

## XI. Two Benedictions

March 2/3, 2011

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, 5:23-28

**Aim:** To pray for one another that Christ might continue to sanctify us and to perfect our sanctification at His Second Coming.

### A. Closing the First Half of the Epistle (1 Th. 3:11-13)

Paul ends the first half of the letter with a benediction. This is a special type of prayer of blessing offered by God's authorized representative, in which the representative asks God to bless His people. After expressing his comfort in, and joy over, Timothy's report by means of several emotional outbursts in 2:17-3:10, Paul concludes the section with a warm but more formal benediction in the tradition of Numbers 6:22-27, in which he once again stresses his love for them. In fact, the three Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope are all implied in this concluding prayer.

#### 1. Directed Way (3:11)

*Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.*

Timothy's report on his visit to Thessalonica had renewed an intense desire in Paul to return and see the church there. It has also driven him to pray earnestly to that end (3:10). Now he prays that God would bring that desire to pass. Paul's petition utilized the Greek optative mood, indicated in English by 'may,' which expresses a wish. Rather than presenting a direct request to God, the apostle speaks in a way that suggests he is expressing a wish. His words, nevertheless, have the force of a prayer; he wants his God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to clear the way for a visit.

Paul shows his belief in the divinity of Christ by linking God the Father and Jesus the Lord together. Such linkings of the Father and the Son are frequent in the epistles and emphasize equality in divine nature between God the Father and Jesus the Son. The use of the singular pronoun 'Himself' (*αὐτός, autos*), and the singular verb 'direct' with the plural subject emphasizes again the unmistakable unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead. Clearly Christ's directing the affairs of men demonstrates His divine power. The fact that Christ is being addressed in a benediction, which is an act appropriate only to the worship of God, is a mark of Christ's divinity.

The foremost motive for Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was that their faith would grow. 'Direct' (*κατευθύνεω, kateuthuneō*) conveys the idea of laying out a straight, smooth path with all the obstacles removed. In expressing this wish, he probably has in mind the roadblocks mentioned earlier that Satan had set across his path (2:18). Whatever those were, the apostle looked to God to clear them away. Note how strong his view is of the sovereignty of the Triune God – it must ultimately be God Himself who will enable Paul to return to Thessalonica, not simply his own desire.

Paul clearly felt that his movements all took place under the sovereign control of the Almighty. He believed that God's control over the events of life extended even to the practicalities of travel plans and consequently thought it both right and necessary to pray about such things. In doing so he was not abdicating his responsibility to plan and attempt the journey himself. Rather, he was

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recognizing that all the affairs of life are ultimately in the hands of God. So Paul's pastoral prayer began with a request that the Father and Son would use him to mature and strengthen the Thessalonians' faith.

### 2. Abounding in Love (3:12)

*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you...*

#### a) To One Another

Paul's primary reason for wanting to revisit Thessalonica was spiritual rather than personal. As much as he wanted to see his new friends there again, he wanted even more to help them grow in their faith. Consequently this, too, finds expression in his prayer for them. Paul prayed primarily that his friends might achieve spiritual excellence. He did not see this as the acquisition of some new experience or blessing that they had not previously enjoyed, but rather that the love that they already had (3:6) would increase abundantly.

He prays that the Lord would make their 'love' (*ἀγάπη, agapē*) increase and overflow for each other. They were already a loving community of people (1:3; 3:6; 4:9). He prays that the Lord Jesus would cause their love to increase and overflow, to abound more and more. Paul depended on God for the development of spiritual virtues. Whether it was the beginning of the Christian life (justification), or the process of spiritual growth (sanctification), God revealed that He ultimately deserves the credit for believers' maturity.

In this request, Paul only addresses 'the Lord,' which in context is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has the ability to make the Thessalonians love for each other and for all increase and abound.

#### b) To All

Paul prays that by the grace of the Lord Jesus, the Thessalonians would overflow with love not only for each other, but for others as well. 'All' refers to Christians outside of Thessalonica and to non-Christians everywhere. The love God creates in our hearts is not a love exclusively for fellow Christians. It is a love as broad as His own, a love that embraces all kinds of people. The love of God poured into the believers' hearts by the Holy Spirit could not be reserved for members of their own fellowship; it must overflow to others without restriction. Paul wanted them to have a greater love for the lost and for those who persecuted them.

