

19] God's Sovereign and Gracious Work (Sunday, April 18, 2021)

Scripture: Numbers 6:22-27; 1 Thess. 5:23-28

INTRODUCTION

The original church in Thessalonica is no longer in existence from what we know.

There are remains of church buildings in the city that date back to the 4th century A. D.¹ There are also many Greek Orthodox churches in the city today. Obviously the original church in Thessalonica likely met in a home or maybe several homes as the congregation grew.

How long did this congregation established by Paul, Silas, and Timothy last?

I don't know that we can go back that far in history, but we can say that this church, though not a mega-church, was a faithful church that left a lasting legacy.

Remember the testimony from chapter 1?

1 Thess. 1:8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Local churches are not guaranteed an eternal existence.

In August 2020, the Christian Post had an article which reported that according to the Barna group 1 in 5 churches in the US were facing permanent closure within 18 months.²

This has been a very challenging season for many local churches.

We have faced our own challenges and uncertainties,

¹ <https://singaporechristian.com/2015/07/26/church-of-the-thessalonians-where-is-it-and-does-it-still-exist-today-travel-photos/>

² <https://www.christianpost.com/news/1-in-5-churches-face-closure-within-18-months-due-to-covid-19-shutdowns-barna-president.html>

We always must recognize our own insignificance and trust the Lord Jesus Christ might truly use us for His purposes.

Our assurance as believers is not the local church we are connected to as important as this is.

Our assurance is knowing the grace of God and His continued work of sanctification and protection.

May our boast always be in this grace.

Though we do not ignore what God calls us to do, may you never rest in anything but the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We will look at the end of 1 Thessalonians 5 in two parts.

1] The Blessings of Grace, verses 23-24 and 28

2] Three Final Commands, verses 25-27

1] THE BLESSINGS OF GRACE, VERSES 23-24 AND 28

I think this is our 19th sermon in 1 Thessalonians.

There is no way to remember every detail, but I would strongly encourage you to read through this entire book again and reflect on it.

This book not surprisingly begins with the blessing of grace and a mention of prayer.

The middle section concludes with a prayer of God's grace.

The book ends in a very similar way.

1Th. 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1Th. 1:2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,

Turn next to 1 Thess. 3:11-13

1Th. 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. **12** And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, **13** so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Do you see how at the beginning, middle, and end the focus of this book so clearly is God's sovereign grace and His work?

There are many things that we are called to be doing.

The Christian life we know is to be concerned with obedience and service.

But the foundation for everything must be God's grace and God's work!

If you think it depends on you somehow in the end, you have totally missed it.

The prayer of verses 23 and 24 should be connected to the prayer of Jesus in John 17.

Listen to John 17:15-19 and see how the prayer of Jesus is closely connected with the prayer in verse 23 and 24.

John 17:15 I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. **16** They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. **17** Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. **18** As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. **19** And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

Jesus prays for the sanctification of His disciples and for their keeping.

The same two verbs are used here at the end of 1 Thess. 5 – **sanctify** and be **preserved** or **kept**.

Verse 23 speak of God as the God of peace.

This same expression is used 4 other times so it is not common but also not unknown.

Rom. 16:20 And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

The word **peace** is a very misused word today. It is, when understood from the perspective of Scripture, one of the most beautiful words that we have.

Peace with God because of the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peace – resting fully in God.

May the God of peace sanctify you completely.

The best understanding of sanctify as it is used here is to **get rid of that which does not line up with holiness.**³

And this work of sanctification does connect with God's call that we serve Him.

How can we truly serve Him if we are delighting in sin and have no heart for holiness?

This prayer is then a very vital reminder concerning the importance of holiness and sanctification.

³ BDAG, s.v. "ἀγιάζω," 10.

Too often the truth is that:

We like to hold on to our sin.

We are comfortable with how we are now!

The prayer here is for total sanctification.

The word **completely** is a word used just this one time in the NT – every way complete or reaching the entire goal.⁴

Now on this important subject we reject and affirm several things.

We reject two things:

1] that in this life we will reach a status of sinless perfection

2] that growth in holiness somehow makes us better than others and more acceptable to God

We affirm that we desire and we must seek to grow in holiness and obedience and service, motivated by God's grace and directed by God's Word and Holy Spirit.

The second part of the prayer connects with the first part of the prayer.

May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word **whole** connects with the word **completely**.

⁴ BDAG, s.v. "ὀλοτελής," 704.

And just as Jesus prayed that His disciples would be kept so this prayer is for the total preservation of the believer in light of the glorious return of Jesus Christ and the great day of judgment.

The language here might not sound so common to us; it should be more common to us.

I don't think we give adequate focus always to the awesome nature of the coming of our Lord.

This prayer for preservation then fits very well when we think of this great day that is coming.

Throughout Scripture we are taught that man is both physical and spiritual.

The physical – our bodies

The spiritual – our heart, soul, mind, and spirit

The MacSB notes: **By using spirit and soul, Paul was not indicating that the immaterial part of man could be divided into two substances (cf. Heb 4:12)**

Others while affirming this do state that spirit and soul can speak of the different aspects of our immaterial nature.

So, for example J. B. Lightfoot:

The spirit, which is the ruling faculty in man and through which he holds communication with the unseen world—the soul, which is the seat of all his impulses and affections, the centre of his personality—the body, which links him to the material world and is the instrument of all his outward deeds—these all the Apostle would have presented perfect and intact in the day of the Lord's coming.

We must be careful here.

The main thing to see is the emphasis on totality –

Sanctify completely

Your whole spirit, soul, and body

The word *blameless*, an adverb here, is a word used only two times, both in this short letter. [There is a related adjective that is used 5 times in the NT].

1Th. 2:10 You *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and justly and **blamelessly** we behaved ourselves among you who believe;

How can we be kept or preserved blameless?

