

<sup>1</sup> *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:* <sup>2</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 1:1,2 This is nearly identical to the greeting in the first letter. Paul changed “in God *the* Father” to “in God *our* Father.” He adds that grace and peace are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We can extend grace to one another, though our old nature is not likely to do so unless it gains some benefit. The grace that comes from God is our greatest need. Without grace being extended to us, mankind would have ceased to exist long ago. The holiness and justice of God would have justly annihilated all human beings. The prophet Ezekiel said that “*the soul that sins must die*” (Ezekiel 18:4<sup>i</sup>). From the very beginning the first innocent couple with no knowledge of evil chose to disobey the only thing that their Creator warned them not to do. He told them that in the day they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die (Genesis 2:17<sup>ii</sup>). They did die spiritually, but the grace of God let them go on living physically. If God was only just and righteous they would have died physically as well. But He is also loving and gracious. He immediately set in action a means for their redemption and ours as well. **The entire Old Testament is the development of that plan that climaxed with the cross, the resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.** The blood of Jesus reconciled us to God (Colossians 1:20<sup>iii</sup>). We have peace with God through Jesus’ blood shed for us (Romans 5:1<sup>iv</sup>). That is why grace and peace are from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God became *our* Father when we received the grace that forgave our sins through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Galatians 3:26,27 <sup>26</sup> *for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.* <sup>27</sup> *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.* John the Beloved wrote in John 1:12 <sup>12</sup> *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,* If you have accepted the forgiveness that Jesus offers you then you are a part of the family of God and have peace with God, which is the greatest possible peace. That is because it does not matter what happens to you in this life, you are destined to spend a glorious eternity with our loving God and in the presence of Jesus. God has lavished His grace on you because He loves you (Ephesians 1:7,8<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>3</sup> *We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.* 2 Thessalonians 1:3 Paul tells the church of Thessalonica that it is right for him to always give thanks for them. He gives two reasons. Their faith is growing abundantly, and their love for one another is increasing. That is the great joy of everyone who makes disciples. We want to see their faith grow and their love increase. Those are signs that they are truly converted. We should ask ourselves if this is true of us. Is our faith increasing? Do we trust God more now than we did last year? When difficulties come, do we find it easier than in the past to believe all things work together for good (Romans 8:28<sup>vi</sup>)? Is our knowledge of God’s Word increasing? Do we have more spiritual insights to share? Or have we stagnated? Are we a flowing river of life or as still as the Dead Sea?

*Spurgeon explained how to get a strong and growing faith: “By that means you are to grow. This is so with faith. Do all you can, and then do a little more; and when you can do that, then do a little more than you can. Always have something in hand that is*

*greater than your present capacity. Grow up to it, and when you have grown up to it, grow more.*"<sup>vii</sup>

Evidence of our faith increasing is our love for one another. As it was Jesus' command to us to love one another, if we love Him, that love for one another should be increasing. As our faith increases we realize the love of God more and more which causes our love for Him to increase. That overflows toward the family of God. Like soldiers who become close because of a united mission and the danger they face together, so we too can be united for the same reasons. Recognizing God's abundant grace toward us causes us to have more grace towards our fellow believers. Knowing God loves them like He loves us should also draw our hearts toward one another. Is our love for one another increasing? It certainly should be if our faith is growing.

I remember during one of our trips to Israel we became instantly united with another group as we were walking out of the Upper Room site. We were in single file passing one another, turned toward each other and the hugs just broke out. We saw Jesus in one another and knew we were there for the same purpose and had the same Lord. The rest of the trip we would see them from a distance and wave to each other. We never asked their denomination, they were of a different skin color, and not a lot of words were exchanged. I think you could say we recognized Jesus in each other.

That is what we need both inside our own church and outside toward all believers. If we recognize the person is a believer, then we love Jesus in them. They may differ on the non-essential doctrines and where we attend worship services but that should never keep us from loving one another. The Thessalonians were growing in faith and increasing in love for one another. Would Paul say this of us? Would Jesus say this of us? Let us commit to grow in faith and in love for one another! Amen?

