Give glory to God!

*Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,  
And let those who hate Him flee before Him.  
As smoke is driven away, so drive them away;  
As wax melts before the fire,  
So let the wicked perish before God.*

Psalm 68:1-2

It is so often that we look around and see the wicked prospering. They seem to get by with everything and are rewarded for it. Our sense of justice is pricked and it is easy to become angry and even callous.

But we must remember that what this Psalm asks for is what will ultimately happen to them. God is patient, hoping that sinners will repent, but His patience does have an end. When someone remains unrepentant, God will take vengeance on them in ways that only He can.

This is a reminder for us. Vengeance is not ours; it is the Lord’s. As Christians we are called to sacrificial love and spreading the Gospel to other sinners. Don’t succumb to the temptation to act like the worldly since they seem to be better off temporally. We have blessings in this world, but our hope is in a perfect future with Jesus. Maintaining our integrity will be worth it.

In Christ’s love

John

7-4-21

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Since verse 12, Paul has given instruction for the relationship between church leadership and the congregation, between members of the church, and for corporate worship. Although his comments are brief, they contain a lot of depth. There is a lot to think about and a lot to apply. A healthy church, an healthy body of Christ, must look to these instructions to remain healthy. And, there is always room for us to improve.

Verse 23 is a prayer and verse 24 is a promise. This is a prayer that we can certainly pray for our own church and for each individual here. We can even pray it for ourselves.

Paul begins by invoking “*the God of peace Himself*”. This is an amazing, and true, title for God. It is amazing when we consider that God is also a warrior. God has set in motion a plan that will bring about eternal peace through Jesus Christ; but He will not hesitate to wage war against evil. These two attributes are not contradictory, because God is holy and all He does will ultimately show His glory in a peaceful eternal kingdom.

When Paul makes reference to the God of peace, there are several levels of peace that we can apply to the Thessalonian church and to ourselves. First, although the church in Thessalonica was doing very well, we can see from Paul’s letter that there was some discord. He had to encourage some of the people to work so they would earn their own living instead of depending on the benevolence of others. There was also some confusion about those who had already died in Christ; what would happen to them? God desires peace and unity in church bodies and it can be obtained by His Holy Spirit. Of course, this is never peace at the expense of Biblical truth.

On a deeper level is that peace that God can bring to people who are undergoing trials in life; whether these trials are the natural difficulties that come from living in a fallen world or if they come from persecution due to standing with Jesus. I think we are familiar with that wonderful promise we have in Philippians 4:7, *And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*. In other words, we can have peace during hard times that baffles the unbelieving world.

We can have a peace within us, even when we grieve deeply; even when our troubles are overwhelming. The peace that comes through Jesus Christ protects our hearts so troubles don’t cause us to stop living; unable to get past our problems. It protects our minds so that we don’t become despondent and give up on life. It enables us to continue in the work God has for us; it can even make us better ministers for Christ.

This verse is quoted often as a good promise of God, but we need to pay attention to the verses that come right before it. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*. So, there is a list of things we need to work on in order to have that peace.

When we face grief or trouble, rejoice, not in the trouble but in the Lord. A Christian should have a gentle spirit and everyone around should be able to see it. Furthermore, they should be amazed by it. It is unnatural in this world to have a gentle spirit, especially when facing trouble. In this way, we glorify the Lord.

Lastly, if you want that peace that is beyond understanding, pray. Tell the Lord all your troubles. Ask Him for what you think you need. Ask Him to provide what you truly need. Do your best, by His strength, to stop worrying about things you can’t do anything about; trust in His abilities to deal with the impossible.

Our prayers must include thanksgiving; gratefulness. Now, this does not mean thanking God ahead of time for receiving what you have asked for; this is a false teaching. It means thanking Him for a multitude of other things. Thank Him for hearing your prayer and thank Him for answering it in the best way; the way that brings Him glory and ultimately works out best for you. He may give you exactly what you asked for; He may provide you with something else; He may seemingly not answer your prayer, but that will be the best answer.

That is praying with faith and gratitude, and humbly accepting God’s will. In our prayers we can thank Him for His provision, for His word, for simply who He is. Thank Him for His promises. If we just think a little, we can come up with lots of things to thank God for. Coming full circle: to rejoice, to cultivate a gentle spirit, and to pray will bring about that peace that surpasses all comprehension.

The most important peace that God brings about is peace between Himself and people; those who accept Jesus as Saviour. We are natural born enemies of God. We are naturally born objects of God’s wrath. There is no way for us to escape these realities ourselves. This is where the God of peace has intervened in humanity. While we were still in the condition of being God’s enemies, He sent His Son, Jesus, to suffer and die in our place. When we accept Christ, the impossible happens: There is peace between God and us.

Paul prays that the God of peace “*sanctify you entirely*”. Let’s look at sanctification a little. But first, I need to back up and deal with justification. Justification is a legal term. When the judge bangs his gavel and declares “Not guilty”, the defendant is justified in the eyes of the law. Whether he was actually guilty or not doesn’t matter; he has been declared not guilty and is therefore free of any punishment that the offence requires.

For a Christian, justification takes place at the moment of true acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Our holy God requires every sin to be punished. Jesus took the punishment in our place. In Jesus, the sin has been punished. So, when we believe on Him, our personal sin has been punished in Jesus, and God the Father declares us “Not guilty”. Justification takes place immediately and is complete for all time and eternity.

Sanctification is a process, not something that happens completely and immediately. Sanctification begins with the acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We receive, at that time, the Holy Spirit, who works in our lives to make us more like Jesus. In sanctification our faith increases, we become more resistant to sin, the fruit of the Spirit becomes more apparent in our lives.

