

## Truly In Christ

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Every now and again I imagine what it would have been like to live hundreds of years ago.

Whenever I do that I usually think about two questions.

I ask myself, "How would everyday life be different?"

I think about indoor plumbing and hot water tanks.

Honestly, how amazing is it that we can walk over to a faucet turn it on and get hot water out of it?

I think about my natural gas stove, my microwave, and my toaster oven.

I think about my furnace and how it comes on automatically to maintain a comfortable temperature in my house.

When I start to think about things like that I think, "Man if you dropped me three hundred years in the past I would have a tough time making it."

Then I think, "If I was born in that time period I would be accustomed to those things and would probably get along about as good as everyone else in that time period" which leads me to ask another question, "What would I do for a job?"

Electrician is obviously not an option. Doubtful I would have had the opportunity to get enough education for pastoral ministry.

Since I struggle to grow grass, I think I would likely fail as a farmer.

After thinking about a number of different variables I settled on blacksmith as a realistic job that I would probably enjoy.

I've never had the opportunity to try it for myself but I have watched it both in person and on TV and I find it extremely fascinating.

Of course it is far more complex than this, but the simple picture of blacksmithing is taking a chunk of metal, heating up to a very high temperature and reshaping that metal through a process of hammering and heating.

After the desired shape is arrived at, the metal is cooled in something called 'the quench' which makes the steel strong for the task it has been made for.

When that is finished and the metal is polished and sharpened and ready to use.

After that the skill of the blacksmith is the big question that remains.

How do you know that the sword or axe or whatever it happens to be is any good?

That is a question we ask of many things in life.

How do I know something is real or of good quality?

It is a good question and it is a question the bible asks all the time about belonging to Jesus.

[How do we know whether or not we are truly in Christ? As we continue our journey through the letters to a church in the city Thessalonica we have come to the second half of that journey, the book of 2 Thessalonians. In the first letter Paul had expressed concern for how these believers were holding up in a difficult situation and as he writes to them a second time the situation remains challenging to say the least. In these opening four verses of 2 Thessalonians, Paul expresses a great deal of confidence that these believers truly belong to the LORD and so what he writes here is extremely helpful for us in examining our own experience of faith. He tells them three important truths about being in Christ. He tells them first of all that...]

**Point #1 – A believer is united with Christ by receiving what only God can give. (1-2)**

It is possible to be blind to our spiritual needs and it is also possible to try and meet those needs with things that don't really work. Someone who really knows the LORD both knows his/her need and knows that only the LORD can provide for our deepest needs.

*Listen to how this letter opens in verse 1.*

This introduction is very similar to that of the first letter the apostle wrote to these believers.

The authors are the same, the recipients are the same, and God the Father and Jesus are mentioned in the opening of both letters.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:1 he says of those that belong to the church that they are "...in God the Father and the LORD Jesus Christ."

What does it mean to be 'in God and Christ'?

Based on how Jesus describes it to His disciples in John 14, we should think of it as belonging to God and having that belonging define everything about us.

Here in 2 Thessalonians we are given a bit more of what that means.

*Instead of saying believers are 'in God the Father', he writes that Christians are 'in God our Father.'*

As commentator Gene Green suggests, this is saying something more than God is our creator and sustainer.

This is pointing to the closeness of relationship that believers have with God.

Just as there is a Father & Son relationship between God the Father and the LORD Jesus, so too there is a Father & child relationship between God the Father and those that are in Christ.

While we can never be a part of the being and nature of God like Christ is in His Divinity, but we can share in the affection and devotion that the Father has for Jesus in His humanity.

This is the basis of our unity with one another as well. God is more than my father or your father he is our father and that makes us brothers and sisters.

How does that happen? Verse 2 tells us.

We also find the words ‘Grace and peace’ in the opening of 1 Thessalonians, but here the apostle adds the words ‘from God our Father and the LORD Jesus Christ’.

That says something very important about how we receive grace and peace.

It comes from God through Jesus.

I will admit that it is possible for people to be gracious towards one another and possible for us to make peace and to be peaceable towards one another, but whatever capacity we may have for grace and peace in and of ourselves falls far short of our greatest need.

If we extend grace towards one another it is surely wonderful, but we have no power or authority to pronounce judgement or absolve one another in an ultimate sense.

