

Paul's Prayerful Postscript
1 Thessalonians 5:23-28
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In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28, Paul says, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."

We come to what I call "Paul's Prayerful Postscript." Lately I'm sending text messages that I forget to say something else in. So I'm actually doing a P.S. on my text messages. You can go back and fix the messages, but I just add a P.S. to them as though it was a formal letter.

What Paul is doing at the end of his epistle of 1 Thessalonians is a postscript. It's almost as if he came to the end of his letter, and said, "Oh, I almost forgot," and he adds further information. He was praying for the Thessalonians and wanted them to pray for him, and he told them that God would keep and sanctify them holy until Jesus Christ returns. Then Paul closes with a benediction, in verse 28. He said, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."

We last saw that Paul had given an idealistic picture of the local church in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22. The whole section encompasses verses 12-28, but verses 23-28 is the conclusion and benediction to the epistle.

In verses 12-22, Paul touched on the three, main relationships within the local church. He talked about its leadership; we should look toward them with respect and appreciation, and we should pray for them. He talked about fellowship; we should care for one another in the body of Christ. Then Paul talked about its worship; we should rejoice and pray and "in everything give thanks."

Remember that the context here is the family of God; Paul is speaking to believers. This theme runs from verse 12-28. Five times in this whole section, Paul uses the word "brethren": he used it in verses 12, 14, 25, 26 and 27. The word "brethren" is a generic term for all the family of God.

The moment you become a Christian, God becomes your Father in heaven, and you become His child. And you also become a brother or sister to others in the family of God. As believers, we are the family of God. So Paul was speaking to believers, so he repeated the word "brethren" five times in this section.

Paul knew that to accomplish this idealistic picture of living out God's purpose in the local church meant we would need God's power and God's grace, so he added a prayerful postscript of six sentences or verses. They seem unrelated but they are related. I want to cover these six

sentences Paul gives.

First, in verse 23, Paul prays for their sanctification. He prayed for the Thessalonian believers that God would sanctify them. He prays, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then, in verse 24—I like to put them together—he says, “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” So he prays for their sanctification, and then he affirms that God will keep them and sanctify them.

Notice the context of our Scripture, in verse 22. Paul had just said, “Abstain from every form of evil.” That’s our part, the negative abstinence. Then in verse 23, we see God’s part, His power: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless.” So he uses the words “sanctify” and “preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are four things I want to point out about sanctification. First, what is the meaning of “sanctification” or “sanctify,” verse 23? “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.” The word “sanctify” is a prominent, Bible word. In the Old Testament, God sanctified many things. Sanctification means “to set apart as holy” from the world and unto God for His purposes and for His service.

The nation of Israel was sanctified in the Old Testament. The high priests were set apart. The family of Aaron was set apart. The firstborn in Israel were sanctified unto the Lord. And God set apart the sanctuary, the place of worship. We call the meeting room of the church “the sanctuary,” because it is the place where the saints gather together, apart from the world, to worship God and to study His Word. “Sanctify” comes from the same root word as “holy” or “saint.” It means “to be set apart and holy unto God.”

When we talk about the believer in the New Testament, there are basically four categories or phases of sanctification. First, God calls you or convicts you by the Holy Spirit, and He draws you to Himself before conversion, before salvation.

I remember I saw so clearly all of a sudden in my life that I needed God. I sensed my need for God, I felt sad and I wanted to get right with God. I wanted to read the Bible. I wanted to turn to the Lord. That was the Holy Spirit wooing, convicting or drawing me. No one comes to God without the Spirit of God first convicting them and drawing them.

That’s why when you are praying for your unsaved family and friends, pray that the Spirit of God would convict them and convince them of their need for Jesus Christ. Pray that the Spirit would open their eyes to their need of the Savior.

This is the beginning of the sanctifying process, as God pulls us and draws us out from the world unto Himself.

