

A PRAYER FOR SANCTIFICATION

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We are looking at the prayers of the Apostle Paul as they are recorded in his epistles. We are considering them in their chronological order, as well as we can determine what that is. As far as we know, 1 Thessalonians was the first epistle that he wrote, so we have been looking at 1 Thessalonians. We come today to the fifth chapter and to the last prayer in this wonderful epistle.

The prayer that I want to consider with you today is found in the twenty-third verse of 1 Thessalonians 5, and you will understand how it is hard to leave out verse 24 when you see the content of verse 23. Here the apostle wrote, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23:

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul
and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then after that great request he said, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thess.5:24). You can see that the Apostle Paul was concerned about the sanctification of the believers in Thessalonica.

In the study of the Book of Romans we learned that salvation is made up of three parts. Let me review that for you since in this message we are dealing with one of those parts.

The three parts are presented by Paul in that Roman epistle. The first one is justification. The second is sanctification. The third one is glorification.

Justification, which Paul discussed first, is the same for every child of God. There is no such thing as being partially justified. It speaks of our complete and our eternal acceptance before God through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. There are no degrees of justification. Everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation is fully justified, declared righteous, and cleared of all charges against him or her because of the work of Christ on the Cross. He has suffered the full penalty for the sins of those who would believe on Him. So it is because we are justified before God that we have no fear of having to suffer eternal punishment. Paul declared this in Romans 5:8-9 when he said,

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died
for us.

9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through
him.

There is no other escape from eternal judgment except through Jesus Christ and the work of justification which He accomplished on our behalf.

Our justification, as all of us know, is not ours because we deserve it. In fact, we deserve the same kind of judgment that many are going to receive as a penalty for their sins. No, our justification is based upon the love of God for us and upon the Lord Jesus Christ Who died for us. Paul said in these verses I read to you that we "are justified by His blood," which means *through His death on Calvary's Cross*. Once we are justified, which means declared righteous by God, He will never reverse that verdict on our behalf. God has not overlooked our sin. He is not blind to what we have done. He is not blind to what we deserve to receive. But its penalty has been fully paid in our behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ. What we deserve has fallen upon Him. All of us who are saved have the same justification. A person who might be saved this morning has the same justification as a person who has been saved fifty or sixty years. It is the same in every case. We have the same justification as Abraham had or that David had or that the Apostle Paul had. There is no difference in our justification.

You will notice in the verses that I read to you from Romans that Paul said, "Being now justified by his blood . . ." We have it now. It is not something that we wait for until some later time when we will receive it. There is no period of probation. When we come to the Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledging our sin, and putting our trust in Christ, we are declared righteous because of what Christ has done. So all who are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ have justification now and can never lose it. This is what it means to be saved. All of us who are trusting Christ for our salvation fall under that great statement which Paul made at the beginning of Romans 5 where we read,

1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1-2).

The whole doctrine of salvation is given to us in those two verses. Let us remember that there is only one way that anyone can possibly be declared righteous before God. That is through Christ. There are not many ways of salvation. There are not many saviors. There is only One. We are not justified by the good things that we do. It does not even contribute to our salvation. We are not justified by any money that we might give to God. Our need was so great that nothing short of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ could possibly satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God. So, what we could never do for ourselves, Christ has done by His death on the Cross. It is wonderful to know that, isn't it? I not only hope we all understand this, but I hope that we are all trusting in the Lord Jesus for our justification before God.

Now, what is the ultimate goal of our salvation?

I am going to skip over the word *sanctification* for the moment because I am coming back to it after I deal with the word *glorification*.

The ultimate goal of our salvation is that we should be glorified. It means that when we are glorified we will no longer be capable of sin because morally and spiritually we are predestined to be like the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Paul said in Romans 8:29, that we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son," God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle John said that "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). This is our hope, not something uncertain, but a hope guaranteed by the death of Christ. We are all going to be glorified. We are not glorified now. We are justified now, but our glorification is yet to come. There may be some differences in our glorification, but our final state is certain.

Having reviewed that for you, we are ready for the subject of Paul's prayers which I would like to consider

with you now.

