

2 Thess 1:1-12 Peace, Patience, and Persecution

If we receive a letter, we typically do not focus too much on the greeting.

Paul must have put a lot more thought into his greeting in 2 Thessalonians than we typically do. His greeting is rather lengthy and wanders a bit from the typical pattern of greetings that you find in most letters.

Remember that 2 Thessalonians is a response to some remaining questions the believers in Thessalonica had. Paul had sent them a previous letter, and this second letter addresses other questions bothering the church.

This whole first chapter of the book amounts to an extended greeting. He begins and ends the chapter like a normal greeting, but in the middle, he covers some significant theological matters.

The main theme in this first chapter is steadfast, patient faith in the midst of persecution. The Thessalonian believers were enduring hostility and opposition against them, yet they retained their faith and even grew in their love for one another during these difficult times. They displayed Christian virtues even when under distress. So this first chapter is Paul's expression of appreciation for their steadfast faith and endurance.

We don't face the same kind of persecution, but we should display the same kind of persevering faith, patient endurance, and love for the brethren. In fact, it ought to be easier and more common for us to demonstrate these virtues. We are not under persecution.

Paul packs a lot of theology into this short passage. We'll take two Sundays to work our way through the first chapter.

I. Salutation/Greeting (1:1–2)

We often pass over the initial remarks in a book as fairly unimportant. But this salutation includes some important doctrinal affirmations.

A. Paul addresses his remarks to a local church.

1. Read 1:1 This is a letter—epistle. This letter follows the pattern that was standard at the time for a greeting:
 - a) a statement of the writer(s) – Paul and his colleagues
 - b) a statement of the recipients – the church at Thess.

c) .2-12 a greeting. Greetings often included a wish for the well-being of the readers. In this case, Paul extends a prayer for several sentences and includes quite a bit of theology.

2. .1b Paul is addressing a particular group of people—those who were part of the Thessalonian church.

Paul had started this church on his second missionary journey. He had spoken at the synagogue for just a few weeks, but in that time, a good number of people had been saved and had started a church.

3. .1 What is a church? A called out assembly.

a) “church” was not a religious word at the time. People assembled for various reasons then just as they do today—social, civic, political, military, religious, meetings.

b) Jesus gave the word a theological meaning. He said “I will build my church...” So this church is not a secular assembly; it’s a congregation of believers in Christ. This is a special kind of assembly.

(1) Those in this assembly have been called in a particular sense.

Quote: Christians have received and accepted the ‘call’ of God and Christ unto life eternal, and ... thus form a spiritual body.¹

The church is a body. Christ is the head, and we are all member or parts of his body.

(2) This church is “of the Thessalonians.” That is, the members of the church were residents of the city of Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a large, prosperous port city in Greece. It was a center of government, military, and commerce. Romans, Greeks, and many Jews lived there. The majority of the Christians there were Gentiles, along with a few Jews.

(3) This church is “in God the father”

¹ Lenski, 218.

The preposition “in” means “in connection with.” This assembly is marked off as one connected to or associated with God the father.

- (4) This church is “in the Lord Jesus Christ”
- (a) This is not a Jewish assembly (synagogue); it’s an assembly dedicated to Jesus Christ.
 - (b) This church is for those who believe that we approach God only through the work of Jesus.
 - (c) Jesus claimed to be the only means of having a right relationship with God the Father.

John 14:6; Acts 4:12

- (d) Note that Paul uses the complete title: “Lord Jesus Christ.” The Thessalonian believers had accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord.
- (i) The word “Lord” means “owner, master.”
 - (ii) The title signifies authority. E.g., Luke 6:46
 - (iii) Paul tells us in Romans that a person is saved by calling upon the Lord Jesus Christ as one’s savior (Rom 10:9-10).
 - (iv) And the title “Christ” refers to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior.

App: Anyone who thinks of himself as “in connection with” God and Jesus must also submit to Christ as Lord. The most basic confession of the Christian faith is “Jesus is Lord.”

Trans: So Paul is addressing this letter to those in Thessalonica who had accepted God’s call to salvation and formed themselves into a local church, an assembly dedicated to the glory of God and to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

App: All believers in Christ are called to assemble with a group of like-minded people to dedicate themselves to God and to submit to the commands of Christ. That's what Christians do. Every believer should be connected in some way with a local church.

Each legitimate local assembly of believers is “in” God and the Lord Jesus Christ. That means that the highest authority here is God, not us. This is God's church; the church belongs to Christ. What we do here is for the greater glory of God, not for ourselves.

