

# A Gospel-Filled Greeting

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[ 0 : 00 ] There is a kind of agony to communication at various points in your life. Particularly what I have in mind when I say that is the early stages of a relationship that you think has the potential of becoming romantic.

The way that you talk, the way that you fashion your words means a lot to you and it means a lot to the person that you're pursuing or that you hope to pursue in those moments.

The college that Julie and I attended, we had a nightly letter exchange program called the Pony Express. And it was through the Pony Express every night, you could send a note or a package or a class assignment that maybe someone needed help with if they cared about you enough to send that to you.

They could exchange that with you. There would be two people after hours, after curfew for the college. Two people would be designated from the guys. Two people would be designated from the ladies. They would collect all the letters or packages that were going to be exchanged.

The guys would meet the ladies in the parking lot. They would exchange the baskets full of notes like the Pony Express. And then they would take it back to their respective dormitories and pass them out.

[ 1 : 25 ] Now, in that context, the early days of a relationship involved writing flirtatious notes that maybe if you really were interested in the person, spray a little bit of cologne on there if you had it.

You hoped that if you got something in return that it didn't smell like paper. You wanted it to smell like something nicer than paper. That meant something significant, right? You would hope to receive maybe some brownies or cookies in return.

Something that would show that the person you're writing to that you're interested in has some type of interest in you in return. And when Julie and I were first interested in one another, we would often utilize this system.

But it was a bit of an agony that went along with it, determining exactly what words should I use as I'm writing this letter.

You know, do I say, dear Julie? Does that say too much? Like, dear? Doesn't that mean beloved? Maybe I should just say Julie. Or maybe I shouldn't put her name at all. When you get to the end, you're trying to figure out how to actually sign off on this letter.

[ 2 : 31 ] I can't put love yet because I hadn't told her that. She's going to get the wrong idea. She's going to think I'm going to propose soon or whatever. And maybe I should put in Christ. But no, that's too formal.

That's too Christian. We don't want to write that way either. It's agonizing. It's excruciating in the early days of those relationships. How do I communicate? How do I write these notes? You didn't want to be so casual that your interest wasn't adequately expressed.

But being too forward might scare them away. Now, those in the younger generation, like my daughters, they don't know much about writing letters with paper and pen.

They text message. That's the thing that they do, right? But they understand. You understand what it's like. It's the same thing. When you're writing, you're about to send that text message to somebody that matters to you, that you actually care about what they think and how they may read, you're plugging yourself with, what punctuation should I use?

You know, periods may make them think that I'm mad at them. Or explanation points may think that I'm too excited about this. How am I supposed to communicate? And the reason for that is even the simplest forms of communication, they carry deep meaning, significant meaning.

[ 3 : 41 ] We care about that because we know words matter. And we know the structure of words matter. We know the way that we say things has significant meaning. And it's going to have a

perceived meaning.

It's going to have an actual meaning. And it's important. When we come to the opening verse of 1 Thessalonians, we find that this is really, it's a simple greeting, and yet it's still loaded with profoundly rich meaning.

It follows a pattern that's consistent with letter writing and the first century and Greco-Roman culture, naming the letters authors and recipients, including a formal statement of greeting. Still, as we read through this, a thoughtful person will recognize that there's so much more to this opening formula than meets the eye. The authorship, these first three names that's listed, it points back to the glorious yet tumultuous beginnings of the church in Thessalonica.

The recipient designation. The way that Paul and his team write it, it expresses an identity-shaping reality that, honestly, we're often prone to take for granted or to forget about.

[ 4 : 59 ] The greeting itself, it presents a wonderful hope that not only sets the tone for the letter, but it provides the reader, particularly the reader in Thessalonica, with strength of faith and obedience until the day of the Lord's return.

Three massive, meaningful truths here. Their beginnings, their identity, their hope.

All three of them are teeming with gospel significance. And this focus on God's saving work through Jesus Christ is actually what gives this verse and all of the letter its substance.

The fact that all of it is rooted in the gospel of Jesus. And what I want to do with this verse today, and as far as our study, is by way of introduction to the letter, I want to break down these three statements to expose for you their gospel significance, their gospel meaning.