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

The first point that I want to make with you out of this text is:

I. SANCTIFICATION IS A WORK OF GOD.

Sanctification comes between justification and glorification. Sanctification has to do with what God is accomplishing in our lives now. The work of sanctification begins the very moment we are saved; it begins when we are born again. And although our justification is the same with each one of us, there can be a great deal of difference between us as far as our sanctification is concerned. It is to be hoped that a person who has known the Lord Jesus Christ for a long time would have made real progress in sanctification. That is not always the case, but that should be the case. We are all in the process of being sanctified. We are all in the process of being made holy.

Here, as Paul wrote of sanctification, you will notice that he made a big request of God, "The very God of peace sanctify you w-h-o-l-l-y." That means *completely* -- "body, soul, and spirit," and that the three "be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Therefore, we can see from this that sanctification, like justification, is a work of God. Paul indicated this two times in our text. You will notice that he said, "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly." Then he followed that by saying, "and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He was calling upon God to sanctify the believers in Thessalonica.

We pray for things, don't we, because we cannot do them ourselves. We cannot do them without the help of God. And so Paul, referring to God, went on to say in verse 24, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it."

How are we to account for the fact that we are saved? Ephesians 2:8 and 9 teaches us,

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

God chose us in eternity past, and in our lifetime He has drawn us to Himself. As Paul said in Titus 3:5, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us"! Consequently salvation is a work of God.

It is not that we are more intelligent than anybody else, and that we have figured out what our need is, and that we have come to understand how that need can be met. It is not that we have discovered on our own what God has done for our salvation, and so we have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. No, that is not it! We are saved because God called us to Himself. God is the One Who has taken the initiative in our salvation. He is the One Who made us see that we needed a Savior. He showed us that only Christ could save us. So He called us to Christ, and we came. And He is the One Who has given us the faith to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The God Who called us, Paul said here in verse 24, is "faithful." That means that He started a work when He called us to Himself. We have trusted in Christ. We are declared righteous in His sight. He began a work that He intends to finish. He is not going to stop until that work is completed.

That is what Paul told the Philippian church, didn't he?

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil.1:6).

In performing this work, He is sanctifying us, and in the day of Jesus Christ the work is going to be completed. That will be our glorification! So Paul was assured of that, and he wanted all believers to be assured of that too. God never starts a work that He does not finish.

If God has brought you to Himself, and you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, you may feel like your spiritual journey is an up and down journey, and possibly with more down than up, yet God is working. God is going to see that His work in you is completed. This whole work of salvation, we gather from what we learn in Scripture, is too big for us. Therefore, we are all dependent upon the same God and the same Savior to work out Their purposes. If it depended upon us, it would never get done. We would have failed long ago. But we can really expect that this is going to be accomplished because God is doing it.

So the work of God begins with our justification. And the end of His work is our glorification. But up to this point I have not really defined sanctification, the doctrine which joins justification and glorification together. Most of you, I am sure, know what this means, but let me spend just a moment on the meaning of sanctification.

II. THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION.

To be sanctified means to be made holy. Since God is holy, perfectly holy, sanctification means that we are being made like God. We are being made like the Lord Jesus Christ. This last part of 1 Thessalonians is not the first time that he has mentioned sanctification, or holiness, in this epistle. In the prayer we considered last Sunday at the end of chapter 3 there are several references to this. For example, when in chapter 3 and verse 10 he prayed that he might be instrumental in perfecting that which was lacking in their faith, he was talking about sanctification. In verse 12 he spoke of seeing their love increase one for the other, and toward all men. This is one of the evidences of sanctification. Then, you will notice that he said in verse 13 that all of this is done

To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

To be made holy is sanctification, and sanctification is the work of God whereby you and I are being made holy. If you could see the word translated *holy* in the Greek New Testament, and the verb translated *sanctify* in the Greek New Testament, you would see that they both have the same Greek root.

Then look with me at 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7:

3 For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:

4 That every one of you (here is his definition) should know how to possess his vessel (his body) in sanctification and honour;

5 Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God:

6 That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified.

7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness (1 Thess. 4:3-7).

God has called us unto holiness.

