

# What the Church Needs

Psalm 61, 1 Thessalonians 5:25–28

We come today to the last in our series on 1 Thessalonians. We will consider the last four verses of the epistle. Each one is essentially a short paragraph. We will tie them together this morning under the theme “What the Church Needs.” As you can see from the outline in the bulletin, what the church needs is (1) prayer, (2) fellowship, (3) the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and above all (4) grace. On the face of it, who can disagree that these are things that the church needs? Let us consider them in turn, first,

## 1. Prayer

Paul says, “Brethren, pray for us” (v. 25).

Think of what this means. Here is the eminent apostle Paul, the former enemy of the church, personally chosen by Christ to be his apostle to the Gentiles, converted by him on the road to Damascus. Paul is the brilliant theologian of the first-century church, the soon-to-be author of the epistle to the Romans, the Bible’s systematic theology. Here is Paul, saying, “Brethren, pray for us.” Clearly, Paul coveted the church’s prayers. How remarkable that an intellectual powerhouse like the apostle Paul would covet the prayers of ordinary Christians! Why? Because he knew that, ultimately, the battle for the souls of the sons of men would be won, not by reason and argumentation alone, but by the blessing of the Holy Spirit of God. He knew the lesson of the LORD’s word to the prophet Zechariah: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

Ultimately, the battle for the souls of men is a spiritual battle. It is a battle that began in heaven. In the book of Isaiah the prophet is instructed to take up a proverb against the king of Babylon. It says in part, “How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High’” (14:12–14). This is exalted language, referring not just to a human king, but to the power that animates him. He is called “Lucifer” (Latin, *light-bearer*; translating the Heb. לְיָיִן, *morning star*). When, shortly after creation, this illustrious spirit-being determined to exalt his throne above the stars of God and said, “I will be like the Most High,” he was deposed and cast down to the earth.

Easton helpfully summarizes: He is called “the dragon,” “the old serpent,” “the prince of this world,” “the prince of the power of the air,” “the god of this world,” “the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.” He tempted our Lord in the wilderness. He is “Beelzebub, the prince of the devils.” He is the constant enemy of God, of Christ, of the divine kingdom, of the followers of Christ, and of

all truth; full of falsehood and all malice, and exciting and seducing to evil in every possible way. His power is very great in the world. He is a “roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Men are said to be “taken captive by him.” Christians are warned against his “devices,” and called to “resist” him. Christ redeems his people from “him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”<sup>1</sup>

Satan is a powerful foe. Here is the saints’ mortal enemy, the enemy of our souls, whose destiny is the Lake of Fire, and whose desire is to take as many of the sons of men with him as possible. My hearer, Satan wants to destroy *you* as well. If you belong to Christ, you are called to resist him. Members of Grace OPC have taken a vow: “Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and promise that you will serve him, forsake the world, *resist the devil*, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?” Our duty is to resist the devil, who leads us into temptation and tempts us to commit treason against Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

But he is so much more powerful than a mere human. How can we resist him? The short answer is: *by the power of Christ*. We must remember that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but *mighty through God* to the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

The saints are in a spiritual battle—a battle that ultimately will be won by Christ—but in the meantime we are called to wage that battle by the power of Christ. That power is activated by prayer. This is why Paul says, “Brethren, pray for us.” “Brethren” and “pray” are plural. Here is a battle that the whole church must wage together. In hand-to-hand combat, the lone soldier—the one who gets separated from his unit—is the most vulnerable. There might be a champion like the apostle Paul out on the front lines, valiantly defending the faith, but he needs the prayers of the church to be victorious. Christians need to pray for one another, that we might be strengthened to resist temptation. We need to pray for our elders, our spiritual fathers in the faith, that they might be given wisdom and strength to persevere. We need to pray for our pastors and ministers of the Word, that they might be enabled by the Spirit of God to preach the Word of God with clarity and power. We need to pray for one another, that we might resist temptation. Think of how much more successful we might be if God’s people spent time each Saturday night praying for the ministry of the Word the next morning.

But not only does the church need prayer, it also needs

## **2. Fellowship**

Paul continues, writing: “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.” Take a careful look at all the elements of this expression.