It is important to notice how Paul words this so we know who is causing things to happen here. It is “*the God of peace Himself*”. God is the one who works all these things in us. Before God works in our lives, we are hopeless and beyond redemption. Jerimiah 17:9,

*“The heart is more deceitful than all else  
And is desperately sick;  
Who can understand it?*

The answer is, of course, God. In His mercy, He made a way for us to be redeemed in Jesus Christ. Further, His Holy Spirit works in our lives and hearts so we can understand the Gospel; and He even gives us the faith we need to consider everything and hopefully say “Yes”. Our justification is all through God by the work of Jesus on the cross.

In sanctification, we are required to cooperate with the Holy Spirit: through prayer, reading and studying the Bible, and fellowship with other Christians. Also, by doing our best to resist sin and doing good. So, we work to cooperate, but it is God Himself who actually brings about the sanctification. And He does so in His timing. We may feel like we are increasing in Godliness and then hit a time where we feel like we are not advancing. Don’t be discouraged; God knows what He is doing and He is for you. He is working and you will be fine.

The next part of Paul’s statement in verse 23 has been fuel for a debate that has been taking place since the first century. He says, “*and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete*”. The ongoing debate is whether human-beings have two parts or three. Do we consist of a physical body and an immaterial part called the spirit or the soul; or do we consist of a physical body, an immaterial soul, and an immaterial spirit? If there are three, the soul is considered the part that is our emotions and thoughts and personalities. The spirit is the part that communes with God, once it has been reborn into life by the Holy Spirit.

On the side of the human-being having two parts are such Scriptures as Mathew 10:28 where Jesus warns us not to fear those who can only kill the body but to fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Another is 2 Corinthians 7:1 where we are exhorted to holiness by cleansing our flesh and spirit from all defilement. There are also several other places where spirit and soul seem to be used interchangeably.

The person consisting of three parts has, in addition to our current verse, Hebrews 4:12 which refers to the word of God dividing soul and spirit, and 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 where Paul talks of praying and singing with his spirit and mind, where his mind would be part of his soul.

My purpose here is not to solve this dilemma for you. As I said, it has been debated now for two millennia. But I want you to be aware of the debate so you are not caught off guard if the subject comes up. Study the Scriptures and prayerfully make up your own mind; it is not a salvation issue.

But what shall we take away from this part of the verse? What Paul is getting at is a Christian maturity that encompasses every part of the individual. There is a Christian doctrine that is called “The total depravity of man”. Man, here, means the human race; and depravity is self-explanatory. We need to look at “total”. First, what it does not mean: It does not mean that everything people do, think, and are is as depraved as it can possibly be.

What it does mean is that everything people do, think, and are is touched by and marred by depravity. People can do good things and be good people, but the motivation for doing the good things will not be entirely good. There may be pride involved or hope of something in return, even if it is only hoping for recognition. This is how God speaks through Isaiah in 64:6 and says that for non-believers “*all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment*”. Everything we do and think is stained with sin and therefore unacceptable to God.

Once again, the Christian is left with thanking God for justification and sanctification and for allowing us to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This is the only way that we are acceptable to Him; it is the only way that our works are acceptable to Him. So Paul’s prayer is that God Himself will bring about our Christian maturity in every facet of our lives and that He will preserve us in that state.

The last part of the verse is “*without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*”. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Parousia; the second advent; the second coming of Jesus when He comes to the earth in glory to establish His kingdom.

When the time comes for us to die, our soul and/or our spirit will go to be with the Lord while our body remains in a state of death. Our immaterial part will be completely pure but our bodies will see corruption. Once Jesus comes back, our bodies will also be raised imperishable and joined with our immaterial part. Once again, we have the completeness Paul referred to with spirit, soul, and body.

The phrase “*without blame*” shows the completion of the whole process, all of which is accomplished by God to His glory. When we accept Jesus, we are justified; our sanctification process begins and continues throughout our lives; finally, as 1 John 3:2 tells us, “*We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is*”. We will stand before Him blameless. When we go to heaven, our sanctification will be complete and we will be blameless and we will stay that way.

If this were all for us to do and accomplish, we may as well give up now. We are not capable in our own strength. How many times have each of us, with all good intentions, chosen to improve ourselves in some spiritual aspect, only to fail miserably? This does not let us off the hook, we are to try to have spiritual increase; but we must do it in the power of God, not our own strength. And He will give us that strength.

That is the beautiful and glorious promise given in verse 24, “*Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.*” Even though all men prove faithless to God, God will always remain faithful. God is unchanging; His faithfulness will remain. God is the one who called you in the first place. If you answered that call to take Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then God will finish the work in spite of you.

How comforting to know that our salvation is completely the work of God in Jesus Christ. He is the one who will bring us to perfection because nothing less than perfection enters heaven. This is not “let go and let God”. This is working in His strength; handing everything over to Him in prayer; and gratefully acknowledging that it is His work; and it will be brought to completion. What can we do but praise Him? He is holy and gracious and has adopted us as His children.

Prayer

Lord God, we are in awe of Your justice and mercy. It is our natural inclination to try to cover our shame in some shoddy way and to try to justify ourselves. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they tried to cover their shame with leaves and justified themselves by blaming another. We continue in this ridiculous manner, even today.

In Your justice, You expelled them from Your presence. In Your mercy, You made for them proper covering to protect them from the life they were now facing and to cover their shame. In the same way, Your justice has now been satisfied in the work of Jesus on the cross, and in Your mercy, You give us proper covering to hide our shame; by clothing us in the righteousness of Jesus our Lord.

Yes, sanctify us Lord! May Your Holy Spirit guide us to cooperate with You in our transformation. Make us like Jesus, Your Son and our Saviour. Give us that peace that can only come from You. Give it for our good, but even more, give it for Your glory.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen