

Where do we go from here?

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First Things

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:24-28

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As we've mentioned before, today is Memorial Day, and the ultimate memorial is what we know as the Lord's Supper. And if you have not acquired those elements as of yet, they are available at the exits, but we're also going to have some of our men that are making their way through the worship center here. If you do not have the Lord's Supper elements, just make your way to grab those elements. You're not going to bother me, you're not going to disturb me. In just a few moments when we take the Lord's Supper, we want everybody that is here, desires to participate, to have the elements to do so.

But I want to invite all of us to open our Bibles to two respective places. The book of 1 Thessalonians 5 and the book of 1 Corinthians 11. As we prepare for what we know as the Lord's Supper today, we have the privilege, and if you're a guest or visitor, I want to welcome you to the very end of the journey, today the privilege is that we get to put a bow on 1 Thessalonians. For the last few months we've been walking through this very strategic book of the Bible, and the reason that it is so strategic is that this is the very first communication, this is the very first letter that the Lord gave us, the church, through whom we know as the Apostle Paul. And one of the things that we've been able to do is to reflect on the last 2,000 years, we've been able to realize the world that you and I live in, even in this 21st century. One of the things that we've discovered is today, when we use the word Christian or we say the term Christianity, oftentimes there's a multitude of different expressions and opinions and, shall we say, dialogue oftentimes leads to what you and I might call division. 1 Thessalonians has allowed us to recapture who we were always called to be.

But as we go into chapter 5 today, as we read these last few verses, it's just going to seem like a very simple salutation. It's not going to seem like there's a whole lot of theological meat there, but I want you to see today otherwise. In these last few verses, the Apostle Paul wraps up this very first letter, not by declaring that this is the end of the road, but it's the beginning of a journey and that you and I today have the privilege of looking back, there was a 2 Thessalonians, there were two letters to the church at Corinth, Ephesus, the churches of Galatia, etc, the Lord continued to communicate through those local churches and today we have the privilege of taking that which he began and which he started 2,000 years ago and we get to ask the question, where do we go from here? How do we leave today as we remember the Lord through what we know as the Lord's Supper, where do

we go from here by looking at where he challenged them to go from at the end of 1 Thessalonians.

So beginning in verse 24 of chapter 5, it says,

24 Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it. 25 Brethren, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss. 27 I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Let's confess that sounds almost like a biblical, "Sincerely, the Apostle Paul." Right? Just kind of the end of things but I want us to peel away some layers here. I think there's more here than we may give it credit for because what the Apostle Paul is doing is he's very subtly alluding to the past that led up to this event, he's challenging them to do something in the present and then he's looking forward to the future.

Let's look at the past for just a moment. Notice what it says in verse 24. It says, "Faithful is he." He's not just declaring that he will continue to be, but he's basically trying to recall their memory of how many times God had been faithful in their life. He's challenging them to remember not just their respective lives, not just the church there at Thessalonica, but throughout all human history, how faithful God has been.

Where do we find ourselves today? Not only can we cherish and relish the fact of how God has been faithful in our respective lives, but there's two things I want to allude to in light of verse 24 and the first is this: the failure of the culture. Never rely on the culture to draw you to the Lord. In fact, the culture will always do the opposite. I'm reminded in Exodus 1:8, the Israelites found themselves in Egypt, they found themselves displaced, much like you and I are today in the world at large as believers. That's why the Bible calls us strangers in this world. The Lord had provided a man by the name Joseph that even though his brothers had sold him into slavery and hoped that he would die, the Lord raised him up to such a powerful position that in a strange land, those strangers known as the Israelites were protected. They were taken care of by his presence. In Exodus 1:8, it says, "There arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph." Can I conclude today that you and I live in a culture that knows not the Lord? We live in a world that does not recognize the Lord, does not revere the Lord, and it's not just of recent days and years, we'll talk about this in just a moment, this has been a long-term struggle. Dare I say we live in a culture that knows not the Lord.

But that's not the worst part. It's not the failure of the culture, but you and I also have to confess what we might call the falling away of the church. Now when you say the falling away, we look back historically, you and I today on this Memorial Day weekend, we have not only been blessed by the sacrifice of others that allow us to worship in such freedom, but we live in a land that for over 200 years has been privileged to experience the movement of God like no other place. We didn't just have an awakening, we actually had a second great awakening. We've had revival movements. We've had awakenings. We've had all kinds of times where the hand of God has moved mightily in our midst,

however, if you want to look at it honestly today, we have not had a coast-to-coast movement of God in over 100 years. Oh, there's been the Jesus movement of the '60s and the '70s, and every now and then there'll be a movement of God in this location or that. There are, in the midst of Egypt, there are always Goshens, correct? But not coast-to-coast. In fact, it reminds me, in the book of Judges 2, it says, "And there grew a generation in Israel who had not seen the mighty acts of God." There is not one person listening or watching today who can locate anybody who is still physically alive that was here the last time God moved coast-to-coast on this land.