#### c) Just As We Do

As a secondary motivation to love others, Paul uses himself as an example; Paul dares to appeal to his own example in this matter of super abounding love. This is no empty boast. The apostle has already shown how deeply he, Silas, and Timothy cared for the church they had left in such a hurry. He loved them when they were strangers, in the greatest spiritual need by sacrificially bring the gospel to them (1:9; 2:1-2). The anxious prayers, strenuous efforts, costly absences, and now even this letter, were all expressions of overflowing love.

### 3. Blameless at His Coming (3:13)

*...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.*

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The final objective of Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was that they might look to their glorification, which produces a purifying hope. Paul wants them to be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father. Most likely the word 'blameless' (*ἀμέμπτους, amemptous*) here refers to the combination of: firstly, the forgiveness of sins based on Christ's work; secondly, the progressive change in us during our Christian lives whereby we become more and more holy; and, thirdly, an instantaneous change of our sinful nature occurring at our death or at the Second Coming (glorification). True blamelessness in word and action must be the fruit of inner sanctification.

In speaking of them being in the presence of God, he is thinking of their appearance before Him as their Judge. He is primarily concerned not about the present, but about the future. He wants his converts to be able to stand in the presence of God blameless and holy. He wants them to be without blame, morally pure, and devoted to the Lord Himself. He knows that their whole of being able to do this rests in the grace of the Lord Jesus. Their appearance before God at the parousia will consummate their sanctification

This awesome event, the apostle adds, will occur when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones. It is at His Second Coming (*παρουσία, parousia*) that Jesus Himself, in fact, will be the One who judges (cp. John 5:22; Acts 17:31). Are the 'holy ones' (*ἁγίων, hagiōn*) holy angels, departed human believers, or both angels and humans? It is certainly true that when Christ returns He will have with Him both angels (2 Th. 1:7; Mt. 25:31) and humans (4:14, 2 Th. 1:10). Paul is probably alluding to the passage in Zechariah 14:5 which says, "And the LORD my God will come, all the holy ones with Him" (cp. also Dt. 33:2). The coming of the Lord is the point of focus to which Paul turns to again and again in this letter. For him it marks the end of the old and the consummation of the new.

### **B. Closing the Second Half of the Epistle (1 Th. 5:23-28)**

The closing section of 1 Thessalonians contains a peace benediction (5:23-24), a greeting (5:26), two exhortations (5:25, 27), and a grace benediction (5:28).

#### **1. Peace Benediction (5:23-24)**

Paul ends his letter with a fervent prayer wish for their sanctification and security. He has explained how they are to live and how they are to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. Now he looks to the one who alone can enable them to act as they ought and sanctify the obedient believer. Three themes in this peace benediction relate strongly to the rest of the letter: sanctification (cp. 3:13; 4:3, 7); the Second Coming (cp. 1:10; 2:12, 19; 3:13; 4:14-17; 5:1-2); and calling or election (cp. 1:4; 2:12; 4:7; 5:9).

##### *a) Sanctified (5:23a)*

*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely...*

This wish-prayer is in essence a repetition in different words of that in 3:11-13, the climax of which is the prayer that the Thessalonians' hearts may be established 'unblamable in holiness' at the parousia.

First, the apostle calls upon God to sanctify his friends. He recognizes that the business of ordering our lives as those who are set apart for the service of God will demand more than we can supply. Ultimately, God must work within us if it is to take place at all. It is God who gives

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Christians the ability to do good works, and it is God who commands them to do good works for Him. Or as Augustine has famously said, ‘Give what you command, and command what you will.’

‘Sanctify’ (*ἀγιασαι, hagianai*) means ‘to set apart,’ ‘to separate’ from sin and holiness. It relates to the process of Christians becoming more and more holy during their lives. The optative mood here expresses a wish or desire. The apostle’s entreaty for the Thessalonians parallels and reiterates the theme and form of his earlier prayer for their spiritual growth in 3:11-13. The idea of sanctification has been behind much of what Paul has written in the last two chapters, starting with God’s will for their lives (4:3). He is well aware that in Christ they are already completely set apart to God and accepted as holy (1 Cor. 1:2). But it is not this aspect of sanctification that he is thinking about. He is referring to the process of transformation that takes place in the life of the Christian as a result of being united with Christ.

Three basic elements define believers’ sanctification. First is the past, fixed aspect—positional sanctification—which God effected at the time He saved each believer. God secured positional sanctification through the death of His Son. Sanctification has a second, future aspect—ultimate sanctification—when God actually makes believers sinless in body and spirit forever. The third element defining biblical sanctification is the experiential aspect, which concerns present Christian living and thus lies between the past/positional and future/ultimate aspects of sanctification. It is the process in which believers strive, by the Spirit’s power, to be more and more conformed to the image of Christ. The Puritan Thomas Watson stated it this way: ‘Sanctification is a principle of grace savingly wrought, whereby the heart becomes holy, and is made after God’s own heart. A sanctified person bears not only God’s name, but His image.’

Paul never taught that it was possible that people could live perfect, sinless lives in this world. But he knew that God’s standard was perfect sanctification and that one day every Christian would be completely sanctified. His prayer reflects that understanding. He cannot be content with people just taking the first steps toward a holy life. He wants to see his converts renewed through and through.

Paul prays that God Himself, the God of peace (*εἰρήνης, eirēnēs*) would bring it about. To underscore that it is God who sanctifies, the apostle used ‘Himself’ (*αὐτός, autos*) in the emphatic position, just as he did in 3:11. God does not delegate the sanctifying process to an angel or an apostle; neither does He accomplish it by some distant decree. Rather he accomplishes it by His own actions as He works directly in believer’s lives.

Paul acknowledges that sanctification is God’s work (cp. Zech 4:6). True, there is a human component to it. The Bible nowhere teaches that sanctification takes place without human involvement and effort. But neither does it teach that it is possible to be sanctified in the least degree by human will or effort alone. It is only through God the Holy Spirit working in us that we can make any progress at all toward holiness.

‘Entirely’ or ‘completely’ (*ὀλοτελής, holotelēs*) is used only here in the New Testament and is a compound of two Greek words, *holos*, ‘whole,’ ‘complete,’ and *telēs*, ‘end,’ ‘finish.’ Paul asked that God would sanctify the Thessalonians ‘all the way through’ or ‘through and through.’

### *b) Preserved (5:23b)*

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

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But the apostle's focus in his letter has not been on sanctification or holiness alone. He has also said much about the second coming of the Lord Jesus. In fact, the two themes have been closely intertwined (3:13). It is at the Second Coming that we enter fully into the experience of being God's holy people.

### (1) Blameless

Secondly, Paul asks the Lord to preserve his friends in such a manner that when Jesus returns each one would be blameless. Since the Lord comes to judge the world and execute His Father's wrath upon sinners, nothing is more crucial than that we should be prepared for His arrival. If the keeping power of God is to bring believers to the point where the Son of God can find no offense in them when He comes to judge the world in righteousness, this is, in effect, their complete sanctification. Thus, 'to be kept blameless' refers primarily to the final change that God will effect in us at the Second Coming (usually called 'glorification'). Paul wants his cherished converts in Thessalonica to be able to stand before the Lord with confidence and joy rather than in dread and shame.

Paul prayed that the saints would be 'preserved' ('kept') 'complete, without blame'; that God would keep them in the path of holiness until they received their ultimate sanctification. 'Complete' (*όλόκληρον, holoklēron*) means 'with integrity, 'total,' 'intact,' 'undamaged.' 'Without blame' (*άμέμπτως, amemptōs*) is the same word archeologists have found on Christian tombs from ancient Thessalonica. At the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, God will make believers sinless forever. This is the letter's fourth mention of His 'coming' (*παρουσία, parousia*).

### (2) Spirit, Soul, Body

Paul's use of the expression 'spirit and soul and body' has prompted debate in church history. Does man consist of three parts (trichotomy) or two parts (dichotomy)? Granted that man has a body, are we to conclude that the soul and spirit are different names for the non-material part of his being, or do these words refer to two distinct aspects of his nature? Dichotomy asserts that man consists of only a soul (inner, immaterial part) and a body (outer, material part) and that Scripture often uses soul and spirit interchangeably (cp. Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 7:34; Phil. 1:27; James 2:26). Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul consistently argues that there is a dual rather than a triple aspect to the human constitution (Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 2:3; Col. 2:5). Most Lutherans, all the Reformed churches, and Roman Catholicism favor dichotomy.