*<sup>4</sup> Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.* 2 Thessalonians 1:4 Paul boasted about the Thessalonians to other churches of God. He boasted about their steadfastness and faith they demonstrated while under persecution and affliction. This is a little different from the praise of their growth in faith. This is encouragement for standing firm and trusting God when times are tough. This letter follows shortly after the first letter, so these believers have not been in Christ for long. Probably under one year. So, we cannot say it is due to what we would normally attribute such strong faith, such attributes like knowledge of the Word, a disciplined prayer life, and excellent preaching. These are babes in Christ and yet they are solid. The Holy Spirit was at work in them deepening their relationship with their Savior. The persecution drove them closer to His heart to receive the comfort they needed. They must have encouraged one another and relied on the Lord to see them through. Their eyes must have been fixed on Jesus and the hope of heaven rather than what they were losing in this world (2 Corinthians 4:17,18<sup>viii</sup>).

Our brothers and sisters in Iran, North Africa, Nigeria, India, parts of Mexico, China, and many other places live that daily. In Pakistan being a Christian means lower income laborious jobs that barely earn enough to stave off starvation. Witness to a Muslim and you can be executed. In Egypt it means your young daughter may be kidnapped and forced to be a bride, and you may never hear from her again. In North Korea it means you and your family can be executed on the spot or sent to a labor camp where you are literally worked to death. In China your organs may be harvested while

you are still living. How do they stand firmly in the faith when they see this happening and know they may be next? It seems contrary to what you might think, but it causes the Christians to love one another more. **The threat we face is complacency.** We have very few threats. We have very little fear that our church service will be interrupted with a suicide bomber. We have sufficient food to stay healthy. We worry more about our weight than we do about persecution. But what keeps us from sliding into apathy is the same thing that helps the persecuted endure. We fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2<sup>ix</sup>). We know life is short. We know the glorious promise of eternity in His presence (1 Thessalonians 4:17<sup>x</sup>).

*<sup>5</sup> This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— <sup>6</sup> since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup> and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.* 2 Thessalonians 1:5-7 Paul told the Philippians something very similar.

*<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.* Philippians 1:27,28 The manner of the Christian life that is worthy of the gospel which we see in our passage for today is steadfastness of faith and increasing love for the family of God which are signs, or we could say evidence, both of the coming judgment on the persecutors and relief and vindication for those who are persecuted. The redeeming grace of God made them worthy, and then the work of the Holy Spirit helping them endure persecution demonstrated what God had worked in them. The fires of persecution were refining their way of life, as they do in us as well (1 Peter 1:7).<sup>xi</sup> It is evidence of God's right judgment in calling us His own.

That gives us insight into how Paul understood persecution, probably from being on both sides of the issue. When he was a persecutor and saw the believers stand firm and express forgiveness and love. That nagged at his conscience that he was on the wrong side of the issue. Their lives were evidence of God's righteous judgment in calling them to Himself. But when Paul was the one who was persecuted, it affirmed to him that he was, as Jesus said, among the prophets who were persecuted before us (Matthew 5:12<sup>xii</sup>).

He saw this as evidence of the righteous way in which God will balance the books. The righteous will inherit the kingdom, and the persecutors will be afflicted with the vengeance of God. The persecuted find relief and the persecutors will experience eternal destruction.

*<sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,* 2 Thessalonians 1:9 The language of "flaming fire" is from Isaiah 66:15<sup>xiii</sup>. Verse 24<sup>xiv</sup> of that same chapter in Isaiah tells us the punishment is eternal. Jesus referred to the wording of that verse to affirm that hell is eternal punishment (Mark 9:43-48<sup>xv</sup>). Paul's use of the words of Isaiah 66 show us that Paul is referring to eternal punishment.