B. .2 Paul requests that God's grace and peace may rest upon the local church.

1. Grace: God's kindness extended toward those who do not deserve it
2. Peace: positive relations between God and man and between individuals; lack of conflict. Cf., Rom 5:1
3. The source of both grace and peace:
 - a) God, the Father
 - b) The Lord Jesus Christ

Grace and peace ultimately come from God. So many people today lack grace and peace in their lives because they are alienated from God. But anyone can experience grace and peace through Christ.

The church should proclaim God's grace to sinners and enjoy the peace that comes through knowing and serving God.

C. .3 Paul fondly remembers the character of the church.

1. He was morally obligated to thank God for them.
 - a) The word “bound” (ὀφείλω) implies an obligation; to owe; ought. The word usually refers to personal responsibility. Paul felt duty-bound to thank God for them.
 - b) .3b Paul usually begins his letters with an expression of thanksgiving for his readers. Doing so is “meet” (ἄξιος), that is appropriate, fitting, proper.
 - c) We could translate it, “We ought to give thanks to God always for you, brethren...”

App: We are obligated to thank God for one another, especially when we see spiritual growth and faithfulness in one another. We ought to live in a way that others would be thankful for us.

2. .3c He was thankful for their evident moral virtues.

Paul is thankful for the Thessalonians, and particularly for their spiritual growth in Christian virtues. He's glad that they are making spiritual progress.

Other churches that Paul wrote to were doing just the opposite; they were regressing in the faith. Cf., Galatians—Paul was not sure that their faith was genuine.

a) .3b Their faith grows exceedingly (ὑπεραυξάνω). Given the context, it seems likely that Paul has “faithfulness” in mind here. They had retained their faith in spite of serious hostility against them.

Quote: Their tenacious loyalty to Christ in spite of fierce adversity is what Paul finds so remarkable.²

Paul is impressed, not so much with their faith in Christ, but more with their faithful perseverance in the faith under adverse conditions. In fact, their faith/faithfulness had grown in spite of persecution.

“your faith groweth exceedingly” – The rare word *hyperauxánō* means “to grow to the limit,” or “to attain great power,” “to achieve the highest position.”³

In spite of persecution, their loyalty to Christ was growing.

App: Adverse conditions sometimes stimulates faithfulness. That's the proper response to trials—we should grow and be more faithful because of them.

² Rober L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 308.

³ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1229.

Rom 5:4 ... *we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; ...*

Unfortunately, some people respond to trials by becoming less faithful. Some people use trials as an excuse for disloyalty to God and reduced commitment to the church. That should not be true of us.

- b) .3 Their charity/love (ἀγάπη) toward one another abounds (πλεονάζω—excessively, abundantly).

Lit. “everyone each of all of you toward one another.”
I.e., all of them loved one another abundantly. That church was characterized by love among the members.

App: That ought to be true of our church as well. Christ-like love among all of us ought to abound abundantly. That’s how we ought to interact with one another.

- c) .4a Their patience and faith is known in the churches.

Paul was particularly impressed by their patience (ὕπομονή) – steadfastness, constancy, endurance; the basic meaning of the word is “to remain under.” Some translate the word as “perseverance.”

Quote: Patience is the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings.⁴

The Thessalonians were enduring trials and suffering, and in the midst of it, they still demonstrated faith, love, patience. Paul was thankful for their steadfast endurance under such difficult circumstances.

App: I wonder if anyone thanks God for our church? Would anyone describe our church as growing in faith exceedingly, loving one another abundantly, and steadfast patience under trials? Those qualities ought to be true of us. Those virtues are especially important in times of distress and difficulty. We must persevere under difficult trials while we grow in our love for one another and our loyalty to Christ.

⁴ Online Bible Greek Lexicon, #5281

It's obvious why Paul had such a close relationship with these people. They were an exemplary church. They loved one another, grew in their faith, and remained faithful and patient even under distress. That sets a good example for us to follow; that's how our church should be as well.

Trans: After mentioning these great qualities evident in the church, Paul goes on to recognize that the church was enduring...

II. Persecution (1:4b–12)

The church is suffering, but they remain faithful. Paul is very thankful for that. He mentions several things here about how to endure persecution.

- A. .4b See persecution as an occasion to demonstrate patience and faith.
1. .4a We “glory” in you in the churches. “Glory” is literally “boast, show off” (καυχάομαι). Paul boasted about this church for their patient faith in difficult times.
 2. They are enduring “persecutions” (διωγμός)—the attempt to hinder, harass, or destroy the faith by means of inflicting pain or death on the faithful. Persecution is suffering because of one's faith in Christ.
 3. They are enduring “tribulations” (θλίψεις) – oppression, trouble, suffering, pain, affliction. Tribulation is a more general word for suffering of any kind.

Notice the plural of both of these words. They were enduring multiple occasions of persecutions and tribulations.