This must be connected with God's work of justification.

How could we ever think of being without any fault or sin?

It must be God's work alone where we are justified. He does also sanctify us, but our sanctification in this life will never lead to sinlessness.

What a beautiful comfort is found in verse 24.

The faithful God who has called you will do this work!

What God has started, He will finish!

Is there anything more encouraging to know than this?

Again, think of the incredible Day of Judgment.

We cannot fully grasp the awesome nature of this day, but if we think it is something to stand before a human judge or if you ever get a nervous stomach when you are pulled over by a police officer, can you imagine standing before the Lord Jesus Christ in His fullness of glory on the Day of Judgment?

If we had to somehow be able to stand based on what we have done, can you imagine anything more futile?

Could anything be more laughable than thinking on the Day of judgment, I am going to somehow impress God with my own righteousness and tales of service?

This is why any notion of future justification based on human obedience must be rejected!

Yes, every true believer is called to holiness.

God will make a judgment based on works.

But if we think we somehow will earn part of a standing of righteousness before God, then we are like the Judaizers in Galatians, proclaiming another gospel.

52. What comfort is it to you that Christ “shall come to judge the living and the dead”?

That in all my sorrows and persecutions, I, with uplifted head, look for the very One who offered Himself for me to the judgment of God, and removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven, who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall take me with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.

Do you rest in the finished work, the continued work, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?

2] THREE FINAL COMMANDS, VERSES 25-27

As Paul, Timothy, and Silas finished the writing of this book three final commands were given.

The first is a command to pray.

This is a beautiful part of Christian fellowship. We must and we always can pray.

The verb **pray** is used two times in 1 Thessalonians, here and 5:17.

We share in the life and challenges that God's people face in part through prayer.

It is always good to be reminded of the importance of prayer because we often neglect prayer and judge prayer wrongly.

We must pray because that is commanded.

What if we saw direct answer immediately to all our prayers?

Would we more often be in prayer?

I suppose.

But we forget that prayer is not based on what we think should be the outcome and that **prayer is a work of faith.**

We pray not because we know what is best, instead we commit all things into the hands of our faithful God!

We share in the love of Christ in a physical and spiritual way as we see here in verses 25 and 26.

I think that is a beautiful connection of body and spirit.

The verb to greet is used 60x.

In Romans 16, the word is used 25 times.

Do I need to define what it means to greet someone?

I think it is deeper than just a quick hello.

1. to engage in hospitable recognition of another (w. varying degrees of intimacy), *greet, welcome* τινά *someone...*⁵

There is an important place for greeting others in a church.

In Zambia, on several occasions there was a tradition or ceremony where you would shake every single person's hand.

Who is being addressed in this command?

It may simply be that everyone in the church is told after the service to kiss each other with a holy kiss.

It might be best to understand that the elders in the church are specifically commanded to share Paul's love with the entire congregation.⁶

In other places in Scripture the command is that the church as a body will show love in the form of greeting.

2Cor. 13:12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Holy kiss – four times we have this expression in the NT and one time a kiss of love.

1Pet. 5:14 Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Leon Morris writes about this holy kiss:

Not much is known of kissing in the early church, but it is usually held that men kissed men and women women, and that the kiss was on the cheek. But Tertullian (at the end of the second century) speaks of a wife exchanging a kiss with 'any one of the

⁵ BDAG, s.v. "ἀσπάζομαι," 144.

⁶ Morris, 109.

brothers' (*To His Wife*, ii. 4). The New Testament does not connect it with liturgical practices, but the kiss would naturally be exchanged when Christians came together to worship, and it is not surprising that in time it came to be included in the service of Holy Communion (though not confined to this). Clement of Alexandria complains of those who 'make the churches resound' with their kissing, and goes on to say, 'the shameless use of a kiss ... occasions foul suspicions and evil reports' (*Instructor* iii. 12). Such abuses led to restriction and, for example, the *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th century, but containing older material) direct men to kiss men and women women.⁷

Application of this?

Holy handshake or holy hug?

We seek to recognize each other as best we can remembering the life that we share together in Jesus Christ!

What is greater, the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit or that which separates us?

The final command in verse 27 is a very solemn charge that this letter, this epistle, be read to all the holy brethren.

The verb **charge** is a strong word.

NET: I call on you solemnly in the Lord...

The verb is only used 3x in the NT.

Mark 5:7 And he cried out with a loud voice and said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I **implore** You by God that You do not torment me."

⁷ Morris, 109.

Acts 19:13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “We **exorcise** you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.”

Why the strong language here?

The context of Paul’s absence and desire to be with this congregation again is connected with this strong language.⁸

Look back to 1 Thess. 2:17-18.

1Th. 2:17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. **18** Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.

The strong language we can also say is a testimony to the truth of Scripture.

This letter written by Paul, Silas, and Timothy was through the working of the Holy Spirit not just a letter expressing love, care, and guidance.

This is the Word of the Living God!

This testifies to the fact that it must be read by God’s people.

Epistle - can mean just a letter

Romans, 1 Cor., Col, 1 Thess, 2 Thess, 2 Peter - all use the word epistle with connection to Scripture and the letter that was being written to each church.

⁸ Morris, 109.

2Pet. 3:16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.

God's Word must be read to all the holy brethren!

CONCLUSION

Though we do not ignore what God calls us to do, may you never rest in anything but the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ!

1Th. 5:28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

So familiar, but there is nothing as beautiful as this closing word of grace.

Grace - 155x in the NT.

Luke 2:39 So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their *own* city, Nazareth. **40** And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the **grace** of God was upon Him.

Luke 2:51 Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. **52** And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in **favor** [**grace**] with God and men.

Prayer

BENEDICTION – 1 COR. 15:57-58

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.