**Gratitude for God’s grace** 21/1/24dkm

Read: John 1:29-51, 2Thessalonians 1

Text: 2Thessalonians 1:1-4

Psalms: 46:5-11, 17:6-11, 9b:7-14, 134a

Coming to the end of the year 2023 was a special time to give thanks to the Lord for all his blessings upon us, upon our family, and upon our country. I was going to include the world but the world seems to be in a mess, with wars in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Yet in many places, even in those experiencing war, disaster, and poverty, people are turning to the Lord Jesus and the church is growing- the media does not report this of course! A friend of mine took his children to mission conferences so they could hear what the Lord is doing in other parts of the world.

In this second letter of the apostle Paul to the Thessalonian church, he will speak of their faith and love growing, despite ongoing affliction and persecution. I recall a missionary to China saying, ‘Do not pray that our persecution will stop but pray that the church will grow in the midst of persecution’.

Our prayers of thanksgiving to God often focus on healing mercies, on success at school or on the sports field, or on a promotion or a pay rise at work. We pray for such mercies and blessings, and it is right to give thanks when the Lord answers our prayer. But our prayers should focus on spiritual matters, on the salvation of souls and the growth of the church, our church. You pray for your children to do well at school or excel on the sports field, but do you pray that they will come to faith in Jesus Christ. Do you pray that they, like you, will grow in faith and love towards one another? This, presumably, is what Paul prayed for the Thessalonians because it is what he focussed on in his prayer of thanksgiving to God. Our subheadings will be: ‘Grace to you’, ‘Growth in faith and love’ and, ‘Growth despite persecution’.

**1. Grace to you**

The introduction or greeting in this letter is the same as in 1Thessalonians except, ‘God the Father’ becomes, ‘God our Father’ (1:1). This slight change makes it clear that God is our Father, not only the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. By referring to both Father and Son in one breath, the apostle is also making it clear that Father and Son are one. Jewish believers may have needed reminding of the Trinity, along with others. While the words, ‘God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ as not in some MSS of 1Thessalonians 1:1, the words are certainly here in 2Thessalonians 1:1.

This letter, like the first, is from Paul, Silvanus or Silas, and Timothy. We have seen that Paul was in Corinth when he wrote that letter. Forced to leave Thessalonica after just three weeks, Paul went on to Berea, then Athens, and ended up in Corinth. Eventually Timothy brought him news of the church in Thessalonica (1Thess 3:6). The news was encouraging, but they had questions about the second coming or *Parousia* of Jesus Christ. Paul sought to answer these questions and comfort their anxious hearts, while urging them to grow or abound in brotherly love and unity. That letter was delivered, most probably by Timothy, who then returned to Paul in Corinth. By the time he wrote this second letter, answering further questions, a few months may have elapsed.

Paul ends both his letters to the Thessalonians, and indeed most of his letters, saying, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’. He also begins these letters praying, ‘Grace to you and peace’ (1:2). Grace is at the heart of our atonement and salvation. It is by grace we are saved through faith. Grace is what we see in the cross and what we know in our hearts by faith. In knowing the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in salvation, let us know it in our sanctification also, in our growing in faith toward God, and love toward one another. The other day I met a most faithful and gracious man. His heart was overflowing with love for God and love for me, even though we had just met. My heart was touched and I was challenged to ask if I was such a person. Are you such a person? This man was imitating Christ, and this is what we are to do. ‘Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17).

Such grace comes ‘from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2). Such grace comes from a closer walk with the Lord, from being in step with him as it were, as we walk the path he has prepared for us. This is the way of grace and peace. Many are not concerned about grace but they do want peace, peace in the world and in their hearts. How many are at this moment overcome by feelings of guilt for their sin, or by bitterness and revenge toward others- you are not one of them I pray! ‘Do not let your heart be troubled nor let it be afraid’, Jesus said to his disciples as he bestowed ‘My peace’ upon them (John 14:27).

The peace we need most is peace with God because our sin makes us enemies of God. When we repent, God in his grace forgives our sin and reconciles us to himself through the blood of Jesus Christ. Having peace with God means we have peace in our heart, and can be at peace with one another. We cannot walk about saying we have peace with God while fighting with everybody or anybody, any more than we can walk about saying we know the love of God while being bitter and resentful towards other people.

