

1 Thessalonians 5:23-27

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Paul emphasizes one last time the goal of living a God-honoring life apart from the world, so that our body and soul will be blameless when Jesus returns.

Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians. Throughout it, he expressed his frustration that he had been driven away from them, his concern for their endurance in the face of persecution, and his joy when he learned from Timothy that they were prospering in faith and love, and were withstanding all opposition to their faith (1 Thessalonians 2:18, 3:5, 3:6-8).

Paul proceeded to tell the Thessalonians what God's will was for their lives, which was to be sanctified (set apart, holy, to live as God designed, not as the world). Their sanctification would come from staying sexually pure, from loving and respecting one another, and from working hard and living quietly in their community (1 Thessalonians 4:3-12). Paul also cleared up some confusion the Thessalonians had about Christ's return; they were worried that if they died before Jesus came back, they would not join Jesus in His Kingdom. Paul dispels this concern; all believers who die physically will be raised from the dead physically, and will join Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

In his conclusion, Paul blesses the Thessalonians. He points to their continued spiritual growth, and notes that it comes from God: *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely*. The word *sanctify* means to set apart from what is common to something greater. God Himself sanctifies us, grows us, and matures us, when we walk in faithful obedience to Him. He is the *God of peace*, not of division; Paul has called the Thessalonians to be at peace with each other and all men, which might be difficult since their neighbors were persecuting them (1 Thessalonians 5:13b, 5:15). But faith in Jesus brings us away from conflict and into the peace God originally designed us for.

The goal to be *entirely* sanctified fits with Paul's hope that all believers would reach full maturity by the time Christ returns; he declares *may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul has expressed this hope that the believers would be ready on the day of Jesus's second coming several times throughout this letter:

“For who is our hope, or joy or crown of pride, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Or is it not indeed you? For you are our glory and joy.”
(1 Thessalonians 2:19-20)

It is clear from this verse that Paul considers seeing his spiritual children rewarded by Jesus as his own great reward. He will be like a proud parent watching their child receive a great reward. Then also:

“...may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow in love...so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”

(1 Thessalonians 3:12-13)

The idea is that each believer's *spirit and soul and body* would be *preserved complete*, not meaning that we won't die a physical death, but that we would be without sin inside (our *spirit and soul*) and outside (our *body*), that we would be *without blame* when Jesus returns.

Of course believers struggle with sin, because we live with a double nature, the old (what Paul calls the Flesh) and the new (the Spirit) (Galatians 5:17, Romans 8:13). But clearly it is possible that by living according to God's will, by loving one another and by serving God faithfully, we can reach a point of maturation and total readiness for Jesus when He comes back. This is partly because we can confess our sins and Jesus will forgive them and restore us to fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9). We can be encouraged because God appears to only hold us accountable for dealing with what we know (1 John 1:7-8). However, we should be sober to the reality that God will hold us fully accountable for willful sin (Hebrews 10:26-31).

This is possible because *Faithful is He who calls you*; God's promises are true and He is reliable and unchanging, He *calls* us so that He might *sanctify* us, and *He also will bring it to pass*. Our sanctification (being set apart) as believers is certain; God will *bring it to pass*. We are all destined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). This is because *Faithful is He who calls you*. However, how that comes *to pass* depends greatly on our choices. Our choices have immense consequences.

If we live a life of unfaithfulness while on this earth, we will lose all or part of the rewards God desires for us to inherit (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41; 2 John 1:8). Much of what we need to learn might occur in the fire of judgment before God in heaven, rather than in the fire of tribulation in this world (1 Corinthians 3:9-16; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 10:19-30). In his writings, Paul admonishes his children in the faith to make full use of this life, and come to know by faith, enduring trials, just as Jesus endured, and gain the greatest of rewards (Philippians 2:5-10; Hebrews 12:1-2).

Paul humbly asks the Thessalonian *Brethren* to *pray for us*. The *us* references himself, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy, the co-writers of the letter and Paul's missionary team. The Thessalonians knew these men well, for they had all preached the gospel, taught them, and suffered for it while in Thessalonica, along with Paul, before they were driven out of town (Acts 17:10).

It is likely that at the time of writing this letter, Paul was establishing a ministry in Corinth, where he would live for a year and a half without interference from his enemies (Acts 18:11). That Paul calls the believers in Thessalonica *brethren* once again emphasizes that this letter was written to exhort those who have already believed on Jesus and been born again of the Spirit (John 3:14-16).

Paul concludes the letter by affirming the call to love one another, *Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss*. Treat all other believers as friends, family, intimate loved ones. He also makes sure that this epistle will be heard by the entire Thessalonian church, not just its leaders: *I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren*. The message was for all believers there, to hear it straight from Paul, for he counted each one of them as *brethren* in Christ for whom he had fond affection and great concern (1 Thessalonians 2:8, 3:5).

Lastly, Paul writes, *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you*. The word translated *grace* is the Greek word “*charis*,” which means “favor.” This is a constant and powerful truth for the believer’s life. God’s favor, Jesus’s favor, is always with us in that Jesus has taken care of every sin upon the cross, and made us holy and fully accepted in the sight of God (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 2:8-9; Colossians 2:14).

However, in this case Paul prays that Jesus’ favor will be with them in their life. God accepts us unconditionally, because of what Jesus did for us. But God only approves that which is good for us, and for the Body. Peter used the Greek word “*charis*” to speak of God’s approval of good behavior:

“GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE (‘*charis*,’ favor) TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.”
(1 Peter 5:5b-7)

Also Paul used the Greek word “*charis*” to refer to his appreciation, or favor, of the responsibility God had granted him:

“I thank (‘*charis*,’ favor) Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service.”
(1 Timothy 1:12)

So in the many instances where Paul wishes grace (Greek “*charis*”) to come to believers, he is likely wishing that God will favor their deeds, and be pleased by their faithfulness. Paul makes clear that God’s favor is always a matter of mercy, since there is no standard apart from God by which any human can demand approval. As Paul stated in 2 Timothy:

“The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.”
(2 Timothy 1:16)

Here in 2 Timothy 1, Paul notes the faithfulness in ministry of Onesiphorus, but his prayer is that God would grant “mercy” at the judgment, since all favor is a matter of God’s mercy. However, God is clear that He favors those who obey from the heart, and Paul has admonished the Thessalonian believers who are so dear to him to walk in faithfulness, in a constant state of readiness at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

If it was appropriate back then to live in readiness, awaiting the coming of the Lord Jesus, it is all the more so now, as we draw closer to His coming each day that passes.

Biblical Text

²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. ²⁵ Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.