Paul was not attempting to give a considered judgment on a difficult question about the precise make-up of human beings: he was praying. And the force of his prayer was that every part of his friends would be taken up in the service of God. We must understand his words as an expression of fervent seriousness. Paul is not making any specific distinction between 'soul' (*ψυχή, psuchē*) and 'spirit' (*πνεῦμα, pneuma*) but is simply using multiple words for rhetorical effect to emphasize that God redeems the 'whole' man (cp. Mark 12:30). This is another way of expressing the desire for their complete sanctification. In fact, the two terms are used interchangeably in Scripture (cp. Heb. 6:19; 10:39; 1 Pe. 2:11; 2 Pe. 2:8).

In the view of prevailing Greek culture, it is significant that Paul included the 'body' (*σώμα, sōma*) in his benediction. That culture—influenced by a philosophical dualism which taught that man's spirit is inherently good and his body inherently evil—held the body in low esteem. That philosophy provided a convenient rationale for dismissing as inconsequential whatever immoral

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physical behavior people might have engaged in. But such thinking was abhorrent to the apostle Paul. If sanctification is to be complete, it will extend to every part of the believer, especially the body, which thinks, feels, and acts in response to the holiness of the inner person.

What he is saying is that when the Lord comes, we need to be found blameless in every aspect of our lives. This is not meant to suggest that in the end our salvation will hinge on our personal character and works. We know that no one will be saved from wrath and eternal death through their own works.

### *c) Faithful (5:24)*

*He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.*

Paul's confidence was built upon the faithfulness of God. True believers last the course. This is not because they themselves have extraordinary staying power. Our ultimate security rests on the fact that God is reliable and keeps His promises. He has undertaken to finish what He starts (Phil. 1:6). This is another pledge to all believers that God has the power to guarantee their ultimate sanctification. The salvation God grants is secure—He graciously and efficaciously calls individuals, supplies them the faith to repent and believe, and provides them the grace to persevere to the glory of ultimate sanctification.

God is the One who ultimately is changing us (an effectual calling). He has changed us in the past when we first believed. He is also changing us now. He will finally change us at the Second Coming. Our God is a great, 'faithful' God!

In the end, our security rests in the Lord Himself. He is the One who is able to keep us from falling and present us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 24). Our salvation is rooted in the election and calling of God. He chooses, and He calls in accord with that choice. The point Paul now makes is that the One who calls is also faithful – faithful to His purposes, and His covenant promises. What He had determined He will surely accomplish (Is. 46:10). What He has promised, He will surely perform. Our certainty of being able to stand before the Lord rests finally not in ourselves, but in God Himself. He will do it!

## **2. Exhortation (5:25-27)**

### *a) Pray (5:25)*

*Brethren, pray for us.*

Paul's request is a touching plea for prayer for himself and his associates, Silas and Timothy. The three missionaries have been praying ceaselessly for the church in Thessalonica (1:2, 3; 3:10). Now Paul asks that it reciprocate and pray for them. 'Pray' (*προσεύχασθε, proseuchesthe*) is in the present tense, indicating that Paul wanted the Thessalonians to make these prayers a habit. 'Brethren' (*αδελφοι, adelphoi*) left no one out and served as a basis for Paul's first request—because they were together in the family of God and he had the right to expect them to pray for him.

For all his achievements he readily admitted that he was as much in need of help as anyone. He had not got beyond the need for prayer. That he should make such a request shows his remarkable humility. That he should ask them to pray also shows how aware Paul was of his dependence on the grace of God in his ministry. Prayer is not peripheral to gospel ministry, an add-on to the larger tasks of preaching and counseling and evangelism. It forms the very heart of the work itself as God's appointed means of obtaining His necessary power.

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### *b) Greet (5:26)*

*Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.*

Paul asked that his greetings should be passed on to the whole fellowship. ‘Greet’ (*ασπάσασθε, aspasasthe*) conveys the intention of a friendly and righteous gesture. When Christians encountered one another, they were not merely fellow citizens meeting. They were fellow members in God’s family who belonged to each other in Christ. How fitting, then, that they should not only greet one another, but greet in a way that reflected their relationship.

