

## 9. What God Determines to Do

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] in our Bibles to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and you'll find this on page 988 in the Visitor's Bibles, page 988. I want to read a very short passage, it's just the final few verses beginning at verse 23. So 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 23. Paul is concluding his letter to this young church. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, he will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I've put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. When we write personal letters, longish personal letters, we tend to finish them off with a few pithy remarks which sum up our most important concerns. Let's say you've just written a long letter or an email to your sister who's living a long way away. You might end up your letter by saying something like this.

Look after mother and make sure she can pay her fuel bills. Please sort out the sale of the flat with our solicitors. Oh and don't forget to send £25 to young Alan for his birthday. Much love for you all. To you all. Now you'll have written fully about a number of things in your letter to your sister but you end up with a few rapid fire requests like that. Now these final verses of 1 Thessalonians are a bit like that. Paul has written fully about a number of things in the first four and a half chapters of the letter but from verse 12 in chapter 5 he's dealing with a dozen or more last minute instructions. And here in verses 23 to 28 he's on the home straight. He's about to cross the finishing line. But we would be wrong to think that these final remarks are lightweight. Brevity does not mean levity. These closing verses actually conceal serious concerns and Paul is expressing himself forcefully here. This is much more than an affectionate signing off. Now it is full of affection but it's full of serious apostolic concern as well. So I want us to notice four particular concerns or elements which sum up so much that Paul longs to see in a thriving church that is making good progress.

So first, Paul is concerned for the church's ongoing mission. Now you'll see that in verse 25, very short verse. Brothers, pray for us he says. Now what lies behind that request? Looks very simple, doesn't it? Well if you look back to chapter 1 verse 1, you'll see that this letter has been jointly written by Paul and Silvanus, who is Silas, and Timothy. Now these were the three missionary evangelists who together had planted the church at Thessalonica a few months previously. And if you look across to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 1, you'll see that Silas and Timothy are again Paul's co-authors.

Now Paul was clearly the leader of the three and the chief writer of the two letters. But Silas and Timothy add their weight to Paul's writing and remind the Thessalonians of their fellowship with Paul.

And the young Thessalonian Christians knew exactly what these three men spent their lives and energy doing. They were church planters. They were ambassadors of Christ. They were itinerant evangelists.

[ 3 : 5 5 ] Very busy men with an enormously important commission which was nothing less than the evangelization of the known world. Now the Thessalonians would have understood the score.

They knew that Paul and his colleagues were very determined men and yet they were men who were being vigorously opposed at every turn, particularly by Jewish people who didn't like the gospel and didn't want it to spread. So when Paul writes, brothers, pray for us, he doesn't just mean pray that we'll be happy or pray that we'll be healthy. He means pray that the Lord will sustain us in our work because we have enormous opportunities but there are many enemies and fierce opposition.

He's asking for prayer so that the Lord will prosper the great agenda of the evangelization of the world. And Paul knows that that agenda can only go forward if the Lord prospers it and upholds his servants and protect them. So for all their determination, for all their moral courage, Paul and his colleagues know that they can't achieve anything in their own puny strength. If the Lord doesn't give power to his servants for the work, the work has no future. Brothers, pray for us.

Now of course it's just the same today. Verse 25 is a prayer to drive us to our church prayer meetings, sorry, a verse to drive us to our church prayer meetings and to keep us prayerful at home for the ongoing work of evangelizing the world in the teeth of opposition. So in those four little words, Paul is opening up for us his vision of how profoundly the world needs the gospel of Christ. Then second, Paul is concerned for the church's deepening fellowship. Verse 26, greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Now Christians have sometimes made heavy weather of what Paul means by a holy kiss. Some have said, is Paul drawing a distinction perhaps between holy kissing and unholy kissing? Maybe a holy kiss is one which is planted at least three inches from the mouth of the recipient. I mean, if you get closer than that, you're in trouble, brother, so don't do it. Now of course it's possible for Christian men to behave badly and start kissing the women in the church in an inappropriate fashion. But that's not what Paul is talking about here.

Paul is not hinting at some distinction between holy kissing and unholy kissing. He's simply saying, greet one another frequently and warmly so as to strengthen the bonds of fellowship and unity and love in the church. The Lord's people are bound together in a unique and precious relationship.

[ 6 : 41 ] So Paul is saying, express that relationship. Let each other know that you deeply care about each other and love each other. Now he writes of kissing here rather than shaking hands because he was not British.