There is an interesting reference in 1 Corinthians 7:14 talking about marriage. Paul talks about

an unsaved husband with a saved wife and an unsaved wife with a saved husband. The Bible says, "The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy." That doesn't mean that the unbelieving spouse is saved, but it means that there is a sanctifying influence on the unsaved spouse. The Word of God, the things of God, the Spirit of God are working in that marriage and in that home. Even the children are considered clean because of that sanctifying influence of the believing parent.

That's the same thing I see before we are converted.

The second category or phase of sanctification is the moment of conversion, when you are born again. The Holy Spirit regenerates you, gives you new life and comes inside you at the moment of conversion. He indwells you and "you were sealed for the day of redemption" by the Holy Spirit. So you are set apart by God. This is called "positional sanctification." There is a positional, imputed righteousness the moment we are saved.

So the Holy Spirit convicts us, draws us to Himself, converts us, indwells us and sets us apart to Himself positionally.

The third phase is a lifelong process of being made more holy and righteous practically, like Jesus Christ. So there is pre-conversion, conversion (or positional righteousness or sanctification) and a lifelong process of sanctification. Normally we use the term "sanctify" for the third phase of salvation, the lifelong process.

The fourth phase of sanctification is perfect sanctification or total sanctification. That is when we die and go to heaven or when we get raptured and are with the Lord and see Jesus face to face.

You know I have described salvation in its three tenses: past, present and future. We've been justified, past tense; we're being sanctified, present tense; and we will be glorified, future tense. All three of these tenses of salvation can be referred to as "sanctification." All three involve the sanctifying work of God, the saving work of God where He draws us to Himself, He saves us, He changes us throughout our lives and one day He will change us completely when we are in His presence. Number one, that's the nature of sanctification.

Paul has in mind God's work of sanctifying and calling us. And in verse 24, he talks about God being faithful. "He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it." So we are sanctified by the Lord.

What is the source? Who is the sanctifier? Number two, the source of sanctification is "the God of peace Himself," verse 23. We see the emphasis on "God...Himself." I am convinced from Scripture and from experience that God is the source of this work of sanctification. You didn't call yourself, you didn't convert yourself, you don't transform yourself and you won't glorify yourself. From beginning to end, it's all the work of God's grace. By grace God sanctifies us. That's a marvelous truth.

Why is He called here by this title, “the God of peace”? Number one, because He is the source of true peace. Number two, it is through the giving of His Son, Jesus Christ, that we can have true peace with God and the peace of God. So true peace comes from knowing God; it is only provided by God Himself and knowing His Son, Jesus Christ. God Himself is the source.

Number three, we see the extent of sanctification, of His peace. Verse 23 uses the words “completely” and “whole.” These are two variations of the same word. “Completely” means “through and through” or “absolutely complete,” and “whole” means “to the end.” What Paul means by that is that God’s sanctifying process is thorough in the whole person—in “spirit, soul, and body.” He says, “Your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

A lot of people get confused at the statement “spirit, soul, and body.” There are two views about it. One view is that man is a trichotomy, and they will use this verse to say that man is made up of spirit, soul and body. They define these as the spirit is the God-consciousness part of our lives, and when we are born again, we are quickened spiritually. The soul is the psyche of man, our mind, emotions and will. And the body is the physical, biological body that we inhabit.

Then there are those who are dichotomists, who basically believe that man is twofold: body and soul/spirit. The soul and spirit are synonymous.

We can’t be sure that you can differentiate between the soul and the spirit. That is where the issue lies. If the soul and spirit are different, some would indicate in Scripture that it is; some would say it’s not. We don’t know.

But what Paul is saying here in this passage is that your whole being—your spirit, soul and body—is going to be sanctified.

Sanctification for the Christian is not just doing outward, righteous things; it’s inwardly having a transformation of your soul and spirit. And only God can do that. So the outward actions of your body follow the transformation of your heart or the renewing of your heart, your mind and your soul.