Now the book of 2 Thessalonians 2:3, it says that before Jesus comes, there will be a great falling away. You know what's interesting is the Bible doesn't say before Jesus comes, the world gets worse. You know what the Bible says? Before Jesus comes back, the church falls away. It's interesting, the word there for falling away is the word we get apostasy from. Apostasy literally means to present yourself as something that you are not, to claim to be a "part of the body of Christ" and you're not even a believer, you're just walking through a religious ritual, etc., whatever it may be. That's why in 1 John 2:18, I think it's significant, it says there are many antichrists that have risen up from us; they departed from us because they were never a part of us. This didn't start last year. It didn't start with the latest agendas that are being pushed in our culture. I would dare say it started over 100 years ago when we as a culture, we as humanity, we fell in the same trap as the people of God, i.e. Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. Remember what the serpent said? "Yea, hath God said?" All we're seeing in our culture today, all we're seeing in the "church" today, is just a full-fledged manifestation of what that root of apostasy ends up looking like.

So let's talk about the present. How do we respond in the present? Notice in verse 25, he says, "Brethren, pray for us." This is an important designation. He doesn't say pray for your church, pray for the church at large, because the Apostle Paul knew something that was not only happening then but occurs in our world today, the world was full of false prophets and erroneous teachers. In fact, one of the very first heresies in the first century was already beginning to take root where people were denying that Jesus actually came in the flesh. They called it Gnosticism, that somehow they knew more than everybody else.

He said, "Pray for us." One of the challenges that we need to understand today is we need to realize where the real battle is. Church, I've got news for you: the battle's not the White House. The battle's not the courthouse. And the battle's not the schoolhouse. The battle's in God's house. This is where the battle is. I'm going to give you a statement. You may have heard this before but I'm going to preach it again: as goes the pulpit, so goes the pew. As goes the pew, so goes the culture. See, we love to throw darts at distant places and elected officials when the real problem is the pulpit. Now for those of you that want to be literalists today, in the book of Nehemiah 9, it's the only place in the Bible that it talks about a pulpit. I know some of you are thinking, "Okay, this church doesn't even have a pulpit." Yeah we do. You know why? In Nehemiah 9 it says that he stood upon the pulpit, not behind it. So as long as we're standing up, we're in God's favor.

That being said, "Pray for us." Here's what he was praying. "Pray for those of us who are actually preaching truth." We live in a world today where you can go to a church, you can watch it online, for 30 to 40 minutes you can see a person pontificate about how your life can be better, you can make more money, they'll never talk about sin, they'll never talk about Jesus, and they'll never talk about hell. He said, "Pray for us." Let me challenge all of us to pray, not only that God would emblazon those who are actually truly called to proclaim his word, but that he'll keep raising up new ones to do so.

And then, there's a temptation that we need to resist. Now the next verse, it's one of those verses in the Bible that people love to point out, saying, "You know what? That's just something I'm a little uncomfortable with." It says, "Greet each other with a holy kiss." Now let me explain what this means. In our culture today, we give hugs and we give handshakes but in the Eastern world, and I've been to the Eastern world, that's not enough. There's that gentle touching of the cheeks, that greeting with a kiss. It's not something that we do on a regular basis, but I think there's something here that we need to see. It says, "Greet," listen to what it says, "all the brethren." The temptation that we need to resist is the temptation to be a Nicolaitan. Now you may have never heard of that word, but it's actually found in Revelation 2:6. It says that God hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Now let me break that word down for you. The first root word, Nike, anybody heard of that company? Oh yeah, I think they own it all, so to speak. But that word literally means victory, or to gain success. That's why he named the shoe after that. He wanted victory when he ran. And then, lao, or Laodicea, is the people. Literally the term Nicolaitan meant victory over the people. Here is the temptation that we must resist. We must resist a modern day Nicolaitan which says that the church has a caste system. Now don't get me wrong. There are people that God has called to greater responsibility. There are people that have different giftedness than you have, and that you have, that we're to utilize for his sake. But you know what has happened in our culture so prominently today? We have created a caste system that says that preachers and pastors and singers and this and that are celebrities among us. What does it say? It says, "Greet all brethren with a holy kiss." I've got news for each and every one of us: there's not a person here who came to salvation any other way than the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. We may have distinct responsibilities and unique giftedness, but don't fall for the temptation to create this "Christian celebrityism," this caste system that somehow has prevailed the culture. It's just a manifestation of the "falling away."

So what do we do in the future? How do we go realizing these truths? I love verse 27. It doesn't seem like much, but hopefully I can unpack it this morning. It says, "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren." Well obviously, you know, Paul wants them to hear what he's got to say. That's in the flesh. Let's pull it back for just a moment. Whom we know as the Apostle Paul was originally Saul of Tarsus. He was Jewish by faith and not just any Jew, he claims that he was the Pharisee of the Pharisees. He claims he was the Hebrew of the Hebrews. This was a man who was steeped in religious Judaism. There was probably nobody at his time that could rival him. In fact, he brags about the rabbis that he studied under. He brags about the influence that he had even within his faith of Judaism.