God alone can extend that kind of grace.

If people stop fighting with each other it may have the appearance of something good, but apart from peace with God it will be both temporary and hollow.

Peace biblically speaking means wholeness of being. It means knowing satisfaction, contentment, and fullness of meaning and purpose in the deepest parts of our souls.

We can't get that from one another or any created thing; that only comes from the LORD.

The grace and peace that this verse is talking about can only come from God through Jesus because only Jesus has made a way for us to be justly forgiven for all the things that make us God's enemies.

[A while back we bought a used Honda Odyssey. We had it for maybe a week and many of the electronics started going haywire. We took it back to the Ford dealership we got it from and they said it was a battery. They put in a new battery and a few days later the same thing happened. I brought it back again and they said it was the battery. I said, “you just put in a new battery.” They said, “Yes the problem is it wasn't a Honda battery!” Put the Honda battery in and it's been fine ever since. There was no other option.]

That is the idea here! The only difference being Honda doesn't have to make their cars to work with only a Honda battery.

There are no other options with genuine grace and peace.

God is the only Being that exists in and of Himself.

It is impossible to change our need of God for meaning and purpose in life.

Creating a world where creatures have no need of a creator is logically impossible.

Creating a world without moral law is impossible for a God whose very nature is just and right.

If or when that moral law is violated like it has been in this present world the need of sovereign grace for restoration is unavoidable.

[We our united with Christ on the basis of what God has done. When we say that Jesus is the only way, we are saying something a bit more than God has only provided one way to be united with Him. We are saying only one way is even possible. Being in Christ is a gift from God that can only come from God. Here is a second lesson...]

**Point #2 –A believer is united with Christ by experiencing what only God can do. (3)**

When we see the fruit of being born again in our lives we are seeing the work of the LORD first hand.

Verse 3a reminds us of a theme in the life and ministry of Paul.

We find similar statements in a number of New Testament books written by the apostle Paul.

It was his constant and common habit to give thanks for those who believed the gospel through his preaching ministry and the ministry of others.

This verse I think offers us a valuable insight into why he so often is giving thanks for believers like this.

The word 'ought' is important. It is a word that communicates an obligation.

It has the sense of something that is owed.

That is emphasized in the phrase 'as is right'.

The word translated 'right' there means worthy or deserving or fitting.

Putting those two ideas together the picture that we get here is that there is a moral obligation to thank God for His work among these believers because that's what His work deserves.

It is important to say that obligation and willingness go together here.

If you are like me you may think of things that you have to do as things that you most often would rather not do.

How many kids here are excited when your parents ask you to do chores around the house? You think to yourself, “Mom thank you asking me to do the dishes, it is my sincere delight!”

We would be reading this totally wrong if we see this verse like that.

This is much more like seeing a glorious sunset or landscape.

When we look out on the Rocky Mountains or see a beautiful sunset on the ocean it is our obligation to say, “Wow, God is amazing!”

That is the only right thing to say, but saying it completes our delight rather than diminishing it.

That’s what is going on here. Let’s look at the reason for fulfilling this joyful obligation of thanksgiving. (**Verse 3**)

Wait a minute here. He is thanking God for their growing faith and their increasing love they have for on another.

God is not believing for them and they are the ones feeling and acting on the affection for one another so why is he thanking God?

It is true they are doing the believing and loving, but the question we have to ask here is why?

This is what theologians call the work of regeneration.

It is what Jesus called being ‘born again’ in John 3.

It is what Paul describes in Ephesians two as the process of going from being dead in our sins to alive in Christ.

Their faith and love are clear and powerful pieces of evidence that the LORD is at work in them.

[Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 uses the picture of a seed to describe the work of the gospel. He says one preacher of the gospel is like someone who plants a seed and another preacher is like someone who waters the seed, but he says, “God gives the growth.” I admit there is a bit of a mystery there between the Work of God and the work of people but the lesson is crystal clear and that is it all ultimately depends on God.]

You can have the best preaching ever, you can have all the books, and arguments for faith there are and each one is important but the only reason any of it works to bring people to faith is because God makes it work.

No one else can open our eyes to the truth and no one else can stir our hearts to believe.

If we are in Christ this morning it is because God has done something in our lives that only He can do!

