts 17 records that after Paul and his companions were sent away to Thessalonica for their safety, Paul went to Athens. The 1560 Geneva Bible and the original 1611 King James Version included the following postscript: “The second epistle to the Thessalonians was written from Athens.” It seems more likely that the letter was written from Corinth, about 60 miles distant, where Paul stayed longer. The letter would have to be carried about 525 miles in all up to Thessalonica. It would be interesting to know who carried it, but we are not given that information. What we do know is that the epistles to the Thessalonians are inspired by God himself, and that indeed makes them special. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” God not only inspired the text of this epistle, he also providentially oversaw its safe delivery to its intended recipients. Furthermore, he providentially preserved this letter down to the present day. So it is no overstatement to speak of 2 Thessalonians as “special delivery.” This letter contains precious words for which the faithful Christian renders profound thanks. “Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven.” Amen!

This morning let us consider three particulars about this spiritual treasure: the sender, the addressee and the contents. First, the

### 1. Sender

The letter begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians . . .” It is evident that the brilliant Paul was the human author, but Silvanus and Timothy were familiar with its contents and in full agreement with its teaching. Their names also appear at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians, which is likely the earliest of Paul’s epistles. The name *Paul* means *small* or *little*. It is a fitting name for a Christian. Our purpose on this earth is not to lift up ourselves, but Christ. *He* must increase; *we* must decrease. “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

Silvanus was a prominent member of the church at Jerusalem who was chosen by the apostles and elders, along with Paul and Barnabas, to go to Antioch as bearers of the decree adopted by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. His name means *wood*—a dense growth of trees—as in the Robert Frost poem “Two roads diverged in a *wood*, and I—I took the one less traveled by.” The name *Silvanus* is related to *Pennsylvania* (“Penn’s wood”). Its shorter form is “Silas,” which has the same meaning.

The third name, Timothy, means *honoring God*—something every Christian is duty-bound to do. Timothy was Paul’s “son in the faith,” whom he had begotten through the Gospel. May God grant us all the joy of encouraging others in the faith.

One thing we don’t find here, that we find in nine other epistles<sup>1</sup> is “Paul . . . an *apostle*.” Paul doesn’t mention his apostleship in the letters to the Thessalonians. Paul’s apostleship—the fact that he was personally chosen by Christ to preach his gospel—was not under attack in Thessalonica as it had been attacked elsewhere (as in Galatia and Corinth). So in our epistle he is just “Paul”—*little*.

I tell you these details, dear congregation, to remind you that these were real people, not just names on a page. They are our fellow saints with whom we will spend eternity. They walked this pilgrim journey before us and were overcomers, as can we by God’s grace. So take heart, dear saints! We are not the first to live life in a fallen world. God will give us grace to “run the race with patience,” even as he gave to the saints of old.

But I want to emphasize that Paul, with all his vast learning and scholarship, was just the penman. Ultimately, God is the author of this letter. We saw this last week as we finished up 1 Thessalonians. In the second-to-last verse of that first letter Paul writes, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.” As I said then, the word “charge” is actually a very forceful word meaning “I put you under oath.” The ESV has “*I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.*” The church has divine authority to preach and teach the *Bible*, the Word of Christ—everything that’s in the Bible, nothing that is not in the Bible. It is inconceivable that Paul would write, “I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” if that letter was merely his own human opinion and not the divinely-inspired Word of the living God. Paul would never have said, “I put you under oath before the Lord to read *Gulliver’s Travels* or *The Origin of Species* to all the brethren.” It is the word of *God* that is to take precedence in the church’s worship. The church gathers at the feet of Jesus to sit and learn of him who is our life. Ultimately, the message of 2 Thessalonians is the message of Christ. The sender of this letter is *Christ*.