Sanctification is that work of God in our hearts which causes us to avoid sin, on the one hand, and to do what pleases God, on the other hand. It is a work of God, but the Lord Jesus is involved in it, and so also is the Holy Spirit. It is a work of God in which He changes us from what we were when we were first saved to what He wants us to be as His children. This is godliness, godly behavior which is the result of godly character. Everything that God has to say in His Word about what we are to be and how we are to live, is aimed at our sanctification. God saved us to make us a holy people. Just because there are some people who carry this to an extreme and teach that it is going to be possible for us to be perfect in this life, should not make us avoid this great and important doctrine. We are to be concerned about our sanctification every day that we live.

III. THE EXTENT OF SANCTIFICATION.

Now, let's look thirdly at the extent of our sanctification. This looks like a simple verse. You could sit down and in five minutes or so memorize it. Maybe it would not take you that long. Perhaps you have already memorized it. It is a verse which probably has caused as much discussion as any verse that you will find in the Scriptures because of the reference to spirit, and soul, and body.

Paul introduced this verse by saying that he was praying that "the God of peace" would "sanctify" them "wholly." Then he added by way of explanation, "and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." So we are faced with the question of what he meant by "spirit and soul and body"?

Of course there is no problem as far as body is concerned. We understand what our bodies are: our eyes, our mouths, our hands, our feet, and so on. And we know, or should know, that every part of our bodies can be involved in sin. Our bodies desperately need to be sanctified! This involves such things as what we look at, what we read, what we say, what we do, where we go – the list seems almost endless. We all struggle daily with our bodies because they need to be sanctified.

But this verse tells us that sanctification is not limited to the body, but that it applies to every part of our being. The Bible teaches us that we are not only flesh and bones and blood, that is, body, but also that there is a part of us that we cannot see, and that part is usually referred to as our spirit and soul. Our bodies are what we can see. But there is an immaterial part of our bodies which no one can see except God. No surgeon, as extensively as he may have operated on the human body, has ever seen our spirit or our soul. They can tell if our spirit and soul are there because we are alive. If we should die in surgery, then he would know that the spirit and soul are gone. Our spirits and our souls are what give us life. And they, likewise, are included in this divine work of sanctification. There is no part of us that is excluded from this work that God is doing to make us a holy people. This sums up Paul's main concern about the believers in Thessalonica. This is why he wanted to get back with them. This is why he wanted to teach them. This is why he wanted to encourage them. They had been saved out of lives of terrible sin. Probably nobody here this morning has been saved out of the kind of living that the people of Thessalonica were involved in. For the Lord to save them, and then to begin this work of transformation, this work of sanctification, was for them like starting life all over again.

So this was the burden of his prayer. He knew that God wanted them to be holy, and he wanted them to be holy. It meant a complete change, an entire transformation in each one of their lives, a change that would continue to be made as long as they were living on this earth. Finally it would be completed when they

stood before the Lord.

Let's look at these three words for a moment: spirit, soul, and body. I want to tell you that I do not profess to have all of the answers to this problem. Theologians and Bible teachers have struggled with the difference between soul and spirit generation after generation, and yet often come up with different answers. Sometimes it seems like they are used synonymously; in other passages it seems that there is a difference. Let me at least attempt to show you what I think the difference is. I trust that this will be helpful to all of us.

There is no part of us which is not either spirit or soul or body. To state it another way, spirit plus soul plus body equals a human being. Angels cannot claim these three because they have no physical body. Sometimes they use physical bodies, but angels, as they were created, do not have physical bodies. Animals, birds, fish, such as we have been learning about in creation in our Sunday School lesson, cannot claim all three because, as far as we know, they have no capacity for fellowship with God. Only human beings, of all of God's creatures, have spirit, soul, and body.

But there are those who believe that man is only body and soul, or body and spirit. They would use soul and spirit as synonyms. A person who believes that we are simply soul and body, or spirit and body, that is, that there are just two parts of us, that person is called *a dichotomist*. A person, on the other hand (and I fall into this category on the basis of what we have in this verse), who believes that we are spirit and soul and body, is *a trichotomist*. Among believers there are godly people who believe that we are just soul and body, and that spirit is a term that is often used as a substitute for soul. They feel that man is made up of two parts: his material body and his immaterial spirit or soul. But this particular verse is one that keeps me from being *a dichotomist*.