And in doing that, I hope to simultaneously kind of lay a groundwork for what this letter is about and what its focus is and kind of give you a roadmap for our study in the coming months.

[ 6 : 18 ] And then, of course, I want you to be encouraged by these words in the way that I believe the Thessalonian Christians would have immediately been encouraged by these words, even just the simple opening greeting of the letter.

First thing I want you to see here is their gospel beginnings. Their gospel beginnings. Look again at verse one, just the first three words here.

Paul, Silvanus, who we know is Silas, and Timothy. However else this letter might be described by those who are given to study it, it is first and foremost a letter of friendship.

It's a letter of friendship. There's an incredible warmth and intimacy that envelops this letter, showing the depth of friendship enjoyed by the church and this ministry team that founded it.

The Apostle Paul, of course, is the leader of that team, and the team included his, what we would describe as a senior associate. His name was Silas, and then also a junior associate whose name was Timothy.

[ 7 : 31 ] And we see that there are all three mentioned at the beginning because this letter really, though Paul is the leader, he would be designated as the primary author. Really, they're writing this as a team. Often throughout the letter, we find the first person plural pronouns being used, we and us, so that even though Paul is the primary author, he's writing on behalf of the three of them together.

Therefore, all three are included as authors in the opening statements. However, to truly grasp the relationship between these men and the church, to understand the context that gave way to the writing of this letter, we need to trace Paul's movements.

And fortunately for us, they're provided for us in the book of Acts. So I want you to turn with me to beginning at Acts chapter 15, at the very end of it, and I just want us to walk through tracing Paul's steps and his team's steps.

And along the way, I hope what it's going to do is it's going to help us understand better his relationship to this church in the context that informs the content of the letter.

We first find at the end of chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16 that this team, Paul and Silas and Timothy, are assembled at this moment for the very first time.

[ 8 : 55 ] Paul's already been on one missionary journey up to this point. His partner was not these men. His partner was a man named Barnabas, his senior associate. And then the junior associate at that time was, at least temporarily, was a man named John Mark.

Unfortunately, beginning in verse 36, we're not going to read it, but just for your own notes, if you'd like to keep track of it, in verse 36, we find actually a sorrowful moment.

Paul and Barnabas are preparing to launch out on a second missionary journey. They want to visit the churches that they established the first time around, check on them, strengthen them. The problem is, Barnabas wants to take John Mark, and Paul thinks that's a bad idea. And he thinks it's a bad idea because John Mark had abandoned them on their first journey. Hurt by that, no doubt, but also wanting to be wise in the way that he carried out the next series of season of his ministry, Paul thought it would be a bad idea to take them. And what we find is that these two very close friends and colleagues in the gospel have such a sharp disagreement that they decide they're going to have to do this separately. Barnabas takes John Mark and he goes to one area.

[10:07] Paul then picks up Silas, or Silvanus, who had come from Jerusalem. After the Jerusalem Council, you can read about that in Acts 15, Silas is tasked as one of the men to go to the Gentile churches to tell them about what had been discussed and decided in terms of the gospel and its relationship to the Gentiles at the Jerusalem Council.

He's a faithful man, a skilled man, a ministry-minded man. Paul asked him to join him, and that's exactly what he does. Just look at chapter 15 and verse 40.

Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And the first place that Paul and Silas go is to revisit some of the churches he had established earlier.

They make it eventually to a place called Lystra. At the very beginning of chapter 16, we find that while they're in Lystra, they pick up another companion whose name is Timothy.

Just look at verse 1 of chapter 16. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek.

[11:19] He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. And Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him. And so he did. So this is how we see, even before the people of Thessalonica ever come into the picture here, we see God working in kind of a unique way, even in a way that we would say is probably sorrowful and hurtful.

There's this, what we might think of as maybe a disintegration of a close friendship happening on one hand. Maybe it's not quite that extreme, but certainly the breaking apart of a gospel ministry team.

And what does God do through that? Well, God just keeps working, doesn't he? He continues to work in Barnabas and Mark. He continues to work in Paul and he begins to assemble this team, Silas and Timothy coming along with Paul.

And so after they pick up Timothy and Lystra, they head out and Paul has tremendous plans. So when we get to chapter 16, verses 6 through 10, we find that Paul has actually great plans for this particular journey.