And also note the word “all” – all your persecutions and tribulations. So this was likely common and frequent experience for them; they endured multiple times of persecution and tribulation.

4. The Thessalonians were enduring (ἀνέχομαι) persecution and tribulations.

To endure is to bear with something difficult or unpleasant, to be patient under a burden, to hold up under a trial. The Thessalonian believers were holding up well as they endured these trials. They continued in their steadfast faith and love patiently, even as they suffered for their faith.

App: Sadly, many American Christians today would hardly bear up patiently under just a little bit of inconvenience. Even the threat of discomfort or trouble sends many Christians fleeing out the door of the church. They refuse to bear up under even a hint of pushback or difficulty. That was not true of this church, and it should not be true of us. We are supposed to endure the difficulties associated with the Christian life with faith, love, and patience. That means we don't give up when things get tough.

5. And all this trouble was due to their faith in Christ. They were enduring this harassment, trouble, and suffering because of the Christian faith that they had accepted. And remember that these were relatively new, mostly Gentile converts. Paul had been with them for only a few weeks, and still they had all these great qualities.

Quote: Their focus was not on personal comfort, fulfillment, and happiness, but on the glory of God and the fulfillment of His purposes.⁵

Today, unfortunately, many church focus on personal comfort, fulfillment, and human happiness—that's what the church is all about. The primary concern is not the glory of God or his purposes. Their focus is on human success and fulfillment.

That's not the purpose of the church. We need to make sure that our main concern is faithful loyalty to God no matter what the conditions.

App: The Thessalonian church is a great example for us to follow. Frankly, their example puts most American churches to shame. Many of us lack patience, love, faith, and endurance. Many Christians today would not endure under any kind of adverse conditions; they would just quit. We must follow the example of the Thessalonians in their perseverance under distress.

- B. .5a See persecution as a “manifest token” of the righteous judgment of God.
 1. “manifest token” (ἔνδειγμα) – proof, evidence, verification.

⁵ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1853.

2. Their enduring persecution was proof of God's "righteous judgment." Or that "God's judgment is right."

a) The sense seems to be that the faithful perseverance of the Thessalonians under persecution is a proof/evidence that God's judgment is right.

b) He's not talking about God's judgment against them for their sin; they were not suffering because of their sin. They were suffering because of their loyalty to Christ.

Sometimes we do suffer because of our sin. We make sinful decisions and suffer for it. That happens. But in this case, their suffering was not caused by their sin.

c) The persecutions and tribulations they were enduring were part of God's righteous judgement that they should suffer "for the kingdom of God."

Paul is saying that God has a purpose for the persecution and tribulations they were enduring. The sense seems to be that God will be righteous in rewarding them for their sufferings.

This whole section is a discussion of God's future judgment. Paul is about to explain how the wicked will suffer for their sins. God will repay the wicked; God's holy vengeance will fall on the unsaved. Likewise, God will reward the righteous for their suffering. God's righteous judgment is allowing the faithful to suffer right now, but in the future, God's judgment will fall on the wicked.

d) The Thessalonian believers were demonstrating that their faith in Christ was genuine by holding up faithfully under persecution.

C. .5b See persecution as an honor.

1. Their endurance of suffering was proof that they were "counted worthy" (καταξιόω) of the kingdom. The word is usually used of being found worthy of some privilege or honor.

God's judgment is that the Thessalonians were worthy of the kingdom of God. Their faithfulness in spite of suffering was evidence of genuine salvation.

2. And their suffering (πάσχω) was for the kingdom. That is, they were suffering because they were Christians. They were suffering for their faith in Christ. The direct result of their faith was persecutions and tribulations.

App: Faithfully enduring persecution at the hands of ungodly people who hate God is an evidence that you are really saved. When you retain your faith steadfastly and patiently under persecution, it is an evidence that your salvation is genuine.

When we face harassment and opposition because of our faith, it's an opportunity to demonstrate our loyalty to Christ. Genuine believers do not shrink back from Christianity or quit just because we face hostility or ridicule because of our faith.

Thankfully, we do not suffer persecutions or tribulations like the Thessalonian believers did. The worst we ever suffer for the faith is minor annoyances, slight frictions, and light harassment. None of these should threaten our faithful loyalty to Christ or his church.

If the Thessalonian believers could grow in their faithfulness, love, and patience under severe persecution, how much more should we be able to be faithful, charitable, and patient when we are experiencing no persecution? We ought to use our peaceful situation to grow even more in faith, love, and patience.

Paul is next going to turn his attention from believers suffering tribulation and persecution to God's just retribution against unbelievers. God's righteous judgment will fall on the wicked at some point, as we'll see next week, DV.

Until then, let's see if we can grow in our faith, abound in our love for one another, and endure our trials with steadfast loyalty to Christ and his church.