He was Mediterranean, wasn't he? In our culture up in these northern climes, it's a little bit different, isn't it? Now if I was at a church in France, should we say, and a great big Frenchman with a bristling moustache like a walrus came up and began to plant kisses on both my cheeks, I'd probably grin and bear it. But inside myself I'd be thinking, my dear brother, I wish you wouldn't.

But you see, Paul is not enshrining the kiss as such as a necessity of Christian behaviour. He's simply using the form of greeting that was appropriate in first century Mediterranean culture and is still appropriate in the Mediterranean now and in other parts of the world.

But his point is, keep oiling the wheels of affection and love in the fellowship. Greet each other repeatedly, warm-heartedly and kindly. Now it is lovely, isn't it? I'm sure this has been happening in the last half hour.

It's lovely when somebody comes to you in the church meeting and greets you with a ready smile and says something like, it is lovely to see you. Now when that happens, you smile back, don't you?

[ 8 : 01 ] Inevitably. In fact, you feel like a little flower that's beginning to open its petals in the spring sunshine. Your heart is warmed by the greeting and the fellowship. And Paul the Apostle knows this so well.

He knows that a thriving church is one where the relationships between Christians are being frequently warmed. Just look again at verse 26.

He says, greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. Notice the all. Don't leave anybody out, he says. We know that a church can become a little bit cliquey and you can have a group of people who are close friends who are keen to see each other but they miss other people out sometimes.

The shyer ones and the quieter ones. And Paul is saying, don't be like that. Greet all the brothers. I suppose our problem is not simply that we're British but that 95 or 97% of us are rather shy and find it easier to keep quiet and to hang back rather than to step forward and take the initiative in greeting each other.

It's just a bit risky, isn't it, when we take the initiative. I mean, what if you step forward to greet somebody and they look at you as if you're a very presumptuous and intrusive kind of person.

[ 9 : 12 ] And what if you go to somebody and you say, it's so nice to see you here today. My name's Edward. And they reply, I've only come here to look at the architecture. You feel a bit squashed, don't you?

Well, there are risks in being friendly and in greeting people. Even with people that you know. Even with people that you know quite well. It can be a little bit risky. I mean, they might be having an off day.

They might give you the chilly shoulder. So it is risky. But Paul is saying, come on, take the risk. Make sure that you put your love into that company, this company of the church where there is such love and affection.

Make sure that you're a giver as well as a receiver of affection. Take responsibility for building up the heart of the fellowship. That's what he's saying. So Paul is concerned for the church's deepening fellowship.

And he asks us to share that concern. Now third, Paul is concerned for the church's developing understanding.

[ 10 : 12 ] Let's look at verse 27. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. Now isn't that forceful?

I put you under oath before the Lord. Now it may be that the church at Thessalonica met in small groups in various people's homes around the town.

No doubt they would all gather for central meetings whenever they could. But there would have been house churches in different people's homes. There were no church buildings in those days such as we have.

So probably Paul is envisaging a number of small meetings, small group meetings. And his message in verse 27 is, make sure that you get this letter around all the smaller meetings so that it's read to all the brothers.

Notice again how he insists on all the brothers in verse 27 as well as in verse 26. Now why is Paul so forceful here? Surely the answer is that he knows that if these Thessalonian Christians are to survive as a church, if they're not to disappear out of sight, it's essential that they absorb Paul's teaching deep into their systems.

[ 11 : 25 ] They were facing two particular problems or two particular pressures. The first was that they were a very young church, almost certainly only a few months old.

Paul's original visit to them, in fact his only visit to them, had lasted for only a few weeks. He would have loved to have stayed longer so as to teach them more and build them up. But he'd only be there a short time.

He'd then been able to send Timothy back to them to give them further encouragement and teaching, but they were still very much an embryonic baby fellowship. They had a lot of growing to do.

It's a long way from an acorn to an oak tree. Now the oak tree can survive a great deal of rough weather, but the little oak sapling can quite easily be uprooted.

And this Thessalonian church was like a sapling. So if it was going to grow strong, it had to get Paul's teaching well into its system. So there's the first reason for verse 27.

[ 12 : 20 ] It's the sheer youthfulness of the church. But the second reason is that this baby church was being fiercely persecuted. Look back, for example, back over the page to chapter 2 and verse 14, where Paul says, For you brothers became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.

For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and so on. Or look on to chapter 3, verse 2.

We sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we're destined for this.

For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. So, these Christians were under great pressure and persecution.

We don't know exactly how they were being persecuted, but the persecution of Christians has a number of well-used, well-tried tactics. For example, depriving people of their jobs and therefore of their income, taking away various privileges and liberties, and of course, in more extreme cases, forcing people to suffer physical violence and torture, imprisonment and even death.

[ 13 : 42 ] Now, Paul said, back in chapter 2 and 3, you know that we, we Christians, are destined for this. This is part of the normal expectation of Christ's people.

So, the young Christians at Thessalonica needed to read Paul's letter so as to fortify themselves against their sufferings. If they could read from their apostle, you know that we're destined for this.

If they read that and understand it, they'll be much better equipped to stand firm as Christians when the times of persecution and trouble come. Now, think of ourselves.

To get the teaching of the apostles and of the whole Bible deep into our systems is the only way to develop a maturing, strengthening faith and understanding.

If I were to say, and I'm not going to say this, but if I were to say hands up, all those who would like to have a more mature and strong Christian faith and understanding, I'm pretty certain that every hand in this hall would go up.

[ 14 : 46 ] I mean, you would be mad, wouldn't you, not to want a stronger faith and deeper understanding of the gospel and the Bible and how to live the Christian life. Well, how do you get it? The answer is by the continual reading and learning and understanding of the scriptures as a lovely lifelong discipline, part of the Christian life.

Let me draw a simple and homely parallel. We eat and drink every day, don't we, without fail. Every day we open our mouths and into them we place several litres of fluid and perhaps a couple of pounds weight of food.

Some of you wouldn't manage two pounds weight of food, but others would, wouldn't you? Quite a lot has to go in to sustain us. And we do this daily ritual and routine of eating and drinking, partly because we enjoy doing it.

There's nothing quite like a fish supper, is there? There's nothing quite so good as a smoked salmon sandwich with lemon juice and pepper. Very enjoyable to eat and drink. But we also do it because we know that if we abandon the daily ritual, we'll very soon be in the southern necropolis.

We have to keep eating and drinking so as to function as human beings and keep alive. And therefore we have to submit to what you might call the discipline of shopping, cooking, laying the table, washing the dirty dishes, taking care of our crockery and cutlery, and all the whole rigmarole of what you might call personal cuisine.

[16:17] It's essential to the happy, ongoing functioning of human life. Now in the same way, any individual Christian or any church that is really going to develop a strong faith and understanding, the kind of understanding that can withstand the shocks of living in a hostile world, that individual or that church is going to be serious about learning the scriptures.

And yes, there is a certain discipline to it, but it's a joyful discipline. To read the Bible is rather like reading a love letter from heaven.

I remember when I was courting all those years ago and my sweetheart, now my wife, this was in the days before emails, when letters were sent by sweethearts, and she would write me a letter once or twice a week.

She was hundreds of miles away from where I was. The postman would come and the letterbox would go click and bang and I'd rush to the door, pick up the envelope, see the beloved writing, rip the envelope open and read the letters and drink them in.

Lovely. It was joyful and exciting for me to do that. Can you do love letters by email? I bet you can't. I mean, you wouldn't have the joy of ripping the envelope open, would you?

[17:28] Sorry, that's an aside. Now the Bible, the Bible is a message that the Lord, who loves us, loves us passionately, he is determined that we should read this message of love because in the reading of it we shall come to appreciate the depth and strength of his love for us and our minds will be progressively transformed so that we can live joyfully, purposefully and happily even in the midst of sufferings and pressures.

So that is why Paul says, I put you under oath to have this letter read to all the brothers. That's why he expresses himself so strongly. He's saying, if you are to survive and grow as a church and if you're to survive and grow strong as individual Christians, the teaching of the apostles and of the whole Bible must be taken on board, chewed, digested, mulled over, discussed, enjoyed.

A person who is not a serious Bible reader will never be a strong Christian. A church that is not serious about its Bible teaching will never be a strong church.

So Paul is concerned. First, for the church's ongoing mission. Second, for its deepening fellowship. Third, for its developing understanding. And fourth, for its final perseverance.

Let me read verse 23. Now, may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:10] Now, that verse expresses Paul's longing and prayer for the Thessalonians. Verses 25 and 26 and 27 are all about the Christian life in this world.

The mission, the fellowship, the understanding of the church. But verse 23 is about what happens to the Thessalonian Christians beyond this world. What happens to them at the return of Christ at his second coming.