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<sup>1</sup> Easton’s Bible Dictionary, “Satan” (Logos Bible Software)

The word translated “greet” occurs some 60 times and is translated various ways. In the KJV it is often translated “salute.” To *greet* means to give a polite word of welcome upon meeting someone. This is part of our second-table duty to love our neighbor as ourself. Christians are not to ignore one another but greet one another, not pass on our way as though nobody else mattered but take time to interact with our fellow saints, not hurry to race away from worship so that we don’t have to talk with our brothers and sisters in Christ but linger and spend time with them. We live in a world where we are increasingly disconnected from one another; God wants us to look one another in the face, recognize one another, speak to one another.

Paul says, “Greet *all* the brethren.” We are not to dismiss another Christian, looking on him with contempt, shunning him because he is not in our social class. James writes, “if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (2:2–4). It is an offense before God for a Christian to treat another member of the body as though he doesn’t matter. *Every* member of the body is important. When I was younger and heard older people talk of joint pain I used to think, *Hey, at least you don’t have cancer or heart trouble—why all the bellyaching?* But now, having experienced joint pain myself, I am more sympathetic. Every little joint in the body is important to the proper functioning of the body.

Paul says, “Greet all the *brethren*.” There are, after all, times to run for our own safety. He’s not talking about meeting a dangerous ruffian in a dark alley. He’s talking about those who profess Christ, who worship with God’s people, our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Finally, Paul says, “Greet all the brethren with a *holy kiss*.” Note that he says “*holy* kiss.” In the Middle East a man might greet another man or a woman another woman with an embrace and a kiss on each cheek. Paul is not speaking here of an amorous kiss on the lips as between a husband and wife. Putting it in the modern context he is speaking of a warm embrace, a quick hug, a handshake, as appropriate.

But the point is, Christians are not to ignore one another, run right past each other. We are to greet one another in a culturally appropriate way. This is part of our second-table duty: showing love for God by loving his people.

This is what the church needs. Fellow Christians are not expendable. Rather, we each need to be involved in other people’s lives. Christ loved even the outcasts and lepers, and we should, too. Thirdly,

### 3. Reading of Holy Scripture

Paul continues: “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.” The word translated “charge” is a very strong word. It literally means *put a person under oath*. It is a reference to an oath taken before a judge in a court of law—“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help you God?” This expression is faithfully translated in the ESV as “*I put you under oath before the Lord* to have this letter read to all the brothers.” What do we make of this? Clearly, Paul’s intent is that the Word of God—inspired Scripture—be read in the churches. As Calvin said, “it is no light or frivolous thing to adjure by the name of God.”<sup>2</sup> There is no way that Paul would have used such a strong expression with reference to the uninspired writings of mere men.

Christians believe that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Though the Holy Spirit of God used humans—mortal men like Moses, David, Matthew and Paul—to pen his word, the ultimate author is God himself. His Holy Spirit inspired the original authors, breathing his word into them. Moreover, God is absolutely sovereign and perfectly accomplishes all his holy will. In his providence, the written Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments turned out exactly as he intended, such that the Lord Jesus Christ could declare unreservedly and without restriction: “Sanctify them through thy truth: *thy word is truth*” (John 17:17). God’s word is “truth”—not “mostly truth,” not “truth in a certain respect,” not “truth, spiritually speaking.” God’s word is “truth” in the same way that Christ is the “truth”: truth absolutely.

When Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren,” he is implying that the letter to the Thessalonians is itself inspired Scripture, and ought to be treated with the utmost care.

Christian worship must include the reading and preaching of the Word of God, Holy Scripture. Every worship service must include the reading and preaching of a text of Scripture. Humanly-devised sermonizing is forbidden. The church gathers to sit at the feet of Christ and hear his inspired word. The teaching that is taught in a Christian church must be *biblical*—it must reflect the mind of God, not the opinions of men. The church has no authority to require the reading of uninspired literature, whether human philosophy or the Apocrypha. The Geneva Bible (1560) included this note at the beginning of the Apocrypha: “Apocrypha, that is, books which were *not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the church*, neither yet served to prove any point of Christian religion, save

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary on 1 Thess. 5:28

inasmuch as they had the consent of the other Scriptures called canonical to confirm the same . . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The Apocryphal books were “not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the church” because they are human writings and are not inspired.