He wanted to go into Asia Minor to preach perhaps in cities like Ephesus. But you'll notice in verse 6 that God kept them from doing it.

[12:33] Look at verse 6. They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Paul tells Silas and Timothy, we're going to go into Asia Minor. We're going to try to preach in some synagogues there if we can find some. We're going to plant some churches. And as soon as they do, he doesn't explain how this happens.

He just says, God wouldn't let us do it. So they say, okay, what are we going to do? Well, why don't we try to go to Bithynia instead? But again, God says, no.

Look at verse 7. When they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

Now, I've got the map on the screen for you here if you care to see that. You'll see where they started is over here in Syria in Antioch. That was their sending church, so to speak. Paul and Silas leave Antioch and they jump up to Tarsus and then over to Lystra.

[13:34] That's where they pick up Timothy. And where they actually desire to go is in this yellow area. If you can see, I don't know how clear it is for you, but there's this yellow area right in the middle of the picture. That's where they wanted to go. If you look far over on the west side of that yellow area, you'll see Ephesus and Thyatira.

If you read through the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, this would have been the cities that Paul would have been aiming to go at. The churches that John had actually addressed in that letter.

But as they're trying to go there, Paul's thinking in his mind, I'm going to go preach the gospel. Surely God will bless us, but God says, no, I don't want you to preach the gospel in Asia Minor. So he says, okay, can't do Asia.

Maybe we'll go north to Bithynia. God doesn't let him do that either. Now, if you're like me, what you would do in that situation is probably get a little frustrated.

Lord, here I am. I'm trying to do your work. I'm trying to preach the gospel where people haven't preached the gospel and you won't let me. You ever make plans and God gets in the way and refuses?

[14:36] It can be frustrating, can't it? What do they do? Well, Paul, in really great wisdom, goes to Troas. You'll see it's on the west side of Asia. They go the north end.

They take probably the Ignatian Way is what that's called. They go all the way over to Troas, which is a port city. Now, I love that Paul does this. You know why he does this? I'm convinced the reason he goes to Troas is because he could basically sail anywhere he needed to go from Troas.

So he goes there and he waits. And what's he waiting on? Clarity from the Lord. Lord, where do you want me to go? I'll go wherever you want me to go. You don't want me to go to Asia Minor?

That's fine. Don't want me to go to Bithynia? That's fine. Wherever you want me to go, I'm just going to wait in Troas and I'll be prepared when you tell me. And it's at this point in this text that we read about what is called the Macedonian call.

While he's in Troas, the Holy Spirit gives Paul a vision. He sees a man of Macedonia calling him to come. Paul takes that as a sign from the Lord that what he intends for him to do is not to go to those other places but to go into Europe, into Macedonia, a place where the gospel, as far as we understand, had not yet gone.

[15:50] And what does Paul do? He goes. Of course. He goes. Now I want you to take a moment and consider God's sovereign work in this ministry endeavor.

It was not Paul's plan to go to Macedonia at that time. But God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, intervenes. Why? Because God had a saving plan for the people of Macedonia that Paul was totally unaware of.

but because he was flexible and he was sensitive to the leadership of the Lord in his life, he followed through and the Lord used him to great effect.

Proverbs 19, 21, many are the plans in the mind of a man but it is the purposes of the Lord that will stand. A month from now, we'll celebrate five years as a church and as a church plan.

And those of you that have been with us since the early days will probably say this is not exactly what we expected our church to look like and where we expected to meet in the course of five years.

[17:01] That's okay. That's okay. God's got a work that he's doing in our church and that he's doing through our ministry that we might not ever understand. Our job is to be faithful, to be faithful, to follow his leadership, be sensitive to land.

Paul's desire to obey the Lord created this flexibility of heart so that he was willing to go wherever God led him even if it meant abandoning all of his plans in the process.

And what was the result? Really, really incredible hardship was the result. Tremendous persecution, overwhelming stress, and also the miraculous conversion of many, perhaps hundreds, of lost souls who up to that point had never even heard the name of Jesus Christ.

Paul, I think, would say that's worth it. You see, I think there's something for us here. I think we need to learn to hold our plans loosely in life as hard as that is to do and to remain sensitive at all times to the leadership of the Lord.

