

1 Thessalonians 5:25-28

Pray, Kiss, Read, Grace

Introduction

We reach the conclusion on 1 Thessalonians with these miscellaneous statements. Very likely Paul wrote the concluding words by himself. Normally Paul used an amanuensis or secretary to write most of his letters, but at the end he would take up the pen and complete it himself – c.f. **I Paul write this greeting with my own hand...** at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, and similar statement at the end of Galatians.

Brothers, pray for us (5:25)

This simple request gives us a glimpse of a very human Paul. Seven times in his epistles he makes this request. By calling them “Brothers”, his own affection is implied, and he calls on them to show their affection by prayer. The Greek προσευχεσθε actually means “Keep on praying”.

Here is Paul, the great man of God, through whom many amazing things had been done, who had won many for God, who had founded many churches, whose epistles we are indebted to, who endured terrible suffering which the rest of us would shrink from – yet constantly in need of the prayer support of others – and not too proud and self-sufficient to ask for it. He was very conscious of his own weaknesses and limitations. He knew his only hope was God’s grace. He often found himself in a situation where he did not know how to act or what to do or whether he had done the right thing (e.g. 2 Corinthians 7:8). He needed others prayerful support, just as they needed his.

Two lessons here. We can never grow too important and too great that we do not need the support of others. We ought often to make the same request – “pray for me”. Also, we learn from this the importance of prayer for one another and for the work of the Gospel. Nothing so directly and powerfully influences a minister of the Gospel as the prayers of his congregation. And nothing helps the progress of the Gospel as much as prayer.

On D.L.Moody’s second visit to England in 1872 he was preaching at a North London church. The morning service was dead and cold. There was little interest in the message. Moody felt he was beating the air. But at the evening service there was a remarkable change. The atmosphere seemed charged with the Spirit of God. God was evidently at work. Yet Moody had not been much in prayer that day, therefore he could not understand it. When he asked those who wanted to become Christians to rise that he might pray for them, hundreds stood up. It seemed like the whole congregation was on its feet. He assumed that most people did not understand what he had meant, so he invited all who wanted to become Christians to step into his enquiry room at the end of the service. They all crowded into his enquiry room! Extra seats were needed. The minister and Moody were astonished. Both lacked faith to

believe God could do this. Moody asked again for all seeking to become Christians to stand up. Everyone in the room did so. He did not know what to do, so he suggested that all who were in earnest should meet the minister there the next night.

The next day, Moody had to travel on to Dublin. But on Tuesday he received an urgent letter asking him to return to London, for on Monday night even more had turned up than on Sunday night. He returned, and ten days of meetings followed. Four hundred were converted and joined that church.

After some time, a secret came out. There were two sisters that belonged to that church, one of whom was strong and healthy, and the other was bedridden. The bedridden sister had decided that instead of bemoaning her lot, she could at least do what she could, and committed herself to pray that God would revive that church. Day and night she prayed, but the church remained cold and dead. One day she read in the newspapers of D.L.Moody's meetings in the USA. She prayed that God would send him to their church. On the morning of Moody's visit, the healthy sister had been in the service, and when she got home she said "Whom do you think preached this morning?" The sick sister made several guesses without success. Finally the other sister said, "It was Mr Moody from America". The bedridden sister turned pale. "I know that means God has heard my prayer". They had no lunch. They spent the afternoon fasting and praying. In the evening the answer came in fire from heaven.

Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss (5:26)

"All the brothers" – no one was to be left out. The bereaved, the anxious, the loafers, the idlers and the weak Christians were all included. All were to be greeted. Was the church divided? Or was he making plain that however much some of them displeased him, he loved them all without exception? So he says "Give everyone a kiss from me".

In other places in the epistles Paul (and Peter) urge the readers to give one another a holy kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14). So, a verbal greeting was made stronger and warmer and more personal by a culturally appropriate physical sign. Paul urged the use of the customary mode of greeting to express affection, much as we use the handshake today.