I believe that there are three parts to our being. I do not think that Paul would have prayed this way if this had not been the case.

It is not a simple thing to define the difference between spirit and soul. As I have told you, I do not claim to have all the answers, but let me point out some of the differences which I think will apply. When we get to heaven, we are all going to agree and we will all know exactly what it is, but it is important for us to at least face this question and see if we can come up with some answers.

I think we all have to agree that there is a close relationship between the soul and the spirit. All parts of our being really work in conjunction with each other, don't they? We do know that, as far as people in the world are concerned, there are people who do not give any thought to God. They are not concerned about pleasing God. They are not interested in fellowship with God, and they live like they do not think they are ever going to become accountable to God. The Bible speaks of them, as it spoke of us before we came to know the Lord Jesus, as dead in trespasses and sins. We know that a person who does not know the Savior is very much alive physically, but there is a part of his being that has been, could I say, rendered inoperative because of the fact that he is still in his sins. When he comes to know the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior, there is a change within him. Then he knows that he is accountable to God. Then he wants to please God. Then he is concerned about his fellowship with God. He enjoys being with the people of God.

Personally, I believe that it was in man's spirit that he was affected by sin. I think, in a sense, that our spirits are out of commission, dead, before we knew the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. I wonder if that is not

the reason Paul puts "spirit" first here in our text. We often will use this order when speaking of the three, "body, soul, and spirit." That is probably the most customary way of referring to them. But Paul said, "spirit and soul and body." I think that when a person becomes a new creature in Christ, when he or she receives eternal life, it is the spirit that is revived, the spirit that is made alive. It is this part of man's being that was incapable of fellowship with God because of the effect of sin. This is what is changed. It is in man's spirit that he comes to be capable of having fellowship with God and enjoying fellowship with God. The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, when Paul was speaking to the Corinthian believers about their bodies as being the temple of the Holy Spirit, you remember that he went on to tell them that they were to "glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." I know that this could be one of those passages which the dichotomist would use to say that we are just spirit and body, or soul and body, but when you see all of the passages that are used with reference to the nature of man, I think you can see that there is a special place that our spirits have as far as our relationship to God is concerned.

An unregenerate man has a soul. He has a spirit too, but his spirit is dead. He has a soul: He thinks, he has opinions, he has emotions, he has will. Fausset, in his dictionary, says that "the soul is the sphere of the will and affections." And he pointed out that Genesis tells us that "man was made a living soul," not a living body. See Genesis 2:7. Man's emotions, his will, his desires are all a part of the soul. These are operating in the life of an unbeliever in a way that they should not be. Instead of being guided by a desire to glorify God, or guided by the Word of God, his life is completely self-centered. He looks upon this life as really all that he needs to be concerned about. To use a term that many Bible teachers use, he is *soulish*. But when he knows the Lord Jesus Christ, he still has a will. He still has thoughts. He still has emotions and desires. But these are directed in a different way because God has given him eternal life and in his spirit he enjoys fellowship with God. I think it is impossible for us to understand all that is involved in becoming new creatures in Christ. We have a new life, and yet, as long as we live, we will still be tempted by sin and capable of sinning.

Paul's prayer was that we would be sanctified, made holy. Holiness affects the totality of our being. There has to be a difference between the soul and the old nature because the old nature is not redeemed, nor is it redeemable. It is in all of the areas of spirit, soul, and body that Paul was praying that we would be preserved blameless, that we would be sanctified. Salvation affects the way we think. It affects the exercise of our emotions, how we exercise them, and how we are able, by God's grace, to control them. Our wills become subject to the will of God. And there is a desire that every believer has to know the Word and to know the God of the Word. In addition, the Bible has a lot to say about our bodies. Romans 6 talks about the members of our bodies. Romans 12:1-2 says that we are to present our bodies a living sacrifice to God. But since the soul and the spirit are contained in the body, Paul was not just emphasizing the fact that it is our physical bodies that need to be sanctified, but also our spirits and our souls, every part of us, is to be concerned about our fellowship with God.