I grew up in a Baptist church during a time when hell was emphasized as a reason to make a decision to accept Jesus' forgiveness. The fear of God should certainly deter us from sinning. How can we reconcile this with a God who is love (1 John 4:8<sup>xvi</sup>). I find the

balance on this issue in Exodus 20:20. The LORD had descended on Mount Sinai to make a covenant with the people of Israel. The sights of the mountain quaking and lightning along with the mighty claps of thunder were enough to frighten the strongest warrior. After the Ten Commandments were spoken, <sup>20</sup> *Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”* Did you see the double use of the word fear? They are slightly different words in Hebrew. However, the meaning is almost identical. The context helps us understand. Do not be afraid! The command to not fear is used 365 times in Scripture. Angels speak it. YHWH says it. Prophets say it. Jesus commands it. We are not to be afraid because we have an all-powerful God who loves us and holds our future in His hands. But we are to fear the justice of our righteous God. It is His righteousness that demands that He judge evil, on the cross or in hell. That is what restrains us from sinning. So, on the one hand we are comforted by His gracious attributes, and on the other hand we are to fear the fact that His holiness will not tolerate evil (Habakkuk 1:13a<sup>xvii</sup>).

It sounds like a contradiction within one verse but consider if it was not said in this way. If we were afraid of His presence, we would not draw near to Him. If we did not fear His righteousness, we would end up destroying ourselves with our sinful ways. Like children with a loving parent, we should not fear snuggling in their arms, but we should fear discipline when we are caught eating spoons full of sugar from the sugar jar. And if we keep doing it despite the discipline, the discipline becomes more severe. If we keep it up we make ourselves sick. Worse yet, our hearts become hardened toward our loving parents, and we end up with a rebellious life that lands us in prison or ends our life.

I am not describing it this way to lighten what is said in these verses. Hell is eternally horrific. Those who will be in hell have rejected the gospel. But how can they refuse to obey the gospel if they had not heard it? So apparently they did hear it in some form and chose another path.

Not knowing God in the Hebrew way of thinking is not wanting a relationship with God. It is not that they are unaware of His existence. Paul told the Roman church that creation speaks so clearly of God that all people are without excuse (Romans 1:20<sup>xviii</sup>). To choose not to know God is rejecting the continual invitation of the Holy Spirit to come to Jesus for forgiveness (John 12:32<sup>xix</sup>). It is to harden one's heart to all that God does to draw them to Himself. They persecute or mock believers because the believers' love pricks their conscience and they want to silence that conviction so they can go on living as if they were god. Jesus told us that if they hate Him they will hate you also (John 15:18<sup>xx</sup>). Knowing they are fighting conviction can help us have grace toward their actions. We never know if one more demonstration from us of the grace and love of God might bring about the turning point in their lives.

In verse 9 we have another expression that can be seen as a discrepancy if we are too literal. Hell is eternal. Many have tried to interpret the Bible to say otherwise, but it is clear. We are eternal beings. We will go on living after death in the place we choose now. One place is with Jesus, glorifying and worshiping Him for all that He is and all He has done for us. The other choice is to go on being our own god. That is to be away from those attributes of God that He longs for us to embrace: love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, kindness. That is the glory of His might. Instead, they have chosen His righteous judgment forever with those like themselves who insist on being their own god.



Guzick agrees with this understanding of away from the presence meaning to be away from the attributes of God that we enjoy. He writes, *What truly characterizes hell is that there, people are **from the presence of the Lord**, in the sense of being apart from anything good or blessed in God's presence. **From the presence of the Lord** sums up the Bible's understanding of hell. Nothing must be said more about its horrors, other than hell will be completely devoid of God and every aspect of His character, except one: His unrelenting holy justice.*<sup>xxi</sup>

I said that it seems to be a contradiction because of Revelation 14:9-11a <sup>9</sup> *And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, <sup>10</sup> he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger; and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. <sup>11a</sup> And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.* These have chosen the presence of God's righteous judgments. God is omnipresent, but hell is a place where the presence of His grace and mercy is not expressed. That is what we need to fear. Holy fear sets our feet on the right path to the right place.