J.B.Philips puts this ancient practice in modern terms when he renders it "Give a handshake all round among the brotherhood". Intriguing that there are churches where head covering is still insisted on, but not the kiss. If the handshake is the modern equivalent in our culture of the kiss, why is not the wedding ring accepted as equivalent of head covering in the twentieth century as demonstrating the husband's authority over the wife? Certainly Eastern veils and Western hats are not equivalent theologically or culturally. Modern hats do not signify a husband's authority, as the first century veils did. Some modern modes suggest the reverse – liberty, and not submission.

What is the origin of kissing as a greeting and its practice in the early church? In first century secular life, kissing on the lips was a seal of a relationship. Among kinsfolk, the kiss was on the cheeks, brow and shoulder. In honouring a superior, a kiss was placed on the hands and feet, or the knee and breast. In mystery religions the kiss was

a sign and seal of recognition. Also in the first century, a kiss was used as a greeting on meeting and separation.

In the first century church, the kiss was used as a greeting for Christians on the Lord's Day. Then later it was used in Church services, especially at communion. It was a sign and symbol that they were at the Lord's Table in perfect love. It came to be called "the peace". It was not treated lightly. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386AD) said, "Do not think this kiss is like the kiss given to one another by mutual friends in the market place". Evidence suggests the kiss was exchanged at first only between members of the same sex. But later men and women exchanged kisses. Obviously this led to abuse, and rumours of misconduct spread among the heathen.

Clement of Alexandria objected to "resounding kisses in church, which make suspicious and evil reports among the heathens". As a result, early church councils regulated the circumstances under which a kiss should be encouraged. Finally the practice died out, and also the church became less and less of a fellowship.

Some Pentecostals and Charismatics have revived it. Others say it is a lovely practice, which ought to be revised. The main thing is the warmth of love and fellowship, which was expressed whether by the first century kiss or the twentieth century handshake. So Paul asks all the brethren to be greeted with a holy kiss. "Holy" – Christian, and to be exchanged by believers. A kiss which belongs to a holy community. A symbol of spiritual oneness in Christ.

Have this letter read to all the brothers (5:27)

("Holy" brothers, as it is translated in the A.V., is not in the best manuscripts). The letter would have been read aloud, in public, when the church was assembled. Everyone without exception was to have the chance to hear it, and it was not to be kept for the hands of the leaders only. Paul also wanted to make sure that those who might object to parts of the epistle might hear it whether they liked it or not.

There is nothing in the Gospel which is barred against any man. No attainment in spirituality which is not possible for any man. **He warned every man and taught every man that he might present every man perfect in Christ** (Colossians 1:28).

Christians read the Old Testament Scriptures from the beginning of the early church. Now there was to be the public reading of the apostle's letter, and he expected it to be obeyed because he was an apostle, i.e. he had received special revelation of Christ with special inspiration. N.B. Paul told them to weigh the prophets' words and test them, but he does not say they must do the same to his words. He was an apostle, and therefore his authority was higher than the prophets.

So today, even if there is still prophecy in the church, it is subordinate to the Scriptures which have supreme authority. The Word of God is to be read and expounded, for the church's health and growth. Paul also commanded that his letter to the Colossians to be read to the church at Colosse and then to be read to the church at Laodicea. Likewise, the Colossians were to read his letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). Gradually each church would collect the epistles, and they formed the nucleus

of the New Testament. So Christian writings were read side by side with the Old Testament, with which they were on a level.

Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you (5:28)

Paul ends with practically the same prayer as that with which he began – **Grace and peace to you** (1:1). What is true in this epistle is true of all the rest. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is their alpha and omega, their first word and their last. In 2 Corinthians, it is expounded into a Trinitarian formula (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Whatever Paul says to us as God's messenger – and there are many things which search the heart and make it quake – it always begins with God's grace and ends with it. Grace is free and undeserved mercy to lost sinners. Grace is the sweetest and most constraining of all the Bible words. It is the source of the Christian life (Ephesians 2:8), it is the reason for spiritual growth (2 Peter 3:18), and the secret of effective service (1 Corinthians 15:10). Every step in the Christian life does not depend on us, but on the grace of God to which we respond by faith and obedience. **From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another** (John 1:16).

All that God is to us is summed up in "grace". Grace is the heart of the Gospel, and indeed the heart of God. What more could one person wish for another than that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ should be with him.