We know from Philippians 3:20-21 that someday these bodies are going to be fashioned like our Lord's glorious body. That is the reason we treat the body with care even after a child of God has died. We believe that there is a resurrection coming. Just as our Lord was raised from the dead, those who have died in Christ are going to be raised from the dead, and their bodies are going to be glorified. It will no longer be possible for any of us to commit sin. So it behooves every one of us to give constant thought to our progress in

holiness in every part of our being.

To illustrate how holiness affects our lives, let me speak about the tongue. Sometimes we congratulate ourselves that we do not say what we really feel, but we forget that God is concerned about how we feel and what we would say if we really expressed our feelings. It is good not to say the wrong thing, if you feel inclined to do that. But when you get concerned about the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God in your life, you are not only going to be concerned that you do not say the wrong things, but you are going to be concerned that you don't have the wrong attitude which would cause you to say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing. We all struggle with this type of thing. That is the reason Paul said that he was praying that the whole spirit and soul and body would be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his prayer, will you notice, he says, "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly." Do you know what peace is? Peace is harmony. When a person is at peace, it means that his whole being, the various parts of his being, are in accord with each other, and every part of his being is functioning the way God wants it to function. So Paul calls upon the God of peace to sanctify us wholly and to preserve us blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have said that this is a work of God. We all know recognize that only God can make us inwardly and outwardly what He wants us to be. He is the only One Who can change our habits by changing our hearts. This is the reason that all that is being done today by counselors and by social programs and so on and so forth, while they may change conditions, they can never solve our basic problem. God is the only One Who can change a man, because it calls for an inner change. God is the only One Who can change us on the inside so that our behavior on the outside is what it ought to be.

When I say that it is a work of God, do I mean that we do not have any part in our sanctification? Paul was asking God to sanctify the Thessalonian believers. He assured them that the God Who had called them to Himself was faithful in the sense that He was not going to give up on that work in any one of them. Does this mean that we have no responsibility? Does this mean that the Thessalonian believers had no responsibility? Is there nothing for us to do that can be a part of this sanctifying work? This is my fourth point.

IV. DO WE HAVE A PART IN OUR SANCTIFICATION?

Let me point out this simple fact to you: If there were nothing for us to do, Paul would never have written this epistle, and he would never have written 2 Thessalonians. As you read through these epistles you will see that he told them many things what he wanted them to do, and many things that he did not want them to do. He was giving them this guidance for a life of holiness. He was impressing upon them that God not only works for us, but God works in us, and God works through us. That is what God told the Philippian church. It is God Who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure. See Phil. 2:12-13. God's work of sanctification is that He takes the Word of God, and by the Holy Spirit He uses that Word to work in us. The Holy Spirit causes us to want the will of God. Then He enables us by His divine power to do God's will which we could never do otherwise. And so we need the Word of God. We need to pay close attention to the Word of God. We need to see that it tells me what God wants me to do, what He wants me to be, what He does *not* want me to do. All of this is a part of this great work of sanctification that is going on in our hearts.

We all fail. I said, and I hope you remember, do not believe any person who says that they have attained perfect holiness. Nobody does in this life. As long as we live there is going to be progress that we can make in a life of holiness. But the work, thank God, someday is going to be finished. The burden of Paul's prayer was that God would be working in the hearts of these Thessalonian believers so that in their spirits, in their souls, and in their bodies, they might be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We cannot do it on our own, but by the grace of God, and through the Spirit's work in our hearts, we can live lives that are pleasing to the Lord.

Conclusion

So, our justification is settled, and our glorification is certain, but it is our sanctification that we need to be concerned about. This prayer that Paul prayed for the Thessalonian church is a prayer that you and I ought to be praying every day for Trinity Bible Church, and for everyone else in our acquaintance who knows the Lord Jesus Christ as his or her Savior. In addition, let us daily seek God's grace that we may be, do, say, and think, only that which is going to please and glorify our God. And let us remember that our precious Savior Who died to save us from sin's penalty, died also to save us from sinning against God.