We need to always acknowledge that God's plans for us are not easy. And if you've got an idea in your mind that to obey the Lord and be faithful to him means that it will always come in what we determine as blessing, then you've really got the wrong idea.

[18:37] God's ways are very often hard. still yet, God's ways are always good, always right, always fruitful for the gospel, for his saving work and his sanctifying work and his people and his saving work in others.

The gospel went to Thessalonica not because Paul wanted to take it there, but because God was determined to get it there through Paul. And how precious of a thought this is.

How precious of a thought that God would use our lives, that he would use a church like ours to reach people in such a magnificent way, even through hardship and difficulty and stress.

Yet, is it worth it if the result is the conversion of the loss? And I'd say, it's worth every moment if people come to know Christ, if he's determined to use us in that way.

So the thing we establish, at least up to this point in Paul's movements, is what's happening eventually when we get to the part about Thessalonica is not Paul's plan. This is God's work.

[ 19 : 45 ] It's God's work of grace that's unfolding here. Well, they go into Macedonia and when we get to verses 11 through 40 and it's a familiar story to you, I'm sure, we see Paul's exploits in the city of Philippi.

And let me just give you a couple highlights. Their time in Philippi, it began with the conversion of a wealthy woman named Lydia. Her family was converted and baptized and then so was a servant girl who was being abused for money.

Well, the people who were abusing her didn't appreciate the fact that they lost their income through the conversion of this servant girl. So Paul, after being obedient to the Lord and doing exactly what the Lord told him to do, guess where he and Silas land when they get to Philippi?

They're dragged into the marketplace before the city leaders. They're stripped naked. They're beaten almost to death and then they're cast into a jail cell.

Can you imagine? With wisdom, you've waited in Troas. Lord, just send me wherever you want to send me and God says, go to Macedonia. So they go to Macedonia.

[ 20 : 54 ] As soon as they get there, a couple of people get saved but then they're almost killed and then they're put in prison. They're humiliated in the process of it. And again, if you're like me, you'd have been a little discouraged, probably a little angry, ready to quit.

Oh, not Paul and Silas. You know what they did. At midnight, they begin to pray and sing praises to the Lord and miraculously, God unlocks their chains through an earthquake and opens up the gates but they don't leave anywhere.

And overwhelmed by what he's heard through the night in their praises, the jailer, who is responsible for the prisoners, runs in, can't believe that they're all still there and what is it that he asks?

What must I do to be saved? He asks the right question. What I have to do to be saved? And Paul preaches the gospel and him and his family get saved and they're baptized. That's the beginnings of the church in Philippi but that's not an easy beginning.

That's hard. Finally, the city leaders let them go but they tell them they can't stay, they're going to have to leave. And so Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke probably at this point they leave and guess where they went?

[ 22 : 08 ] Another town over called Thessalonica or Thessalonica. Now look with me at chapter 17 and let's just read the first four verses. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews and notice what Paul did.

Paul went in as was his custom and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ, the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead and then saying this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is this Christ who suffered and rose from the dead.

What do we find in these verses? We find the gospel beginnings of the church of the Thessalonians. And what we see here is that everywhere Paul went his priority was to preach the gospel of Jesus as a matter of first importance.

There's a lot of things he could have reasoned with them about. There's a lot of things you and I might reason with people about in this world and outside of the walls of this church. But if the priority of our proclamation is not the gospel of Jesus we're wasting our time.

Paul knew that. He knew in following the pattern of Jesus himself the priority must be the proclamation of the gospel. So that's what he does. He finds the synagogue which is his custom and he goes in and he takes his Bible and he opens his Bible and he shows them he proves to them out of the scriptures the Messiah must die and rise again.

[ 23 : 52 ] And by the way somebody just did that. Jesus of Nazareth. His preaching was rooted in the Old Testament law and prophets he explained from the scriptures the gospel message of Jesus.

This is the apostolic pattern for all Christian ministry. We must faithfully preach Christ from all the scriptures calling sinners to respond to the gospel message in repentance and faith.

faith. This is the gospel upon which a true church is founded and it's the foundation that was laid for the Thessalonian church. If they didn't know anything else from Paul and Silas and Timothy's visit in the early days they knew the gospel message and the gospel message was enough to transform them and to empower them to move forward even despite the tremendous hardship that was going to come their way.