You say, "Why is that so important?" Well, if you've ever been to a synagogue, you've ever been to a "Jewish worship service," you'll notice that on the platform area, the "pulpit area," they typically have what appears to be a wardrobe. Think C. S. Lewis, okay? Think wardrobe there. And within it are the scrolls, and at some point in the service, the rabbi will go and they will pull out those scrolls. Think Luke 4 when Jesus pulled out Isaiah and he began to read to them. You say, "What is so critical about this?" Because in a Jewish synagogue, you never read from anything that wasn't straight from the mouth of God. You know what he's saying? It's called inspiration. 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. 2 Peter 1:21 says, the holy prophets of old, they moved as the Spirit of God spoke unto them. Let me tell you what Paul's saying here. This is incredible. You've got to catch this. He's saying, "I'm not writing this because it's what I want to tell you. I'm not writing this because I came up with it one night." When he says, "Read it when you gather," he's saying, "This came from God," which means that he's given us instructions. Not suggestions. Not ideas. Not if you're in the mood or if it seems good. When God spoke through him, just like he spoke through other vessels, it is that which is from on high, directly from the throne room of God.

So let's turn to 1 Corinthians 11 and let's see what the Lord said about his supper. I talked about when you use the term Christian or Christianity today, there's a lot of different opinion, there's a lot of different preferences, there's a lot of different expressions, maybe no more so than what we know as the Lord's Supper. There's debate on the what, the who, the how, the when. There's all kinds of discussion out there. So let's take the inspired words of God and look at what the instructions are for the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 11, verse 23 of 1 Corinthians.

23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: 24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. 25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. 27 Wherefore [listen to this] whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. 29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

So when you and I partake of these elements, in very simplistic response to what we just read, I think we made it very clear that these elements are not just for the world at large. These are very specifically given to a specific group, the church, to remember the specific act of sacrifice, the giving of his life and his blood, that of Jesus Christ. It also says that

we're to examine ourselves. That is why throughout the course of the worship service, we have alluded to this, we have sung songs about Jesus and pain and awe, we have read scriptures and addressed that we need to be in a position that though we know deep down we'll never be truly worthy of, but at least in this moment, we can with the purest of intentions say, "Lord, I want to remember what you did on my behalf, and I want to do so honorably."

And so today I'm going to ask you that you join with me in the taking of what we know as the Lord's Supper. We're going to begin with the bread. It represents, it's symbolic of the body of Christ. It was given for our behalf. It was beaten for our behalf. It was mocked for our behalf. He was willing to give so that we could attain that which we could never get on our own, and that's the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation of our soul. Let us eat today in remembrance.

And then there is the juice. It's a picture. It's a representation. It's to help us remember that in Hebrews 9:22 says without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sin. This is a weekend where as a culture we remember men and women were willing to shed their blood so that we could have the freedoms that we share, but more importantly, Jesus Christ shed his blood so that all who called on him would and could be saved. And so today we remember that if it were not for his blood, we would not have the right to be called his children, nor would we have forgiveness and salvation for all of eternity. Let us drink in remembrance.

Would you pray with me? As our heads are bowed, our eyes are closed, many of us around this room have today done that and partaken of that which we've done many times throughout the years, the Lord's Supper. But maybe today, maybe you're that individual, maybe that person when you heard those words of 1 Corinthians 11 and you saw what took place around you, the Spirit of God took the word of God and deep down in your soul made it very clear that you've been trying to fix things in your own strength, you've been trying to navigate life according to your purpose, your agenda, whatever it may be, but maybe today you realize for the very first time that Jesus Christ did on behalf of you what you can never do for yourself, the shedding of pure blood, the payment, the price for the debt of sin. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe today that is you. Maybe today's the day where you say, "You know what? I've heard about Jesus, I know that I'm not perfect, I need to connect the biblical dots and be forgiven and saved." Let me encourage you to do what Romans 10:13 says, just cry out, just call out. You don't have to do it out loud, you don't have to say the same words that I would say, somebody else would say, but maybe your heart's cry today would go something like this, "God, today I recognize I have sinned. God, I have strayed from your desires, your purposes, and your goal for my life and your Bible, your word says the wages of my sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. God, today I believe, I believe Jesus is the answer to my sin problem. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, today I believe that as we see these elements representing his body and his blood, that when he allowed his body to be nailed to that cross, when he allowed his blood to flow, it was by doing so that he paid the price for my sin. And God today I

believe that three days later, when Jesus Christ rose from the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible that my sin could be forgiven and my soul could be saved. God, today I don't know the answers to the issues, the struggles, and the problems of this old world but there's one thing I know, I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. The best way I know how I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed. Maybe you're that person today who for the very first time cried out to Jesus. In a moment, I'm gonna pray for us, I'm gonna invite us all to stand, and I just want to encourage you to step out and step forward. We've got a team set aside, we've got a room set aside, just to celebrate with you, to hear from you, to pray with you, and to pray for you. Maybe today you cried out to Jesus. Maybe today he's spoken to you about following in believers' baptism or becoming a part of this incredible Bible-believing church. Or maybe today you just need somebody to pray over you and pray with you. The invitation is open to all.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time, thank you. Thank you that you have invited us through your mercy and grace, to partake of that which we can never attain on our own, the forgiveness of our sin, the salvation of our soul, in a right relationship with you. Help us, O God, today to respond to your voice and none other. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.