

Closing Prayers—1 Thess. 5:16-28

Background: When we say goodbye to people, we often give them a quick series of requests (or, in the case of parents, demands): “No texting while you drive, and put on your seat belt,” or “Remember who you are,” or “Let us know how your surgery goes. We will be praying.” Paul was no exception. When he came to the end of his letters, he almost always included a number of rapid-fire imperatives instructing his readers how to act. These end-of-the-letter commands are the subject of this week’s text.

Text: Paul’s instructions to “rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances” (5:16-17) are pretty standard in his letters. Therefore it seems unlikely that these demands are related to specific circumstances at Thessalonica. On the other hand, it is easy to understand why they would be important in Thessalonica. When facing persecution (as these Christians were), the call to rejoice takes on new meaning. The reader is reminded of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, at which time he is imprisoned and yet writes of his joy more than in any other letter (see Phil. 2:18, 3:1, 4:4). Joy is not found in circumstances so much as in our relationship with God. The reminder that his readers should pray continually and give thanks in everything also should be seen in the light of their difficult circumstances. There can be no better way to deal with our troubles than by praying over them and giving thanks for the blessings we have in Christ, in the community he has created, in the numerous other blessings we enjoy, etc.

Paul’s comments concerning the Spirit’s fire and prophecies (5:19-22) are somewhat more difficult for us to understand after two millennia. Apparently many in the early church had special gifts of the Spirit such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, healing, etc. (see 1 Cor. 12-14). It also appears that there was often controversy surrounding these gifts, because of pride, jealousy, and even some Christians thinking or pretending to have gifts they did not really have. Prophecy would be especially easy to manufacture. Because of these problems, some disapproved of the practice of these gifts. Others, of course, were confident that they were receiving messages from God that the church needed to hear. Paul’s instructions are that they are not to discourage the exercise of these gifts; however, they are to “test them all,” probably by comparing the content of prophecies to 1) what has been taught by the apostles and other leaders, 2) what their Bibles (the Old Testament) said, and 3) what proved to be true (one of the tests in the OT was to see if what a prophet said actually came true). 1 Cor. 14:29 is a similar passage, in which Paul instructs the Corinthians to “weigh carefully what is said.”

5: 23-24 are typical of Paul’s prayers throughout his letters. His desire that “God sanctify you through and through” is a request for God through his Spirit to transform their thoughts and conduct. In other words, even though they are already sanctified in one sense (they have already been made holy by the blood of Christ), in another sense they are still very much in the process of growing into the likeness of Christ. Paul’s reference to the Christian’s “spirit, soul, and body” is simply a way of referring to the totality of one’s existence, much like we might talk about different aspects of our lives: physical, emotional, mental, social, etc. Paul expects that we will have our spirits, souls, and (resurrected) bodies “at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul ends with three short imperatives and a final prayer wish. 1) “Pray for us”—Paul is with Silas and Timothy in a difficult ministry in Corinth. 2) “Greet all God’s people with a holy kiss”—the holy kiss was a greeting showing affection in that culture. 3) “Have this letter read to all”—Paul wants to make sure that all in all the house churches get his message, perhaps especially those who needed the admonitions in 5:12-15. 4) “The grace

of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you”—most of Paul’s letters end this way. He always prays for Christians to continue to receive God’s favor.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Paul mean when he says to “pray continually”? How do we develop the habit of continual prayer?

2. Do you know people who have remained joyful in spite of illness, relationship troubles, financial struggles, or even persecution? How did they do it? How do we cultivate such a spirit of joy?

3. This may not be the best setting for a serious discussion of the validity of present-day claims of the ability to prophesy. However, perhaps a few words should be spoken with regard to our more charismatic or Pentecostal friends. How should we relate to those who claim to receive messages from God?

4. Is it possible that we sometimes “put out the Spirit’s fire”? That is, even apart from present-day claims to the ability to prophesy, are there ways in which we fail to follow the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit? Is there any sense in which many or even most of us believe that we receive instructions from God?

5. How would you describe the process of sanctification (becoming more and more like God)? What, if anything, should Christians do to encourage God’s work in us?

6. We don’t do a lot of holy kissing today. Why is that, since Paul commands it? What might we do instead? Is a handshake the same as a holy kiss? (In other words, what was the purpose of the holy kiss?)