In both Jewish and Greco-Roman practice, kisses were exchanged within families and with close friends to show appropriate affection, especially upon meeting and departing. The ‘holy’ kisses of the New Testament were certainly meant to show friendship and family affection between brothers and sisters in Christ, and were not sensual. Most likely the kissing was both within and between the genders. Probably the kisses were on the cheek or forehead.

Kissing was a common form of greeting at that time, and Christians were to continue to use it as part of their life together. It was to be the affectionate kiss of family members who related to one another with utter moral purity. The ‘kiss’ (*φιλήματι, philēmati*) is ‘holy’ (*άγιω, hagiō*) in the sense that it is between two believers or saints. Later abuses of this practice required that it first be restricted and then eventually curtailed altogether.

Paul wants this form of greeting to be extended not to just some of the brothers, but to all of them. ‘All the brethren’ (*τούς άδελφούς, tous adelphous*) leaves out note of the Thessalonian believers, not even the unruly ones of 5:14. It may be that he wanted them to avoid selectivity in their greeting. They were not to greet just their closest friends in the church and ignore those who were less appealing. He is warning against the partiality that so quickly hardens into factions and cliques within the church.

Too little attention is given to the practice of Christian greeting today. The perfunctory way in which we so often greet one another falls far short of what Paul had in mind. It should be a matter of conscience to us to greet fellow Christians in a way that reflects our relation to them and our affection for them.

Obviously, different cultures show brotherly or sisterly affection in various ways. The normal method in Paul’s day was a kiss. Paul also spoke of the ‘right hand of Christian fellowship’ (Gal. 2:9). In any event, God’s Word teaches us that we are to greet Christian friends heartily. Do it in a way that shows your brotherly or sisterly affection and is appropriate to the culture.

Eventually people in the church began to abuse the holy kiss and by the thirteenth century the Western church abandoned the custom. Christians in Western culture now generally express affection by shaking hands or embracing one another. In whatever appropriate form the affection might take, however, the apostle Paul commanded believers to love one another in a demonstrable fashion.

What is considered an appropriate greeting may well vary from one culture to another. The important thing, surely, is that we treat our fellow Christians not only with courtesy but with affection according to the conventions of our own culture.

### *c) Read (5:27)*

*I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.*

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Paul wanted his letter to be read to the whole fellowship at Thessalonica. This is not light request but has the strength of a demand made on oath. ‘Adjure’ or ‘charge’ (*ενορκίζω, enorkizō*) is a strong word that means ‘to bind with an oath.’ Paul was so intent that all the Thessalonians receive his letter’s contents that he imposed a solemn oath (‘by the Lord’) on the elders. He put the elders on their honor to ensure that the letter was read, probably at least in public worship.

Paul evidently wants to guard against his letter becoming the restricted property of a select few within the church. It was intended to be a means of instruction and blessing to all, and consequently, it was to be read to all. ‘Read’ (*ἀναγνωσθήναι, anagnōsthēnai*) connotes a reading aloud in the public worship service. Public reading of Scripture was essential to the spiritual accountability of the people of God (2 Th. 3:14; 1 Tim. 4:13; cp. Gal. 4:16).

While not specifying that this take place at one of the regular assemblies of the church on the Lord’s Day, we may assume that Paul had something like this in view. The apostolic letters quickly gained a place alongside the Old Testament Scriptures in public readings in Christian meetings. This in turn contributed to their acceptance as Scripture and their eventual inclusion in the canon of our Bible. The practice of reading and explaining these letters in Christian gatherings continues today.

### 3. Grace Benediction (5:28)

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.*

The letter ends as it began, with a prayer that all who read it might experience the ‘grace’ (*χάρις, charis*) of God. For Paul, the Christian life was a life of grace, saturated from beginning to end with the undeserved favor and blessing of God. It began in grace, was sustained by grace, and would be consummated through grace. How vastly superior this is to a mere ‘good-health’ wish. It highlights again how different our lives should be as Christians. Even our common ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ should reflect that our lives are bound up with Christ. Is that true of us?

Paul ends all his epistles with a grace benediction. On the basis of Numbers 6:22-27, and the fact that most of the New Testament letters end in benedictions, the church has adopted the practice of concluding the worship services with a benediction.

For next time: Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4.