And Paul's prayer is that God will sanctify them completely. Now, what does that mean? Well, the basic idea in sanctification is that God takes what is unholy and sinful, which is you and me before our conversion, and he makes it holy.

And the Bible speaks of sanctification in two ways. First, there's an initial sanctification whereby God sets us apart to belong to him the moment we repent, the moment we come to Christ.

So, at this first level, you're a sanctified person the moment you're born again. You've been categorically transferred from the realm of sin and death and Satan into the realm of Christ and the company of all who belong to him.

[ 20 : 22 ] But following that initial sanctification, there is an ongoing and progressive sanctification whereby God is continually transforming his people into those who think and behave more and more as he does himself.

Now, sanctification in that way goes on throughout the life of the Christian and that's what Paul is talking about here in verse 23. These Thessalonians are Christians, they're converted, they've been initially sanctified or consecrated and they now belong to Christ but they're very young in the faith and in verse 23, Paul is praying that God will further the process of their becoming more and more godly in their thinking and their behavior.

Now, the New Testament, as you know, emphasizes both man's part and God's part in the process of sanctification. Christians have to cooperate with the Lord and it's always a struggle to cooperate with the Lord, to strive for holiness.

So, friend, if you're struggling with temptation and sin at present, that is a sign that you're a Christian. Struggle is a sign of faith, not a failure. But the New Testament not only emphasizes our need to keep on struggling to grow in holiness, it also emphasizes most strongly the part that God himself plays.

And verse 23 here is one of the verses that emphasizes God's power at work in the Christian life. Paul prays here that God will, now look with me at verse 23, that God will sanctify the Thessalonians completely so that their whole spirit and soul and body, which means everything that they are, their thinking, their feeling, their behavior, will be kept blameless at the coming of Christ.

[ 22 : 16 ] Now blameless does not mean sinless. Blameless means that their quality of life is such that no man can justifiably point a finger at them and accuse them of dishonorable behavior.

Now friends, are you waiting for verse 24? I do hope so. I hope that you've spotted what a lovely and delightful verse verse 24 is because this verse expresses what the all-powerful God is determined to do for his people.

Look again at verse 23. Paul is asking that God will continue and complete his work of sanctifying his people. Now, we look at verse 23 and we think, but I'm struggling.

It's so difficult to live the Christian life. I'm struggling with temptation X and temptation Y and temptation Z. And that's not all I'm struggling with. I'm struggling with life in general. I'm short of energy.

I'm short of cash, especially today. I'm short of wisdom. I'm short of excellent health. I'm short of a few other things as well. How can I possibly grow in godliness over the whole course of the rest of my life?

[ 23 : 28 ] In fact, sometimes I think, how am I going to survive this week and live a godly life between now and Sunday? Isn't that what we often feel like? How can I grow more holy? Well, Paul answers that cry and that question in verse 24.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Now, what's the it? Well, it refers to the contents of verse 23.

What God will surely do is that he will surely sanctify every one of his people and keep them blameless until the Lord Jesus returns. So, yes, we must play our part in struggling with temptation and growing in holiness.

holiness. But in these verses, it is God himself who is guaranteeing to sanctify and keep his people until the return of Christ. Why? Because he's faithful.

That's the glory of verse 24. God will surely do this for us because he is faithful, loyal, trustworthy, can be trusted. So, the ultimate ground of our being kept holy and blameless till the coming of Christ is not our effort, but his faithfulness.

[ 24 : 42 ] His faithfulness is our security. Isn't that good? There's no security in this world. There's no security in the National Health Service, though it's a fine organization.

There's no security in the Royal Bank of Scotland, particularly not in the Royal Bank of Scotland. There's no security in the new president of the United States of America. We pray for him, we wish him well, but he is but a man.

There's only one source of security, and that is our eternal God. He who calls you is faithful, and he will surely do it.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. dear God, our father, so many of us can testify to your faithfulness throughout our Christian life, and we're so grateful that even now we have proved that you are the faithful one upon whom we can rely utterly.

And we do trust and believe that you will do this thing, that you will keep us and sanctify us, spirit and soul and body, keeping us blameless for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

[ 26 : 01 ] We pray that you will give us the joy, dear father, of seeing this work out in our lives more and more, right until the end. And so we pray, as Paul indeed prays for the Thessalonians, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with us all.

Amen.