

1 THESS 5.23-24: A HOLY BLESSING

[Chelmsford 12 July 2009]

Many years ago my PhD supervisor said to me, “*If a preacher has got something worthwhile to say, then he can say it within 20 minutes. If he has nothing to say, then he will need at least 40 minutes*”.

This morning I don’t even have the luxury of 20 minutes.

For we find ourselves today having to hold a church meeting after the service.

Time is always at a premium when we follow a service with a church meeting – but we are even more constrained because the service includes the Lord’s Supper.

What’s more, we shall also be welcoming a new member, as also four new deacons.

Unfortunately we cannot postpone the church meeting to another Sunday.

So the deacons have asked me to preach a short sermon. So a short sermon it will be!

My text is found at the end of Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians: “**May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being – spirit, soul, and body – free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful**” (5.23-24)

1. *Holiness and love go together*

Paul prays that the Thessalonians may become a holy people: “**May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way**”.

This is a theme that we find elsewhere in the letter. At the end of chapter three Paul writes: “**May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow more and more and become as great as our love for you. In this way he will strengthen you, and you will be perfect and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all who belong to him**” (1 Thess 3.12-13).

Notice the relationship between love and holiness – love and holiness go together.

We cannot be a holy people without being a loving people.

Holiness is a misunderstood concept. We sometimes speak of ‘holier-than-thou’ people, as if holiness is something very unattractive. In fact it is the very reverse.

As CS Lewis once wrote: “*How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing it is irresistible*”.

The word ‘**holy**’ means ‘different’ because the person/thing belongs to God

We speak, for instance, of the Holy Bible – the Bible is holy in the sense that it is different from all other books – it is God’s book.

Paul here speaks of Christians being holy in the sense that they are different from other people – different because they belong to God (see 1 Thess 1.1).

In what respect are we called to be different? Paul here in his First Letter to the Thessalonians highlights two aspects of holiness:

- **Negatively**, holiness involves renouncing the world’s way of living. In 1 Thess 4.3 Paul writes: “**God wants you to be holy and completely free from sexual immorality**”. Holiness involves saying ‘no’ to sin, in every shape and form.
- **Positively**, holiness involves embracing God’s way of living – and God’s way of living is above all the way of love. It has been said: “*Holiness is likeness to*

Christ, not only in his victory over temptation to sin, but also in his positive life of perfect love, the epitome of all other virtues” (Martin Parsons).

“**May God make you holy in every way**” – ‘May God give you strength to say “no” to the way of the world & “yes” to the way of love’: i.e. ‘May God make you like Jesus’.

2. *God wants us to be holy through and through*

Paul goes on: “**May God... keep your whole being – spirit, soul, and body – free from every fault at the coming of the Lord**”.

This is the only place in the NT where we have this tripartite division of humanness. People have speculated about the difference between the ‘**spirit**’ & the ‘**soul**’. Frankly, I am not convinced that we should draw a great distinction. Paul is simply saying ‘*May God make you holy - completely and absolutely*’, so that we shall have nothing to fear when we have to give an account of ourselves to the Lord.

But is this really possible? Much as I want to be holy ‘through and through’ I am conscious that all too often I am just like any other person
There is so much within my life which is tainted by sin.
Time and again I have allowed myself to be squeezed into this world’s mould.
Time and again my life does not reflect the love of Jesus.
How on earth can I be “**free from every fault at the coming of the Lord?**”
The fact is that all of us have sinned and fallen far short of the glory of God.

But the good news is that it will be God who makes us holy.
Paul doesn’t say: “Become holy” – rather “**May God make you holy**”; “**May God keep your whole being free from every fault**”
Yes, we need to co-operate with God – we need to do our best to live holy lives - but at the end of the day it will be God and God alone who will make us holy.
Or as Paul writes to the Corinthians: “**God has brought you into union with Christ Jesus... By him we are put right with God; we become God’s holy people and are set free**” (1 Cor 1.30).
This is what we celebrate as we gather around the Lord’s Table
As a result of Jesus’ death on the Cross, our sins are forgiven
Because of what Jesus has done for us, we will be put right with God.

3. *God will make us fit for heaven*

At this point Paul introduces a promise: “**He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful**”. Yes, God is “**faithful**” – he is “*completely dependable*” (Peterson).
“**He will do it**” - “*He will finish what he has set out to do*” (JB Phillips).
In the words of Jude, “**He is able to keep us [lit, you] from falling and to bring us [lit. you] faultless and joyful before his glorious presence**” (Jude 24)
Here is a promise for each one of us to hold onto.
God will make us holy through and through – he will make us fit for heaven – he has promised and he will do it!