I tend to believe that man is a dichotomy, the body and then the immaterial part of man, which you can divide into soul and spirit if you want. But there is no clear definition or explanation of the difference between soul and spirit in the Scriptures.

But we do know that we are more than just a body, and that God’s work of sanctification is whole and complete. Paul uses the words “completely” and “whole,” and then to clarify it, he says, “spirit, soul, and body.” Normally we would put “body” first and say, “body, soul, and spirit.” But God says the spirit is the most important part, and the soul is the inner man and the body follows. Someone said, “The most important part of you is only the part that God can see.” I like that.

So God wants to transform us from the inside out. He doesn’t want us to be legalistic and just

keep rules; He wants to change and transform our hearts, our inner man, and thus the way that we live. He is totally sanctifying us.

Number four, we see the completion of sanctification. When does it come to an end? Verse 23 says, it is “at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He said “sanctify you” and that you “be preserved blameless.” That’s not sinless and perfect. But we will be absolutely, completely blameless at the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ. “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

You’re never going to be perfectly, totally sanctified until you literally, physically see Jesus face to face. Then you will be like Him, perfectly transformed. Sanctification is a lifelong process in which God is making you more like Jesus, but you won’t arrive until you get there with Him and see Him face to face.

I have mentioned, as we’ve gone through 1 Thessalonians, that each chapter ends with a reference to the coming of Jesus Christ. So here in verse 23, we have “the coming.” The Greek word is “parousia,” which means “appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For the church, that means the rapture. For unbelievers, for the world, it’s the Second Coming. In chapter 1, the reference is verse 10, where Paul says “to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” This is a reference to our salvation from wrath. So when you speak of the Lord’s coming, it has the practical application that He is coming to save His own, because He saved them—past tense—from the wrath of God.

In chapter 2, in verses 19-20, we see the second reference. Paul said, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” it’s the same Greek word “parousia.” “For you are our glory and joy.” Here the coming of the Lord relates to our service. We know Jesus is coming, so we want to serve Him and we want to have the rewards, the crowns in heaven.

In chapter 3, in verses 12-13, Paul says, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts...”—tied in with the idea to sanctify, give you strength and stability in your hearts—“...blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming...”—or “parousia”—“...of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

So the coming of the Lord relates to our salvation, our service and our stability, being able to stand “blameless in holiness.”

In chapter 4, in verses 16-18, it speaks of the Lord’s surety that we will see Him, that we will be reunited with our loved ones who have died and that the resurrection of our own bodies will take place. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” This was the problem: they thought those who had died before the Lord returned wouldn’t be resurrected

and would be at a disadvantage when the rapture came. “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up...”—“harpodzo” in the Greek or “snatched up by force” or “raptured”—“...together with them...”—that is, “the dead in Christ,” verse 16—“...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” So there will be a resurrection, a translation and a reunion as we all meet together in heaven.

So salvation, service, stability and surety or comfort are referenced at the end of these verses. Now we see a reference at the end of the chapter, in our text, in chapter 5, verse 23. It says that we will be “preserved,” we will be sanctified, we will be kept “blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I think that Paul is including the entire sanctifying process here: God drew us by His grace, He saved us by His grace, He transforms us by His grace and then He takes us to glory. The great American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, once said, “What begins with grace ends in glory.” I like that. What starts with God’s grace in calling us ends with God’s grace in glorifying us in heaven. So Paul was talking about God’s entire sanctifying process in our lives. How marvelous that is.

In chapter 4, verse 3, we saw that “This is the will of God, your sanctification, that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” So that is God’s sanctifying process.

Now in the second part of verse 24, Paul affirms God’s faithfulness. In verse 23, Paul prays for their sanctification, then in verse 24, Paul affirms that God is faithful, that He will do what he just prayed for God to do. “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” “Who calls” is in the present tense. This is sanctification’s surety.

If you put verses 23 and 24 together, you have sanctification’s nature, source, extent, completion and surety. “He...will do it.”