Are you willing to be taught by Christ? Are you willing to sit at his feet and learn of him and become his disciple? Are you willing for him to do his work of grace in your life? Are you willing for the Son of God, through his Spirit, to make changes in your life to make you more and more like Christ—to take away your love of sinning and give you a love for righteousness and truth, to mold you and make you more and more like him who loved you and gave himself for you? As we encounter the truth of God in this book, we must receive it with joy as the spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Rom., 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Gal., Eph., Col., 1 Tim., 2 Tim., Tit.

treasure that it is. It is given by inspiration of God so that we, receiving its message, hiding it in our hearts, might grow more and more to be like Christ. Our job, brothers and sisters, is to receive the word with joy, that it might bring forth a harvest of spiritual fruit in our lives.

When we receive a letter—or even an email—it is important to know the sender. In the case of 2 Thessalonians, the sender is God, so we better sit up and take notice.

In our Old Testament text there was a letter from Sennacherib king of Assyria. He had been carrying out a campaign against all the fortified cities of Judah, and had taken them in battle. King Hezekiah was rightly worried. Sennacherib sent one of his generals, the Rabshakeh, with a great army to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. He cried out brazenly to the people on the wall, boasting of all his past successes. This terrified the citizens of Jerusalem. He dares the people of Jerusalem to try to resist him. He tauntingly cries out, “Now in whom do you trust, that you rebel against me?” He says, “I will give you two thousand horses—if you are able on your part to put riders on them.”

Suddenly, the army of the Assyrians is called away to another battle, but the Assyrian general sends a letter to Hezekiah, promising that his army would be back. Hezekiah received the letter delivered by the messengers, read it, went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. This threat against Jerusalem could only be successfully resisted through prayer. And when Hezekiah prayed, God answered, promising to protect Israel.

In our Old Testament text the sender was a heathen king, but in our New Testament text the sender is God himself. Since it is God himself, we, his people, ought to listen. Second, consider the

## **2. Addressee**

The letter continues: “to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is a letter to a church—a particular church, the church in Thessalonica—but it is inconceivable that this message was for that church only. Second Thessalonians is for the whole church—for all churches everywhere.

It was written to the *church*, not to private individuals per se. Christ plainly said that his purpose was to build the church: “upon this rock *I will build my church*; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). This is the work that Christ has undertaken in the present time: the work of building his church.

The church of Christ is not bricks and mortar, it is not buildings and steeples. The building-blocks of Christ’s church are *people*—individual lives transformed by the gospel. We—each of us—were conceived and born in sin. We were rebels and haters of God. We were like sheep that went astray, far out into the wilderness of this world. But Christ is the Good Shepherd. He went out into the wilderness to search for us. He found us, caught in the briars of sin. He picked us up upon his

shoulders. By his life-giving Spirit he gave us a heart to know him, a heart that longs after righteousness, that longs for fellowship with God. He brought us into his flock and made us his joyful worshippers. He made us know that we are not our own but were bought with a price, the price of his own precious blood. Now, we enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise. We have a new sense of purpose: to glorify God and enjoy him, with his saints, forever.

In the book of Acts we read that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” It is Christ who builds his church. He did not save us to remain alone, isolated, far from his fold. He says, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.” As his sheep we can say, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.” The spiritual food that he feeds us is *himself*. Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him” (John 6). This we do spiritually, as we receive him by faith. This spiritual eating and drinking is symbolized in the Lord’s supper. We receive the Lord’s supper with his church.

A lot of people seem to want Christ without the church, but in the church is where Christ is to be sought. Christ *dwells* with his church. It is his spiritual family. In the church is where the saints have a sense of belonging.

So our text begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Greek word is ἐν—sounds a lot like *in*, doesn’t it? That’s not a coincidence. The primary meaning is *in*, of the space within which something is found. The examples are numerous: in the city, in the desert, in the temple, in the marketplace, in a house, specifically, in our Father’s house; ultimately, in heaven. The church of the Thessalonians “*in* God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church bears a special relationship with the triune God. “*In* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” is the place of protection, the place of fellowship, the place of nurture, the place of peace and joy. The church alone bears this special relationship with the triune God. If you want a relationship with the true God you must be in fellowship with the church. This is a relationship that cannot be broken. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of Christ.

One commentator writes: “It should not be overlooked that the deity of the Son is taught here. Combining ‘God the Father’ and ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ under one preposition demonstrates Jesus’ equality with the Father and consequently his deity.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is God incarnate! Only he could save us. Amen!

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<sup>2</sup> Expositors Bible Commentary (PocketBible)

We've considered the sender (God) and the addressee (the church). Thirdly, consider the

### 3. Contents

What are the contents of this letter from God addressed to the church? The answer is profound—even astonishing—but we've been over this so many times it may seem commonplace. Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The contents are “grace” and “peace”—grace to be saved, and peace to live the Christian life.

Once again in rapid succession Paul uses the important phrase “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” He uses it twice for emphasis. The church is “in” God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we learn that grace and peace are “from” God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Under the last point we considered that combining “God the Father” and “the Lord Jesus Christ” under one preposition demonstrates Jesus' equality with the Father and consequently his deity. But there is something else that should be mentioned, and that is the force of the word “Lord.” The Greek word is *κύριος*. This is the word that hundreds of times in the Old Testament translates the Hebrew word Yahweh, God's personal name. So when the Bible says, “the *Lord* Jesus Christ,” that is an assertion that Jesus is Yahweh—God. The Athanasian Creed teaches: “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.” This is the doctrine of the Trinity held by the Christian church. Without it we cannot be saved. The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever. Amen!<sup>3</sup>

So Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Grace” is God's unmerited favor in Jesus Christ—grace to be saved.

How can you know if you are a recipient of God's grace? You know, if you love God—the God of the Bible; if you hate your sin and long to seek his face; if you love to pray and worship him, you have a hunger and thirst for righteousness, you have a longing for heaven, a longing to be with God's people forevermore. On the other hand, if other *things* are more important to you than God, if you are content *not* to seek God's face, if you love the things of this world, if you have no desire to read the Bible and learn what God has in store for you, if you don't enjoy being with God's people and worshipping with his church, then that is an indication that you are *not* a recipient of God's grace. If you are troubled by this, then talk to one of the elders about it.

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<sup>3</sup> SC 21, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

In its biblical context “peace” is much more than the absence of war. The concept represented by the Hebrew word *שלום* is completeness, soundness, welfare, health. “Peace to you” was a common Hebrew greeting meaning something like *may you be in health and may your soul prosper*. The New Testament teaches that it is only through being justified by faith that we have peace (εἰρήνη) with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1). We are no longer enemies of God but are become his friends.

So grace and peace in all their fulness come only from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. But they come to the elect. It is “*grace to you and peace.*” The “to you” is significant. There is “*no peace*” to the wicked. “There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked” (Isa. 48:22). Again, “there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa. 57:21). “Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth *peace!* O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off” (Nam. 1:15).

Here, then, is the content of the Christian gospel. “Grace”—God’s unmerited favor to his elect, regenerating them, giving them new hearts capable of understanding the gospel, of repenting of their sin, of looking to Jesus Christ the only Savior, is given to men, women and children, drawing them to Christ. And “peace” is the result—the cessation of conflict with God, giving them the blessings of salvation, drawing them into fellowship with the Father and the Son.

O church of Jesus Christ, it is to you that the triune God offers peace! What a blessing.”

At the beginning of this service we sang, “I love the LORD, the fount of life and *grace*” (Ps. 116). Then we sang the familiar Psalm 23, which closes with the words “So surely your covenant mercy and *grace* / will follow me closely in all of my ways; / I will dwell in the house of the LORD all my days.” Shortly we will sing, “By *grace* I am an heir of heaven.” And we will close our service with the words of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Our salvation is all of grace.

After Communion we will sing “Be still, my soul”—be at rest, for our covenant God has given us peace in Christ our Lord.

And so we have our Special Delivery. The sender is our covenant God, the addressee is the church of Jesus Christ, and the content is grace and peace.

Church of Jesus Christ, you are singularly blessed! Amen.