GOING THE DISTANCE in the CHRISTIAN LIFE

INTRODUCTION

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you”.

INTRODUCTION

Many of you know that during the past days Kathy and I have been in the USA and Canada to spend time with family. Two weeks ago as we were packing to fly from Wisconsin we received word from my brother Rob that his dear wife Donna had died early that morning, and that a local funeral service would be held Ottawa on Saturday 13 February. While Kathy flew to Bangor Maine by earlier arrangement to spend time with her aging parents, I delayed my departure to Luxembourg and was able to participate in that service. The Lord was honored and I was so grateful to see God’s sustaining grace for Rob, his three married children and nine grandchildren.

One of the things that came out in the testimonials offered at the service and the open house that followed was that Donna had said several times before her passing into eternity that she wanted to finish well. And finish well she did! Despite the suffering of her rapidly degenerating pancreatic cancer, she maintained a smile and a confidence to the end. She would speak to her adopted “kids”–refugee singles and couples whom she and Rob had been helping to get acclimated to Canada–about her hope in Christ. There were tears, to be sure, but no bitterness over her departing this life earlier than she had expected. She slipped into a coma several days before her death and passed into the Lord’s presence at home with Rob and her kids around her.

When I read the final verses of 1 Thessalonians 5 I think of the events we have witnessed in recent days. I’d like to finish well like my sister-in-law did. I hope you desire to also. How can that happen? How can we “go the distance” of the Christian life–the whole period between the day when we trust the gospel and the day when we pass into eternity? How can we maintain confidence that we will finish what we start in a way that honors Christ? Our passage encourages us two simple answers: we will go the distance of the Christian life because God is the one who will carry us through. And some of the means He uses to do that are the obedient ministries of other believers, who pray for us, show us affection and challenge us with God’s Word. Let’s think about those two answers a bit . . .

I. TO GO THE DISTANCE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE WE RECEIVE HELP FROM ABOVE (5:23-24)

The only way we can manage to complete the race of the Christian life is through divine assistance. Our own energies are not great enough. But the God who fashioned a plan to save us in the first place is the God who will bring it to completion.

A. KNOW THE GOD OF PEACE WHO TAKES US THE DISTANCE

Paul prays for the Thessalonians by asking that the “God of peace” do a continuing work in them. This title emphasizes that the God of our salvation is the God who creates wholeness and restoration. It is as if God is the perfect professor of His own finishing school. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word shalom did not just mean “absence of war” but also “wholeness” and “unity”. When you greeted a person in the street with this term you were wishing he would be blessed with restored relationships and a sense of completeness in this life. God Himself is whole, isn’t He? He’s not broken into little pieces, oppressed by inner conflict. He “has it all together”. That is why He can establish wholeness in our lives. He desires this completeness for each one of His children, and because He is Himself the God of shalom He is able to bring us into this condition.

But how does He accomplish this? Look at the next phrase . . .

B. RESPOND TO THE SANCTIFYING WORK OF GOD WHO WANTS TO TAKE US THE DISTANCE

The main thrust of Paul’s prayer in 5:23 gravitates around sanctification. You will remember from our
recent study in chapter 4 that sanctification has to do with dedication of consecration. You will remember that in the Old Testament arrangements with the nation of Israel a whole group of things were consecrated to God: the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8); priestly garments (Exodus 28:2); the high priest himself (Exodus 28:36); the high priest’s crown (Exodus 29:6); the food eaten at the consecration meal for the priests (Exodus 29:34); the altar of burnt offering (Exodus 29:37); the priestly anointing oil (Exodus 30:25); priestly incense (Exodus 30:36); and indeed the whole people of Israel themselves (Exodus 19:6).

What was holy or sanctified belonged to God exclusively and must not be used for any other purposes. When a person trusts in Jesus Christ he belongs exclusively to the God who has bought him. But Paul prays that God will continue the process of setting apart the Christians in Thessalonica to Himself. He prays that it be done through and through, entirely. He is asking that the God of peace make the believers into finished products of the grace of God. None of us are yet perfectly clean and dedicated to God. We all have a distance to go before we arrive at what God intends for us. And that is why Paul prays for the completion of the task.

To help us understand the scope of the work God intends to do for us, Paul mentions three aspects of man’s constitution: spirit, soul and body. There are many words in the Bible that designate man’s being, and these three are not the only ones (consider also, heart, strength, mind, etc.). But each of the aspects of our humanity must belong to God more and more, and it is God’s intent to bring the whole of our being into harmonious completeness.

1. SPIRIT: THE THING ABOUT US THAT COMMUNICATES WITH GOD
How can our spirit be preserved complete and blameless when Jesus comes back? God will do it by cleansing and preserving our spirit, the aspect of our being that lets us know He exists and communes with Him. Consider a few examples in 1 Thessalonians to see how God wants to purify and consecrate to Himself the spirit He has created in us. It will be by acting upon our spirits so that we evidence consecration through these kinds of acts:
   a. Pray more and more (3:10; 5:16-18);
   b. Being spiritually alert more and more, so that we do not live like the spiritually asleep all around us (5:6);
   c. Examining everything carefully more and more, holding fast to what is good and rejecting what is evil (5:21).

God desires that our spirits be dedicated to Him more and more. It is true that every Christian is already completely dedicated to God, just like a married couple are completely legally married on their wedding day. But just as they are to grow in understanding of one another and consideration for one another more and more, so we are to draw closer and closer to God as the years go by. God desires that our life of prayer, obedience and discernment—all functions of our spirit—reflect Him more and more. That is why He is at work to shape our spirit in this direction.

