**God of peace and grace** 17/12/23dkm

Read: Numbers 23:13-26, 1Thessalonians 5

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:23-28

Psalms: 33:1-9, 36:5-12, 89:13-21, 117

How do you end your letters- sorry, your emails? I was taught to end with either ‘Yours sincerely’ or ‘Yours truly’. With emails and texts people end with ‘Regards’ or ‘Kind regards’. I have taken to writing and meaning, ‘With prayer’ to end emails. I have thought about using the letters OHMS, on his majesty’s service, which a politician friend once used. A pastor uses the ending, ‘Grace and peace’ because this is how the apostle Paul ended his letters. Actually, his usual ending is, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’, as found in his letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Philippians (5:28, 1Cor 16:23, Phil 4:23). In 2Corinthians he expands this to the familiar Trinitarian benediction, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (2Cor 13:14).

Paul began this letter with the greeting, ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). He now ends with the same focus on the God of peace and grace. The apostle was writing to a young church that was facing persecution, as well as some internal problems stemming from a lack of knowledge. He shared the truth they needed to know in this letter, and urged them to find comfort in this truth, truth about the *Parousia* or return of Jesus Christ. He was confident they would join together in love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and be faithful in public worship. His confidence was based on the truth that God had called them and given them the Holy Spirit, and would complete the work he began in them. Our subheadings are: ‘Paul’s prayer for sanctification/preservation’, ‘Paul’s pleas and command’, ‘Paul’s blessing’.

**1. Paul’s prayer for sanctification/preservation**

Paul told the Thessalonians that God’s will for them was their sanctification, and that they should abstain from sexual immorality (4:3). Sanctification means to make holy; holy means to be separate, separate from sin, to hate sin and to love God. To be sanctified means to become more and more like Christ. In the Shorter Catechism Q35 sanctification is defined as, ‘The work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness’.

Justification is a declaration while sanctification is a process, but both are acts of God’s grace. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone. We are sanctified by God graciously and powerfully working in us by his Spirit all the days of our life. The motto for the synod I recently attended was, ‘Saved by grace, living by faith’. This is true, but more fully we say that we are saved by grace through faith, and we are sanctified by grace through faith.

Paul actually prays, ‘May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely’ (5:23). It is God ‘Himself’ who sanctifies us, the ‘God of peace’. We are ‘created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them’ (Eph 2:10), and we are to ‘work out our salvation with fear and trembling’ (Phil 2:13), but it is God who works in us. We would not survive a moment in this evil world without God’s help. We would lose our peace in an instant! Satan hates peace and hates seeing us living lives of peace and love towards God, and towards one another.

Only God can give us peace in our hearts, and he does this through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Prince of peace and God is the God of peace. ‘Know God, know peace’ as they say! Because God is the God of peace, we can be people of peace. Peace is a fruit of the Spirit and of our sanctification. God is holy and we must be holy (1Peter 1:16). God is perfect and we are being made perfect in Christ (Mat 5:46). But is a mistake to think that we will become perfect in this life. Sanctification is a process that continues until we die, as Paul makes clear in his next prayer point.

With the ‘God of peace’ sanctifying us, we will be sanctified. God does not leave anything unfinished (Phil 1:6). Paul prays for complete sanctification; the word he uses is found only here in the NT. The word he uses carries the idea of wholeness and completion. The NIV translates, ‘Sanctify you through and through’. Wholeness refers to our whole being, which is the emphasis of his second prayer point in which he refers to our whole spirit, soul, and body (5:23).

While our being is spoken of in three parts, we do not use this verse to argue a tripartite, as against a dipartite, view of our being. The NT generally refers to body and soul, or flesh and spirit, although the Spirit of God does bear witness with our spirit when we believe (Rom 8:16). We must not think of our body as evil and let sin rule over it. We are body and soul or spirit, a complete person, and responsible to God as a whole person. Sanctification affects every aspect of our life and how we live.

In this second point Paul uses another unusual word translated ‘whole’ meaning ‘complete in every part of our being’. This is what Paul is emphasising in saying ‘whole spirit, soul, and body’; there is no part of our being that is not included in our sanctification. God will preserve us ‘blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (5:23). ‘Blameless’ does not mean perfect or without sin, at least not in this life. Through sanctification, God is preserving us, indeed making us more and more like Christ, until the day when Christ returns and we will be changed to be like him, that is, made perfect.