Amazing. gospel beginnings. Now read with me verses 5-10. What happens after they are saved? Let's start at verse 4 actually. Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. Lots of people coming to Christ here.

[ 25 : 19 ] But the Jews were jealous jealous. Taking some men of the rabble they formed a mob set the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason who must have been one of these early converts that was perhaps the church was meeting in his home.

They were seeking to bring them out to the crowd and when they could not find them they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authority shouting these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also and Jason has received them and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king Jesus and the people of the city and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.

This was frightening. It actually terrified them to think as a Roman free city state that there is a movement that's happening within their city that would somehow go against Caesar that would threaten their independence it would threaten their freedom it would threaten their safety so they're disturbed verse 9 and when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest of them they let them go and the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.

Okay we got gospel beginnings in Thessalonica we have a different type of a beginning in Thessalonica as well. Severe persecution severe Christians being dragged out of their homes taking by riot into the mobs of people in marketplaces or perhaps wherever it was that they had gathered before the city leaders their lives are being threatened.

Can you imagine something like this happening here? Davidson, Cornelius just imagine today a mob of people come into the elementary school they drag us out they're going to take us down to the town hall down the street where perhaps hundreds of people have gathered calling for us to be killed because of their faith in Christ because he is our Lord.

[ 27 : 36 ] Now many of you are seasoned Christians you've been Christians long enough to know that that's a reality that's probably going to happen. These believers in Thessalonica they're brand new Christians and that's how their faith starts with that kind of hardship.

The young Christians protect Paul and Silas they help them escape under cover of darkness but the trouble of persecution from Thessalonica wasn't over it was far from over.

Well that takes us to the next one we're going to move fairly quickly through the next part. We get to verses 10 through 15 in chapter 17 we find that Paul and Silas go about 45 miles west of Thessalonica to Berea and what's important for us to recognize here is that as they were preaching people were being saved again and then when the people that hated them so much in Thessalonica heard that the people in Berea were coming to faith they made the journey too.

They went all the way to Berea and what did they do while they were there? They incited another riot threatening the lives of Paul and Silas and Timothy and their team Luke at this point so not only is there persecution in Thessalonica but the kind of persecution that's happening there it's so strong that it's actually spreading to the other cities and the home base for the persecutors was the backyard of the new church in Thessalonica that's their condition that's their life now.

when we get a little further in the chapter we find that Paul goes to Athens that's about 300 miles south of Berea so now he's getting far enough away where perhaps they don't want to travel this far to cause a problem particularly in a city like Athens.

[ 29 : 23 ] Now I want to encourage you to go and read this particular section on your own this afternoon and we won't have time to go through it but it's an amazing text and it's an amazing sermon that Paul preaches to what would be the equivalent in our day of an agnostic situation amazing sermon that would be worth your time but the point for us to piece together now is the movements here okay Paul preached through Athens but he sent Silas and Timothy back into Macedonia he wants them to go and check on the churches there he's the one that the people are most upset with he sends Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the people he sends Silas somewhere we don't know if it was Thessalonica maybe it was Philippi or another place but what

we know is he's alone in Athens and he preaches the gospel while he's there to great effect or to minimal effect excuse me and then he decides to move on to Corinth and that's where the passage picks up in chapter 18

I want you to look with me just at the first few verses of chapter 18 this is about 50 miles west of Athens remember Silas and Timothy are not with him right now he's by himself perhaps Luke is with them still after this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth and he found a Jew named Aquila a native of Pontus recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome and he went to see them and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked for they were tent makers by trade and he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath tried to persuade Jews and Greeks now let's just pause for a second this has been a frustrating journey right fruitful sure also frustrating first God changes all of his plans and sends him to Macedonia everywhere he goes in Macedonia people want to kill him this man is tired he's traveled hundreds of miles on foot he's been beaten nearly to death at least once maybe a couple of times at this point is it any surprise that when we get to 1 Corinthians chapter 2

Paul reflecting on this moment in Acts 18 says when I came to you I came to you in weakness weakness and in fear and trembling weakness fear trembling that's the story of Paul's life at this moment but what is it that he does in verse 4 he just kept going he's in the synagogue every day every Sabbath preaching the gospel trying to persuade Jews and Greeks and he enjoys wonderful fruitfulness there he stays for at least a year and a half where the Lord is blessing his ministry there in Corinth surely a sign of God's blessing and the renewal and refreshment of his ministry for a season but look at verse 5 Silas and Timothy show up when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia where he had sent them Paul was occupied with the word testifying to the Jews that the Christ was

Jesus now here's the point and we'll get back to verse Thessalonians eventually Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth to update him on the condition of the Thessalonians and it was there in Acts 18 at some point after they arrived that the three of them sat down perhaps Silas is the writer we know he wrote for Peter at one point and Paul says Silas write this Paul Silvanus Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians and God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ grace to you and peace now when that letter actually makes it to Thessalonica and those dear people hear just the opening greeting you want to tell me that that was just a simple greeting for them I don't think so I don't think so just the first three words the names of the missionaries that had sacrificed their very lives to bring them the gospel message that had transformed them oh no this would have recalled for them their gospel beginnings their gospel love and friendship and camaraderie those were more than just names to these people they were God's instruments for bringing them the gospel message that changed their lives for all of eternity what do we know about the church and of the Thessalonians well the first thing we know is that they had a gospel rich beginning second and quicker

I want you to see their gospel identity here gospel beginnings gospel identity as a result of those beginnings now just look at 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 1 again Paul Silvanus Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ now in our culture church the word is universally associated with religion particularly Christianity that was not the case in the first century church church or as you've heard me say many times before ecclesia would be the Greek word in Greco-Roman society it wasn't a religious word it was a civic word it was used secularly to describe formal gatherings formal assemblies of people for civic purposes about 200 years BC somebody some Greeks take the Hebrew Bible and they translated into Greek we call it the Septuagint or sometimes you'll see it abbreviated as an LXX to refer to the Septuagint it means 70 and that is just a Greek translation of the Old Testament and when this

[ 35 : 51 ] Greek translation of the Old Testament comes out what we find is that ecclesia is the Greek word that's used to describe the assembly of God's people in particular so if you were to go back and read in your Old Testament there's a number of references where the Greek translation actually uses ecclesia now that gives us an idea for what Paul is trying to communicate here now the fact that Jesus and the apostles use this specific word for Christians in the New Testament reflects their understanding that Christians even Gentiles which would have mattered in this circumstance and in this context even the Gentiles constituted the new people of God when Paul calls this congregation the church of the Thessalonians he's speaking of them both as a physical assembly that is they're a group of people that gather but he's speaking of them also as the assembly of God's people who gather together in the name of the Lord

Jesus Christ that was the distinction so they're an assembly in a civic sense they're a physical gathering that's what a church is they're also God's people as Christians and that distinction comes through the Lord Jesus Christ they are the church of the Thessalonians that would have mattered now the recipient designation moving on from there is all about this church's gospel identity Christ's church finds its very existence the preposition here in the very existence of Christ's church is in the sovereign plan of God the Father brought about through the saving work of his son Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior it was the father's sovereign plan in ages past to send his son to die for our sins to rise from the dead for our salvation and to call out of this world people whom he would redeem on whom he would bestow his eternal atonement and forgiveness they would become his people this was the sovereign plan of God through

Jesus Christ that's their identity this was Paul's very argument when he went to Thessalonica and preached he used the scriptures to prove this but their gospel identity it was very personal as well wasn't it you just read about it the history of the church it was God's sovereign plan to intervene in Paul's plans so that the gospel of Jesus would be taken to Thessalonica it is the sovereign plan of God through the work of Jesus Christ that made them what they were it was their very identity as a people and it is no different for us than it was for them our very identity as a people as a true church is rooted in the sovereign plan of God to save us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ his sinless son the sovereign plan of

God the father has brought this particular group of Christians together as an assembly in the name of Jesus Christ Christ it's who we are the very core of our identity as a people here might be adequately described as the church of Lake Norman in God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ church is who we are and if we ever get to a point that we start to think that our belonging and that our existence and that this group of people as a formal covenanted group has anything to do other than the gospel of Jesus Christ then we will cease to be a true church who we are as Christians we are God's people meeting in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to glorify his name in this world and to do his work until he returns and there's a lot of implications crucial implications of that for us everything we are as individuals and as a church that means that it is a work of God's grace we're going to get to that in the next point it also means that it only makes sense that born again believers who have expressed saving faith in the