Some in the Reformed tradition argue for Catechism preaching. Peter Y. DeJong wrote that “Reformed churches have for centuries *mandated* that one sermon every Sunday shall ordinarily teach ‘the sum of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism.’”<sup>4</sup> What he was arguing for was a sermon expounding the words of the Heidelberg Catechism as a faithful compendium of Christian doctrine. Now I have profound respect for the Heidelberg Catechism and strongly encourage its use by all Christians, but I humbly differ with the word “mandated.” The church’s authority is “ministerial and declarative.”<sup>5</sup> The church has no authority to mandate anything other than what is mandated in the Word of God. The minister has no authority to expound the Catechism; rather, his job is to expound the Word of God.

When Paul writes, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren,” he is mandating that the church read and expound Holy Scripture in its worship. Showing movie clips, sharing testimonies and doing liturgical dance are no substitute for the preaching of the Word of God.

Fourthly, the church needs

#### **4. Grace**

The inspired text closes with the words “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.” This customary benediction was probably added in Paul’s own handwriting, as in 2 Thessalonians 3:17–18. Many of his epistles begin with the phrase “Grace to you and peace.” Our epistle begins with the words “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Grace” (χάρις) is a favorite word with Paul, occurring nearly a hundred times in his epistles. As used here, it is God’s favor, kindness and friendship, or specifically, his forgiving mercy. Christians need both. We need to know that we have God’s favor, that we have experienced his kindness to us in Christ Jesus, and that we are no longer enemies but have become his friends.

Abraham is specifically called “the friend of God” (Jas. 2:23). In Exodus 33:11 it is recorded that “the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”

Is there anything more delightful than sitting down and talking with a dear friend—being able to just be yourself, without pretenses, to know that your friend

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<sup>3</sup> Geneva Bible, facsimile of the 1560 edition, note at folio 386 (University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, 1981), archaic language updated, emphasis added

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ipema, “Catechism Preaching: Cherished Legacy, Contemporary Necessity” (Mid-America Reformed Seminary Messenger 42:4 [June 2024]), p. 9, emphasis added

<sup>5</sup> OPC Form of Government III.3 (*Book of Church Order*)

shows a genuine interest in you and will keep your words and thoughts in confidence?

By nature we sinners are enemies of God, objects of his wrath, not friendship. It is only by grace, poured out to us in Jesus Christ, that we can become his friends. In the gospel Christ takes upon himself the punishment that we justly deserve because of our sins and offenses, and clothes us with his perfect righteousness. In grace, when God looks at us he doesn't see our sin, but rather the perfect righteousness of Christ which alone qualifies us to come into his blessed presence. This is God's forgiving mercy and grace. It is given, not in some stingy way, but lavishly, being "poured out" on us. In the gospel we are truly blessed with the grace that is greater than all our sin.

We have seen that what the church needs is prayer, fellowship, the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and above all grace. God promises to meet all our needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Our Old Testament text is a beautiful Psalm which deserves to be heard again: "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For You have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy. I will abide in Your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of Your wings. For You, O God, have heard my vows; You have given me the heritage of those who fear Your name. You will prolong the king's life, His years as many generations. He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him! So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows."

Here, David speaks of prayer ("Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You"). He speaks of the fellowship that he shares with God "when [his] heart is overwhelmed." He speaks of grace (God's "mercy and truth"). This Psalm is a part of Holy Scripture which is to be read and expounded in the church. We are thankful for its message.

Brothers and sisters, do you long for communion with God through prayer? Do you long for true fellowship with him when your heart is overwhelmed with the pressures of this life? Do you long to hear his voice in the reading of Scripture and the proclamation of his holy word? And do you long to know that grace and friendship that are ours through the Gospel?

Here is "the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Here is God's mercy, poured out on us abundantly in Christ. Here is the promise of eternal life through Christ our Lord. All that the church needs is found in Christ. Amen.