**2. Growth in faith and love**

The Christians in Thessalonica were not bitter or resentful. On the contrary, reports received by Paul pointed to them being known for their brotherly love, even beyond their own fellowship (1Thess 4:9, 10). In his first letter Paul prayed that they would ‘abound in love to one another and to all’ (1Thess 3:12), and they were doing just this, according to his second letter: ‘The love of every one of you abounds towards each other’ (1:3). The whole congregation was showing love towards one another, all of them involved in loving everybody else. ‘This church did not have people who are overlooked and forgotten and on the edges- and it makes Paul’s heart sing with thanksgiving’ writes Ligon Duncan.

Paul writes of their faith growing, and doing so ‘exceedingly’, and of their love for each other ‘abounding’ (1:3). He speaks in superlatives, and he goes on to speak of boasting of them among the churches, but there is always room to abound more in the Christian life. We will not reach ‘fullness’ or perfection in this life. We will never attain to the grace and love we see and know in our blessed saviour and Lord, but this is our goal. Am I watering down Paul’s exuberant words of praise? There is a place for praising, or at least encouraging, fellow believers, and we must be doing this, but let us avoid flattery. Let us not be looking for the praise of men as worldly people do. We do our work unto the Lord, especially our work in the church. It is His praise and His reward on the last day that is the focus of our ministry- as we will see shortly.

Paul begins this letter as he did his first, giving thanks to God that the believers in Thessalonica were continuing in the faith and even growing in faith. He acknowledges their growing faith and love but gives thanks to God because God is the giver of every good thing, including faith and love. But why does Paul feel ‘bound’ or obliged to thank God, and why does he see it as ‘fitting’ or right to do so? (1:3). He could not praise them directly for their faith and love because this would not be true, but in thanking God he was praising them indirectly and encouraging them. He was in a way speaking to himself also, making sure that he was doing just this, encouraging the brethren. Paul was a pastor as well as a preacher.

Not all the news the apostle received from this church was good news, and he will deal the problems in this church in due course. But he does not start with the problems, and does not let the problems dominate his letter. He must, and he does, start with a prayer of thanks to God for these believers and their growth in faith and love. Too often problems in a church become such a focus that we fail to see the work the Lord is doing despite these problems.

In his first letter, Paul gave thanks to God for their, ‘work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Thess 1:3). There is no direct reference to hope in this second letter, but he does refer to their ‘patience’ or patient endurance when he ‘boasts’ about them to other churches (1:4); so we cannot conclude that they had lost hope or that hope was fading among the Thessalonians. On the contrary, their hope, along with their faith and love, was growing as they endured ongoing persecution and afflictions. 'Is not endurance inspired by hope?’ asks Hendrikson.

**3. Growth despite persecution and affliction**

It is James who writes, ‘My brethren, consider it all joy when you face trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience/endurance’ (James 1:2, 3). Paul faced opposition in every city where he preached the gospel. Mostly it was from the Jews who refused to accept Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. The Jews were under Roman occupation and Roman rule, so had to convince local magistrates that Paul and the Christians were subversives, proclaiming Jesus as a rival King. This happened in Thessalonica (Acts 17:7). Paul left town but the local believers endured ongoing persecution.

Governments like that in India deport foreign Christians but they cannot deport locals. Local Christians are discriminated against and harassed, and sometimes beaten and imprisoned. Just how the Christians in Thessalonica were being persecuted we are not told. The Jews kept agitating against them no doubt, and some idol-worshipping Greeks and Romans may have resorted to violence. Later Roman emperors forced everyone, including Christians, to worship them, or else. The ‘or else’ meant being burned at the stake for Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna in AD155. We know how the early Reformers were persecuted and even killed for their faith, on the order of the Pope in Rome.

Polycarp and the Reformers, like the NT Christians, counted it a privilege to suffer and even die for the sake of their saviour and Lord. After being thrown into jail, beaten, and then set free by the Council of the Jews, they ‘rejoiced in being counted worthy to suffer shame for His name’ (Acts 5:41). Are you ready to follow in the footsteps of these men? They were following in the footstep of Jesus of course, which is why they spoke of being worthy to be called Christians, and worthy of the kingdom of God (1:5).

Persecutions and afflictions did not deter these believers but stirred them on in the faith. Their faith, love, and hope were being tested as in the fire, such that they became stronger in their faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter, writing in a similar way to Paul said, ‘That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 1:7). It is not persecution but prosperity that threatens the faith of a believer. Is this not the case in churches here in Australia and other western countries? Let it not be the case in your life or mine!