2. SOUL: THE THING ABOUT US THAT GIVES US PERSONALITY
The soul of man is another word describing an aspect of human nature that we cannot see. The soul sets us apart from animals in that man became a “living being” or a “living soul” when God directly breathed life into the first man. That act gave him personal qualities, and although the term “souls” are used for certain other creatures made on the sixth day of creation (nepheshoth, 1:21, 24), only man is made nephesh in the image of God. Man has the ability to reason, to make decisions and to feel emotions in a uniquely human way.

So how may our personalities be more set aside to God? How can our abilities to think, feel and decide be sanctified? Consider a few more examples from 1 Thessalonians:
   a. By resisting being ignorant (that’s thinking) and learning instead as much as we can about His truth (4:17ff);
   b. By receiving God’s Word with joy (that’s feeling) in the middle of tribulation (1:6);
   c. By being willing to impart our lives (that’s a decision) to others we are trying to reach (2:8).

God focuses on these kinds of things to shape our souls into godly personalities.

3. BODY: THE VISIBLE, MATERIAL PART OF US
Now, look at the third aspect of the Christian’s being, his body. How can we be set aside more to God so that our bodies are more completely His? Again, look back to other parts of the letter . . .
   a. By working night and day, late hours, for the benefit of others (2:9);
   b. By enduring suffering at the hands of the opponents of the gospel (2:14)
   c. By protecting our purity as we think about finding a marriage partner for life (4:4-6)

Can you see how God desires us to be His more and more already in this life? This is His goal,
and He is working to bring us toward it.

C. **ANTICIPATE THE RETURN OF CHRIST, WHEN WE WILL HAVE GONE THE DISTANCE**
When will the process of sanctification be complete? When we stand with Christ at His coming in triumph. Paul has spilled a lot of ink over this theme in this letter. We look forward to Christ’s return for His Church (4:11-18) to take us to be with Him. And one of the things that whets our appetite for His return is the completion of this process of consecration. When we return with Him at His appearing in glory with all the other saints we will share His glory and will be like Him. No more conflict with evil! No more grief! No more danger over standing for Christ! God will have reached His goal in us and for us. That’s a wonderful thing to anticipate this week!

D. **REST IN THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD, WHO WILL TAKE US THE DISTANCE**
Is this wishful thinking? No, Paul emphasizes that is a certain future for the Christian. The one who has called us is trustworthy—He will see it through!

Every Christian here this morning has entered the school of discipleship at God’s initiative. We have not chosen Him—He has chosen us (1:4; 2:13). Every person recruited by God into His finishing school of faith will finish the course. Your success is close to His heart. God is a faithful God; He can be relied upon. He’s like a granite cliff that will not move. You can drill deep into it, screw in a piton and climb high. You can be sure God will carry you the distance because He is faithful.

II. **TO GO THE DISTANCE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE WE NEED BROTHERLY HELP FROM BELOW (5:25-28)**

These sentences would be a fitting end to the letter, but Paul concludes with a few remarks that show us that God uses the obedience of other believers as a means of getting His work done in us. Note three examples as we round out our study of this little letter . . .

A. **WE NEED TO PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER (5:25).** Even Paul the apostle needed prayer. That’s why he requested it from the Thessalonian brothers. If we are going to go the distance in the Christian life, we are going to need one another’s intercession. That’s why we have prayer meetings. That’s why we begin the Monday evening and Tuesday morning studies with a time of prayer.

My nephew Jordan commented last weekend that the Heijermans clan does not easily sense its need. Heijermanses, he said, tend to be independent, rather self-sufficient, confident in their competence. In the experience of his mom’s sickness and death he had realized what a wonderful thing it was to be surrounded by God’s people’s prayers and amazing generosity. We all need the prayers of one another to help us go the distance. I need your prayers. You need mine. We need the prayers of others who hear of us and whom we have never met. Prayer is used by God to help us go the distance.

B. **WE NEED EXPRESSIONS OF GENUINE AND RIGHT AFFECTION (5:26).** Paul urges that all the believers greet each other with a holy kiss. It was apparently the custom in the first century for men to greet each other with a kiss on the cheek or in the air, and for women to do the same with each other. Several centuries later the “holy kiss”, which had become part of the communion celebration, was dropped because of abuses. But the idea behind this command remains clear and in force, even if we do not all give each other a kiss at the beginning or ending of a service: we need expressions of genuine and right affection. Christian love is not just sentimentalism, nor is it just rational. It is genuine affection. And it’s one of the things God uses at a human level to help His people go the distance.

C. **WE NEED ENCOURAGEMENT AND REMINDING FROM THE WORD (5:27).** Paul has strong words at the end of the letter: “I adjure you by the Lord that you have this letter read to all the brethren”. Why the forceful language? Because it was important for all the Thessalonian Christians, persecuted as they were, to receive the encouragement the letter brought. They all needed to be reminded of their calling, of God’s having chosen them, of Paul’s love and affection for them, of Christ’s promise to come and take them to be with Himself. They all needed reminders of needed consecration to God as Paul had shown in his own ministry to them. We do not go the distance in the Christian life without regular exposure to the Bible. That’s why we hold Bible studies. That’s why we encourage believers to have a daily time of study in the Word and to read the Word in their homes with adults and children present. Without the repeated presence of the Bible in our lives, we don’t go the distance; with it in the center, God brings us safely home.
CONCLUSION

Do you want to finish well? Rest in the fact that the God who saved you intends to bring you the whole way to His destination. And know that He uses these simple means to achieve His purposes.

May the God of peace set us apart more and more in these days so that His people in this city will find that God’s purposes for their spirit, soul and body will visibly be a credit to Christ, who called us to these purposes.