An interesting thing is that in verse 23, Paul prays for their sanctification. Then in verse 24, he assures us that it will happen. How? Because God Himself will do it and God is faithful. So our ultimate sanctification, which is glorification, depends not on our self-efforts but on the promises, the power and the faithfulness of God.

I don’t know what encourages me, blesses me or comforts me more than the concept of God’s faithfulness. He is so faithful.

Have you ever discovered that people are flakey? We’re all flakes. But God is faithful. I’m so glad He’s faithful. He’s immutable or unchangeable. He’s faithful in His grace, His love and in His mercy. Philippians 1:6 says, “...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you...”—it started with His call—“...will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” God doesn’t get tired. God doesn’t give up on you.

Have you ever started a project and then given up? I can’t tell you how many half-read books I

have in my library. Or half-projects that I've started and then haven't completed. Aren't you glad that God doesn't start working in your life and then says, "I'm kind of bored" and throws you away? But God starts in your life, He continues in your life and He finishes what He started in your life—the work of sanctifying you.

In Jude 24, it says, "...now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." That's a promise that God is able to keep you from falling and keep you faultless before His presence with great joy.

Romans 8 first starts in verse 1 with "no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," and then ends in verses 35-39 with no separation. And all that is in between is no defeat. It opens with "no condemnation," it continues with no defeat and it ends with no separation. Nothing "shall separate us from the love of Christ." Nothing will separate us—that includes you—from the love of God. Verse 39 says, "Nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." So "what begins with grace ends in glory."

So in verse 23, we have the prayer for sanctification; in verse 24, we have the promise—"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it." God is faithful; He will bring to pass His sanctifying purpose in your life. God calls by His grace, He will keep by His grace and He leads to glory by His grace.

John R.W. Stott said, "God upholds those who He calls and fulfills what He has promised. We can rely upon His steadfast love, which never fails but endures forever. And it's new every morning." That's God's grace and love.

Now we move in this section to the third sentence, verse 25. Paul asks for their prayers. He says, "Brethren, pray for us." He's using the word "brethren" again, the believers. And he uses the word "us," so he is talking about Silas and Timothy, "us" pastors, and apostles. He asked for their prayers.

There are three times in this letter where Paul prayed for them: chapter 1, verse 2; chapter 3, verses 12-13; and in chapter 5, verse 23. F.F. Bruce called verse 23 "Paul's prayerful wish," that God would sanctify them. Now as Paul comes to the end of the letter, he asks the believers to pray for them.

Paul was not too proud, not too self-righteous, not too haughty to ask for prayer. He recognized the need he had for the prayers of God's people. It also reminds us that we need to pray for our spiritual leaders continually. It's amazing how many times in Paul's letters that he asks for prayer. All through his letter he says, "Pray for me," "Pray for us," "Pray that God will open the door," "Pray that God would give me boldness," "Pray that God would help me know what to say," "Pray that I would make the Gospel clear," "Pray that we will be protected from evil and unruly men"—"Pray, pray, pray!" So Paul prays for them, and he asked them to pray for him.

That's a real dynamic in a local church: when the pastors are praying for the people, the people

are praying for their pastors, they're getting along and loving one another. Remember that back in verse 12, it said that people are to know their pastors. That means they are to appreciate them. In verse 13, it said they are "to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." And they are to "be at peace among yourselves." Now again, in verse 25, the people are to pray for their spiritual leaders in the local church.

Then we move to verse 26, the fourth sentence in this section. Paul tells them, "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss." That was the way they greeted one another during this period of time. In the middle East, they kiss on the cheek. It is a show of affection and love. It's a beautiful thing. The carryover into our time would be the equivalent of a holy handshake or a holy hug. But what Paul is saying is that we should show affection to one another.

So in the church, these closing remarks are pretty cool. Pray for your spiritual leaders, and show affection for one another. That's so important. So Paul speaks of the greeting and what love we can have in the family of God for one another.

