

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28**PREFACE**

We have now reached the closing thoughts of Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church. He begins with a fulsome benediction, and ends with the same expression of grace with which he opened the letter.

vv23-24: BENEDICTION

The word "benediction" means, literally, a "good (*bene-*) word (*diction*)" from the Latin *benedictio*, to speak well of. **1.** a blessing **2.** an invocation of divine blessing, especially at the end of a religious service. (Webster's)

Here at the close of his first letter to the Thessalonians—and, as we have learned, probably his first letter written to *any* church—Paul signs off with a "good word"—to encourage, to uplift them, to remind them that God is faithful and at work in their lives.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely;

Of all the attributes Paul could have assigned to *theos*, he chooses the attribute of peace because his "good word" is that this God will "sanctify you entirely," or completely.

peace = *eirene* = probably from a primary verb ***eiro (to join)***; peace (literal or figurative); by implication prosperity :- one, peace, quietness, rest, + **set at one again**. [translates the Hebrew *shalom*]

God's "peace" is less about happiness and absence of conflict (horizontally) than it is about *wholeness*—expanded in the next clause—and the absence of conflict vertically. For the believer, God's peace is materially represented in Christ Jesus.

Read Ephesians 2:13-16.

This "God of peace" will *Himself* sanctify—set us apart, make us holy. We do not sanctify ourselves, nor does anyone else but God in Christ. It is all wrapped up in one package: justification, salvation, sanctification—because we must be this to be given entrance into God's presence, and because we are incapable of accomplishing it on our own, He must do it for us. And what God does, He does "entirely," "completely," thoroughly, inside and out [**"absolutely perfect"**].

and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because elsewhere in his writings the apostle speaks of only two bodily components—spirit and flesh (e.g., Romans 8: 4)—some commentators stand on their head to reconcile the three listed here into two. But there is no reason for that; if I, as a writer, wanted to emphasize the separateness of three distinct items, I would present it just as Paul has here: "spirit **and** [*kai*] soul **and** [*kai*] body" (emphasis added).

"The **spirit** (*pneuma*) is that part that enables man to perceive the divine" (Thomas). It is our spirit in communion with God's Spirit that makes possible our daily association with our heavenly Father, as well as our understanding of His written word.

"The **soul** (*psyche*) is the sphere of man's will and emotions. Here is the true center of personality" (Thomas).

Body = *soma* = from <G4982> (sozo): **the body (as a sound whole)**, used in a very wide application, literal or figurative : - bodily, body, slave.

Rev. George Barlow: There is a great trinity of powers—body, soul, and spirit—linking man with three different worlds. The physical, the intellectual, the spiritual. These three ranges of powers become gateways of temptation from three different worlds, and unless they are all consecrated we are never free from danger.

The imagery for **preserve** is less a retention of the status quo (as in canning or freezing), than a picture of keeping safe by protection, as within the protective walls of a fortress.

preserved complete, kept = *holoklēron tērētheiē* = from <G3650> (holos) and <G2819> (kleros); **complete in every part, i.e. perfectly sound (in body)** : - entire, whole.

One cannot miss Paul's emphasis here; notice the common thread: he is pulling out of his thesaurus every word he can find to emphasize wholeness, completeness, entirety. When God does a work, He does it completely—just as when Jesus healed someone: there was no gradual restoration over time, no partial healing then let nature take care of the rest. No, when Jesus told the paralytic, "Pick up your pallet and go home," he "got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone" (Mark 2:11-12).

This is actually Paul's second benediction in this letter, and he ends both of them the same.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13.

...be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (ESV)

Dr. W. P. Pope: The same power that sanctifies as an act preserves that sanctification as a state.

The end of v23 raises a number of issues that I believe are answered by v24. As the ESV puts it, Paul prays that the Thessalonians will "be kept blameless" until Christ returns, which allows for the possibility that they may *not* be kept blameless. But what about the "perseverance of the saints," etc. Verse 24 answers this.

Read v24.

ESV: He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

If God has called you—as he puts it in the beginning of this letter, “His choice of you,” that is, the believer’s election—then everything in v23 He (“the God of peace”) *will* bring to fruition: God will make it happen, because He is faithful—He *will* keep His word. While it is true that it is God who sanctifies us, there remains a level of personal responsibility.

C. H. Spurgeon: “If an earthly king lie but a night in a house, what care is there taken that nothing be offensive to him, but that all things be neat, clean, and sweet? How much more ought you to be careful to get and keep your hearts clean, to perform service acceptably to Him; to be in the exercise of faith, love and other graces, that you may entertain, as you ought, your heavenly King, who comes to take up His continual abode and residence in your hearts!” [quoting Manton] We know a house in which an empress rested for a very short time, and the owner henceforth refused to admit other inmates. Such is his devotion to his royal guest that no one may now sit in her chair or dine at the table which she honoured. Our verdict is that he makes loyalty into absurdity by this conduct; but if we imitate him in this procedure in reference to the Lord Jesus we shall be wise. Let our whole being be set apart for Jesus, and for Jesus only. We shall not have to shut up the house; for our beloved Lord will inhabit every chamber of it, and make it a permanent palace. Let us see to it that all be holy, all pure, all devout. Help us, O Purifier of the temple, to drive out all intruders, and reserve our soul in all the beauty of holiness for the Blessed and Only Potentate.

v25

Paul’s benediction in vv23-24 is, essentially, a prayer on behalf of the Thessalonian church. Now, in v25, he says, *We need your prayers as well*. Ministers—here, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy—are no less in need of God’s sanctification, and for protection (preserved) from those people and evil spirits that would bring harm to their ministry.

In fact, it is often the case that pastors and evangelists suffer greater temptation to sin than the average parishioner in the pews, for Satan appreciates the coup he reaps whenever a church leader falls. Our pastors, our elders and deacons—our shepherds—our teachers, and our missionaries should be at all times lifted up to the throne for their protection against the evil one, and the righteous success of their calling and mission.

Rev. George Barlow: The richest inheritance of the anxious minister are the prayers of his people. A praying Church will never have to complain of an insipid and fruitless ministry.

v26

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

Thomas: The symbol of greeting was “a holy kiss” (v.26). This was not a kiss of respect as was used in ancient times to honor men of authority. Neither was it cultic as though copied from an ancient mystery religion. It most closely parallels the use of a kiss among members of the same family as a token of their close relationship. Christians have come into the family of God, which knows even closer ties than those of any human family (Matt 12:46-50).

[Thomas continues] It was quite appropriate that a symbolic greeting be adopted. It was to be "holy" (*hagid*), i.e., such as is becoming to saints (*hagiois*, 3:13). This may have been the custom of men kissing men and women kissing women so as to forestall any suspicion of impropriety. A Jewish synagogue practice, it could easily have found its way into early Christian assemblies.

Just as individual families will favor one form of greeting over another, based on the personalities of their members, so to the individual, local bodies of Christ will have their preferred form of greeting. I have been in churches where members made a point of slobbering over each other with grand, unrestrained affection; I have been in churches where the custom was more the restrained, polite handshake. For it to be "holy"—such as is becoming to saints," as Thomas puts it—the visitor or novice should, as well as possible, conform to the local custom—not to mention *national* custom: men kissing men might be perfectly natural in France or Saudi Arabia; less so in the American Midwest.

But Paul is emphasizing not so much the specific *form*, but that the members of the church are to remember and demonstrate that they are members of a loving, supportive *family*.

v27

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

His last bit of counsel is expressed with greater strength—not a request at all, but more a command.

NKJV: I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.
ESV: I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

We can't say for sure why Paul insists—with the weight of an oath, and carrying "implications of divine punishment for failure to comply"—that they read this letter to everyone. But I think we have some clues within this letter and elsewhere.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37-38.

Whether or not Paul expected his letters to eventually be included in the canon of Scripture, he certainly understood that both his in-person teaching and now his teaching through correspondence included the counsel of very God. Perhaps because this was his first such letter he felt the need to so strongly command the leaders in Thessalonica to read this letter to "all the brethren."

After a while he didn't have to include such a command in his letters because he knew that they *would* be shared—not just in the local congregation, but with others.

Read Colossians 4:16.

v28

Paul closes this letter by returning to his favorite topic: grace. And he probably added this brief benediction in his own hand.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.