We can be sure of this because, ‘He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it’ (5:24). Is anything impossible for God? No. Does God fail to keep his covenant promises? No. God is faithful to the covenant he made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ. ‘Has he said and shall he not do it? (Num 23:19). ‘He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 1:6). ‘He will also do it’ (5:24). So when God calls his call is effectual; ‘Those who are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification’ (Shorter Catechism Q32).

**2. Paul’s pleas and command**

In our church we have the practice of the elders praying for the minister before he leads in public worship. Some ministers may think they are above such prayer; it is their job to pray for others, not for others to pray for them! But I can assure you that your minister needs and values your prayers. I would not have stayed on the mission field if it wasn’t for the prayers of the church who sent us. I once told a fellow missionary that people supporting us financially were more likely to be praying for us; he said he was self- supporting! I can assure you that your elders pray for you, and I hope you pray for your elders.

The apostle Paul asked for the church in Thessalonica to pray for him and his fellow missionaries. Yes, the man who met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, the man who was called and sent to preach the gospel by the Lord himself, the man who spoke with apostolic authority, is here asking new believers to pray for him; ‘brethren’ refers to believers, both men and women.

So every preacher and every missionary must humbly seek the prayers of fellow believers. Every Christian worker and every Christian faces trials and temptations and will stumble without the prayers of fellow believers. How often are you moved to pray for elders and deacons and others in the church? How often are you moved to pray for men and women taking the gospel to unreached people here in Australia or abroad?

The second plea of the apostle is for believers in the church to ‘Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss’ (5:26). Some think Paul was asking for everyone to receive a ‘holy kiss’ from him but how would that work? The brethren, as we just said, are men and women believers. Was it men only greeting men and women only women? Maybe. An embrace with a kiss on the cheek was probably the usual greeting in that culture, as it is today in various cultures. We tend to shake hands, while some cultures greet without physical contact, which does seem rather cold. Paul did not want any coldness in the church; he wanted everyone to be in a loving relationship with Christ and with one another.

The Lord’s Supper was a special occasion for oneness. If one could not greet another with a holy kiss they were to go and ‘make up’ as we say, before coming to the Table. If men cannot shake hands they should not be going to the Lord’s Table. We also note that the greeting was for all the brethren (5:26). People from all walks of life were present in the church but the greeting was the same for all; there was no touching the feet of the rich or famous!

The third plea of the apostle is actually a command, a charge made under oath: ‘I charge you by the Lord’ (5:27). Paul commanded them to read his letter in the church such that everyone heard it. There was nothing private in his letter- it was addressed to the church of the Thessalonians so it was for all to hear (1:1). Paul wanted them to comfort one another with the truth he taught them (4:18), which they could hardly do if they had not read the letter or heard the letter read.

Paul sometimes gave instructions for his letter to be read in other churches as well as the one directly addressed (Col 4:16). Was he aware that what he was writing was the inspired word of God that would later be included in the NT cannon? The apostle Peter certainly regarded Paul’s letters as such, placing them alongside ‘the rest of the Scriptures’ (2Peter 3:15, 16). By putting the church under oath to read his letter to all the brethren, Paul certainly saw what he wrote as being essential for the sanctification of believers in the church at Thessalonica, and still today. His was a letter to read by everyone in every church down through the ages.

We may be able to read our Bible at home, and we should be doing so, but the Bible must still be read in public worship. It is not enough to project the words on the wall and tell people to read. Clear, audible reading of the inspired word of God in the language of the people is an essential part of public worship. Paul instructed Timothy to ‘give attention to reading’ the Scriptures (1Tim 4:13). The Lord uses the word read and the word preached to touch our hearts, to convict us of sin, to comfort us, and to encourage us, according to our particular need.

**3. Paul’s blessing**

The apostle closes his letter with the familiar benediction: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’. It may be familiar but Paul would have written it from his heart, and we should always say it from heart. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of the covenant God has made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ, and should be at the heart of our relationships with one another in the church. Grace is, of course, seen supremely in the cross of Jesus, in Jesus laying down his life for us that we might live for him. John says that, ‘We also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1John 3:16). I am sure Paul would say, Amen! What about you? Do you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and are you living in the light of his grace today?