And notice that Paul says it's for "all the brethren." There is to be no discrimination, no favoritism. You can't just go to the people you like. Show affection to all of them.

In the fifth sentence, Paul insists that his letter be read publically. He said, "I charge you..." This is a very strong word, also used in 2 Timothy 4:1, where Paul told Timothy, "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word!" It is a solemn charge, to put someone under a solemn oath. So Paul said, "I charge you by the Lord..."—he is being directed by the Lord in this matter—"...that this epistle..."—Paul's letter to them—"...be read to all the holy brethren." So we give a "holy kiss," in verse 26, and now we are reading the Scriptures before the "holy brethren."

It's interesting that, in verse 25, we have prayer for our leadership; in verse 26, we have showing affection in our fellowship; and in verse 27, we have submitting to the Scriptures or the Word of God, the place it plays in our church. These are three marks of a true church: prayer, fellowship and the Scriptures.

Paul's letters are the Scripture. The Jews read the Scriptures in their synagogues. And that is carried over to recognizing that Paul's letters are part of the Scriptures. And Paul's book of 1 Thessalonians is believed to be the first book written of the New Testament. It was written very early. And it is being recognized here as being authoritative Scripture, or being on an equal part with the Scripture of the Old Testament when Paul said that he wanted it read to "all the holy brethren."

So the Scriptures should be read publically in the church assembly. I believe that the Bible instructs us that when we gather as a church, the Bible should be open and the Bible should be read. I like the idea that not only is the Bible the Word of God, but the Bible is God's Word in written form. When God speaks in His Word, we hear God speak. So when we're reading the

Scriptures, we're actually hearing the Word of the Lord. And we must submit to it, to its authority, and obey it.

I want to point out two things about the Bible and the church. The church needs the Bible, and the Bible needs the church. First, the church needs the Bible to strengthen it. In 1 Peter 2:2, Peter says, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." In Acts 20:32, when Paul met with the elders of Ephesus and was about to leave them, he said, "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." So the church needs the Scriptures.

Second, the church needs the Bible to sanctify it. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed to His Father, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." So as the Bible is read, as it is preached and as it is submitted to, it has a sanctifying effect on the people of God and on the church of God.

Third, the church needs the Bible to equip it for service. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul said, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." So the Bible equips us for our service to the Lord. What better way for us to be equipped for service than to hear the Word of God read and then obey it.

But the Bible also needs the church. We need to hold it fast, 2 Timothy 1:13. "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me." That means to be rightly divided or interpreted or cut straight by the church and its pastors. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Then it needs to be preached—my favorite. 2 Timothy 4:2 says, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." If the church doesn't preach the Word, who is going to preach the Word? We are to publish it, preach it and proclaim it. Submit to the Scriptures.

Then the sixth sentence of our section is in verse 28. Paul wishes them the grace of God in closing. This is the benediction. It is the shortest benediction. And almost all of Paul's benedictions have reference to the grace of God. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen." It's most likely that the "Amen" was not in the original text; it's been added by the translators later.

In chapter 1, verse 1, Paul opens his epistle with "grace," and he closes, in chapter 5, verse 28, with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's because everything is about God's grace. Christianity is all about God's grace. From beginning to end, it is the grace of God. The Christian life is all about grace, because it's grace in the Lord Jesus Christ that saves us, it's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that sanctifies us, it's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that equips us for service, it's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that helps us in our suffering and it's the grace of God that will lead us home safely to heaven. "What begins with grace ends in glory."

I like John Newton's song Amazing Grace. It's the greatest hymn ever penned for the church.

"'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home."

Grace brought me to this point, and grace will take me all the way. It's the grace of God.

The grace of God is found in Jesus Christ. Nowhere else can we find the grace of God than in the Person of Jesus Christ.

So verse 25, pray for your pastors; verse 26, show affection to one another; verse 27, submit to the Scriptures; and verse 28, rely upon God's grace. Amen.