This verse from the Revelation tells us that hell is in the presence of Jesus who is the Lamb. It is relevant that John chose the expression Lamb to describe Jesus. One would think the Lion of Judah would fit better. But Lamb tells us that this was not God's intention but the choice of those who experience it. The gentle Lamb of God gave Himself for their salvation, but they reject Him and choose their own way. There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is destruction (Proverbs 14:12<sup>xxii</sup>). When God called to their heart, <sup>28</sup> *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* <sup>29</sup> *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* Matthew 11:28,29 Their response was, "No! We will go our own way." When He said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me,"* John 14:6 They responded, "Who needs the Father? We will be our own god and do as we wish." When He afflicted them to turn them from their path, they cursed Him and at the same time declared He does not exist. They isolate themselves from God's mercy and grace by refusing it altogether. The result is forever being in the presence of the Lamb's holy justice.

Dear friends, you know that I do not often preach on hell. I preach what the next passage is declaring in Scripture. We have come to this passage today because there are probably some of you who have not come to Jesus for the forgiveness He offers. He loves to the extent that He took your punishment for you (Colossians 2:14<sup>xxiii</sup>). I find whatever passage we are on is what God is speaking to those in attendance. It may be to strengthen your resolve to grow in faith and love. Or it may be that you have not yet responded to His invitation to you, that you are insisting on being your own god, directing your own life in whatever way is pleasing you at the moment. How is that working out? Eternity is before us, and time passes so quickly. Will you hear His call to you this morning? Will you embrace His forgiveness, love, and mercy or insist on His justice? Choose this day whom you will serve, your Maker and lover of your soul, or yourself and its fallen desires (Joshua 24:15<sup>xxiv</sup>). But as you do, remember where that path ends. My prayer is that you will choose the love, mercy, and grace of the God who formed you in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:15,16<sup>xxv</sup>; 2 Corinthians 5:20<sup>xxvi</sup>). He is waiting for you with open arms (Luke 15:20<sup>xxvii</sup>).

## Questions:

1 Where does peace come from and how do we obtain it? 2 What are the first two reasons for Paul's gratitude? 3 How do we grow in faith and love? 4 What is the threat to faith in the USA? 5 How did Paul understand the benefit of persecution? 6 What is the double use of "fear" in the Exodus 20:20? 7 How does one end up on hell? 8 What is the main choice we will make in life? 9 How can "the presence of the Lord" be in hell and those in hell away from His presence? 10 Describe the two choices before us?

---

### <sup>i</sup> **Ezekiel 18:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

### <sup>ii</sup> **Genesis 2:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

### <sup>iii</sup> **Colossians 1:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

### <sup>iv</sup> **Romans 5:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### <sup>v</sup> **Ephesians 1:7-8 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,<sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight

### <sup>vi</sup> **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

<sup>vii</sup> <sup>11</sup> David Guzik, *2 Thessalonians*, David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2013), 2 Th 1:3–4.

### <sup>viii</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

<sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

### <sup>ix</sup> **Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

### <sup>x</sup> **1 Thessalonians 4:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

### <sup>xi</sup> **1 Peter 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### <sup>xii</sup> **Matthew 5:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### <sup>xiii</sup> **Isaiah 66:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> "For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

### <sup>xiv</sup> **Isaiah 66:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

### <sup>xv</sup> **Mark 9:43-48**

<sup>43</sup> And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to

---

enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,

<sup>48</sup> ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’

<sup>xvi</sup> **1 John 4:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

<sup>xvii</sup> **Habakkuk 1:13a (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong,

<sup>xviii</sup> **Romans 1:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

<sup>xix</sup> **John 12:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

<sup>xx</sup> **John 15:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

<sup>xxi</sup> David Guzik, *2 Thessalonians*, David Guzik’s Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2013), 2 Th 1:8–10.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Proverbs 14:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Colossians 2:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Joshua 24:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

<sup>xxv</sup> **Psalms 139:15-16 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Luke 15:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.