Lord Jesus Christ only they can really truly belong to this assembly when we talk about meaningful membership in our church that's what we mean there is no belong before you believe dynamic here that's foreign to the scriptures and we want unbelievers to come and be a part of our worship services we want them to hear the gospel but you cannot be a part of the church if you are not in Christ that matters we need to care about that as a church as we think about membership our gospel identity it must be the motivation and the goal of everything we do as a Christian church we've been called as God's people in Christ and this will dramatically affect the way that we relate to one another and the way that we relate to those outside of our church it is who we are we are gospel people by the sovereign plan of God in the Lord Jesus Christ thirdly and finally we see their gospel hope their gospel are you still with me we're almost there

[ 41 : 43 ] Paul Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians and God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ grace to you and peace Paul had this unique way of turning everything he set his hand to into gospel significance these words are a subtle yet significant departure from the typical greeting of letters in that culture the traditional greeting in Hellenist culture was a word called kairain it literally translates to rejoice but in a letter it meant just simply greetings explanation point if you're a texter greetings we say hello which means health to you in English when we greet somebody and we say hello what we mean is I hope things are well for you when they met somebody formally in their culture they would say kairain I rejoice with you greetings to you

I hope things are well with you Paul just makes a subtle change in this word he doesn't use kairain he uses a word charis it's almost exactly the same if you see it written out except it doesn't mean rejoice it means grace grace unmerited favor peace peace peace peace peace in the sense of wholeness and well-being now what's Paul saying in this he's wishing upon them the continued outpouring of God's grace and peace but again he intends a gospel connection here the grace and peace of God he knows can only come through the person and work of Jesus Christ God's grace is supremely revealed to us in sending his son to die for our sins and in offering forgiveness and reconciliation and eternal life to undeserving sinners as a free gift that's the grace that he's wishing upon them and it is as a result of that grace that we are made truly whole experiencing the peace of

God that surpasses all understanding

Gordon Fee writes this the sum total of God's activity toward his human creatures is found in the word grace God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ nothing is deserved nothing can be achieved and the sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is peace God's eschatological shalom both now and to come the latter peace flows out of the former grace and both together come from God our father through our Lord Jesus Christ gospel beginnings gospel identity gospel hope now let's finish it this way why first Thessalonians why is Paul writing this letter well first because he's concerned the first three chapters is basically him speaking to dear friends about which he is concerned not only for their spiritual health but their physical health and it comes through clearly but there's another reason this simple greeting it communicates the gospel hope that the Thessalonian church desperately needed to be reminded of the dominant theological theme in this letter both letters really is the return of Christ the nature of it the timing of it what it will be like and when it will happen in fact each chapter explicitly refers to it now why do you think the church was so concerned about that particular doctrine and why do you think that Paul pointed them to the promise of Christ's return so often in the letter because it was a congregation facing severe hardship their questions and concerns about Christ's return had everything to do with the difficulty with which they were living as Christians and Paul knew only the hope of the gospel could ground them God's eternal grace and peace through Jesus Christ is the only thing that would make the difference for them in that moment put yourself in their shoes you've heard of the return of Christ Paul was at least there long enough probably there for a few months before the riot they had heard at least enough of the return of Christ and the hope of Christ's return that they were concerned to ask about it so there was some familiarity there but why would they ask about it because every day they're fighting for their lives as Christians and surely they're looking around and they're saying Paul you said he's coming back and you said he's coming soon can you help us understand when that's going to happen have we missed it is part of their question they're hurting and what is the answer Paul gives it's the gospel the same faith that calls us to salvation calls us to trust in the promise of Christ return it's the grace of Christ that saves us it's his grace that keeps us it's his grace that unites us with other believers in the context of the church and eventually it will relieve us it will relieve us of every pain of every sorrow of every struggle of everything we face in this life and peace in this world may be scarce and for sure it is but eternal peace with God is a reality for all who are in Christ by faith and you can trust it and what first Thessalonians will help us do is learn how to live in light of that gospel truth until he comes