If we are growing in faith it is because God is always working in His people and when we are growing in faith ‘all other graces grow proportionally’ as Matthew Henry has said.

[If we ask ourselves this morning, “Are we growing in our faith?” What would the answer be? “If we ask ourselves this morning, “Are we growing in our affection for one another?” What would the answer be? If the answer is yes then we have a really powerful piece of evidence that we are in Christ because we are experiencing God’s gracious work in our hearts and minds. Here is one more truth about being in Christ. This is one the Bible talks about regularly and in incredibly important for us to consider. The lesson is that...]

**Point #3 – A believer’s union with Christ is proven true over time. (4)**

When we truly belong to the LORD and feel in our hearts that there is no one better than Jesus and nothing can compare with Him, we never let go of trusting in Him.

Look with me at the beginning of verse 4. (Verse 4a stop a ‘God’)

Usually when we hear the word ‘boasting’ we think about it negatively.

Quick show of hands, how many people like it when other people bragging about how great they are?

Nobody likes that, especially people who do a lot of bragging.

That is because when people do that they are making everything all about them and even though in our sin nature we love to do that, we know it is wrong.

Besides being wrong it is also hollow and disappointing. It has been my consistent experience that people who are always talking about their own greatness are usually miserable.

The kind of ‘boasting’ the apostle and his co-workers are doing is very different than that.

The word ‘therefore’ at the beginning of the verse tells us that the ground for this ‘boasting’ is what was said in verse 3.

That means that what they are making much of in the churches is God’s work in the lives of the Thessalonian believers.

Why would they do that? He tells us in the rest of **verse 4**.

From the earliest days of this church being established they had trouble.

Paul’s preaching of the gospel caused a riot in the city.

Believers were attacked in their homes and dragged before the city officials and charged with treason against the Roman Empire.

On account of all the trouble the Church made the decision to send Paul and Silas on to the next city.

He did not want to leave and being torn away from these new believers caused him great concern for how they would make out after he had left.

If we were to evaluate the odds of these believers continuing on in the faith based on worldly wisdom I'm sure the outlook would be rather bleak.

Instead of falling away, the opposite has happened, they have grown.

They have remained steadfast in persecution and they are enduring in their affliction.

Why? Because the work of salvation by faith in Christ alone is a work of God and God does not fail.

Paul's boasting here has nothing to do with how great an evangelist he is.

Even though he is boasting about what is happening with these believers, they are not the ground of the boasting in and of themselves.

If that were the case it would make no sense to be thanking God for what is happening.

His boasting is that God has truly united these people with Christ, they really belong to Him and as they continue to endure that becomes more and more evident.

[Let's return for a moment to the picture of blacksmithing. Has anyone ever heard of a Viking sword called the Ulfberht? It was a special sword known for being lighter, more flexible, and stronger than comparable swords of its time. It was unique because the process used to make the steel was far superior. Because of its reputation people made knock offs that they tried to pass off and the genuine thing. When the imitation was first made it looked almost identical to the genuine sword, but on the battlefield it would fail. Time and use would show weather or not you owned the real deal.]

It is very much the same thing with being united with Christ.

Why is Paul boasting about the Thessalonians? Is he trying to make the other churches feel guilty?

“Why can't you guys be more like the Thessalonians?”

Not at all. He is sharing the news of what God is doing to encourage believers.

The same God who is growing the faith of these Christians in the midst of trial, is the same God Who is at work in you.

Just as He is keeping them through hardship so too He will keep you.

*Every Christian should have a desire to examine themselves to see if we are in the faith according to 2 Corinthians 13:5.*

In fact I am convinced that concern for the condition of one's soul is one of the means the Holy Spirit uses to produce assurance in our lives.

In order for us to have that kind of assurance we need to make sure that we are looking to the LORD for what only He can give.

As Robert Thomas says concerning this text, "God is ultimately the only source of grace and peace" and so we must look to Him.

If we can look at our lives and see that we are growing in our faith and understanding. If we can look at see that we are growing in our love for one another then we can be confident in our salvation because only God can make that happen in the hearts of sinners like us.

If we can look at our lives and see a steady obedience over a long period of time and especially through trial then we can be confident that we are in Christ and we can be confident that He will keep us to the end.

That is what it looks like to be truly in Christ and brothers and sisters there is no better place to be.