

200322 || 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 || Online

Welcome and introduction

Call to prayer - Psalm 27 (responsive)

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;

though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:

**that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.**

For he will hide me in his shelter

in the day of trouble;

**he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.**

And now my head shall be lifted up

above my enemies all around me,

**and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.**

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;

be gracious to me and answer me!

You have said, "Seek my face."

My heart says to you,

"Your face, Lord, do I seek."

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord

in the land of the living!

**Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;**

wait for the Lord!

Confession of sin

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you
and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence,
through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
who died for us,
forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we are your servants. And we give you our humble and heartfelt thanks for all your goodness and steadfast love to us. We bless you for creating us, for preserving us, and for all the blessings of this life. But above all, we thank you for your unfathomable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; and for your Holy Word, which is food for our souls; and for the hope of glory when Jesus returns. And we ask you to help us see clearly all your goodness towards us, that we may be truly thankful, and that we would bring you praise as a result, not only with our words but with our lives, giving ourselves up to your service and walking before you in holiness and righteousness all of our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory, now and forevermore, Amen.

Reading from the Old Testament

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
peoples in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you:
I will bring your offspring for the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar,
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

Reading from the New Testament

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide

in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Sermon

I've been led to this passage from 1 Thessalonians, because these are the words of a man who had started leading a church, who was growing ever fonder of the people there, but who suddenly was separated from them and wanted to give them some comfort in hardship, and that's very much what I am at the moment!

In this letter, Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica, which he himself planted. He walked into Thessalonica one day, went to the synagogue as always on the Sabbath, and preached the good news. This good news is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for our sins, who rose again from the dead, and who had sent out his apostles to tell everyone what it means: that whoever believes in this Jesus will be given new hearts, new life; they'll be forgiven all their sins and failures; they'll be able for the first time to turn from sin and live for God, and they will receive the gift of eternal life. And Sabbath by Sabbath, he went to the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica and showed them right their in their Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, that all of this was promised in ages past – that the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, would suffer, and rise from the dead – and he said that all these promises about the Christ had been fulfilled by Jesus – 'This Jesus whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'

He went and taught this message three weeks in a row, and some of the Jews believed the good news, along with many 'devout Greeks', which means non-Jewish people who had come to believe in the God of the Bible. And then shortly after, as he was teaching this new church and starting to appoint leaders, there was a riot. The city was in uproar, and the mob was out to get these new Christians. They beat up some of the believers, and tried to incriminate them in the eyes of the Roman government. And so to protect their leaders and keep them from the mob and the Romans, the church took Paul and Silas and Timothy

and snuck them away during the night, and sent them to the next city over.

Timothy came back to encourage them and continued the work there, and this is Paul's letter to the fledgling church, encouraging them, and speaking often throughout the letter about how much he misses them and looks forward to seeing them again. This is all in 1 Thessalonians and Acts chapter 17 if you want to do further reading!

And we're not in exactly the same situation, but like Paul, I've only been with you here in Stranraer for a short time, and like Thessalonica we were just starting to pick up momentum in various ways, with summer mission and training elders and starting baptism classes – and like Thessalonica we've been suddenly and completely separated. And in a time like this, we need comfort from God, and reassurance through uncertainty – and so this passage caught my attention. Paul's comfort to the Thessalonians, let it be God's comfort to you in these days.

[1 Thess 1:1-5]

I grew up in Ayr, which is a seaside town as you know. And though I grew up by the sea I never really appreciated it, because it was normal. Anyone can go to the beach anytime they like, right? But then we moved away from the coast, and suddenly I realised how beautiful the sea and the coast are, and I loved trips to the shore after that. Familiarity can prevent you from seeing a thing's true beauty.

Paul's letters always start the same way – Grace to you and peace. And like a beautiful view that you don't notice because it's so familiar, we often read right past this!

Consider it: grace to you, and peace. Grace, that unmerited favour and kindness of God; the free undeserved favour of God, restoring us to himself, and adding to us all that we need; God's free, saving initiative; his free, undeserved mercy – these are all definitions from different Bible scholars – God's spontaneous, unmerited favour in action, his freely bestowed lovingkindness in operation, bestowing salvation upon guilt-laden sinners.

Grace.

Nothing forced God to save us. No-one and nothing could make God do anything. All that he does, he does freely, and so he is kind to us and shows mercy to us and gives us salvation, not because of anything in us, but out of his love and kindness, his pure, unmerited, undeserved grace.

And since his love, kindness, and grace towards us are all based on his unchanging character, and on his covenant oath sealed in the blood of Christ – that means it's not at all based on your goodness, or your will, or your feelings – so when you or I fail him, even when we wilfully choose our own comfort or pleasure above God's will and glory, even when we face difficulty or hardship, or when we feel a million miles away from him, none of it changes the unchangeable fact of his grace towards us.

Grace to you, and peace.

Peace –

One writer said that peace, peace is the 'smile of God, as it reflects itself in the hearts of the redeemed, it is the assurance of reconciliation through the blood of the cross, it is true spiritual wholeness. It is the great blessing which Christ bestowed on the church by his atoning sacrifice, and it surpasses understanding.

The smile of God – isn't that wonderful? It's a beautiful thing for Paul to bless his church with at the start of a letter. That all is well between you and God; that there is no unfinished business between us. You know when you walk into a room and there's someone there that you've fallen out with? Or that the last words you spoke to one another were unkind ones? You feel that, when you walk into a room, that there's unfinished business there, scores unsettled. But there's no such tension between a believer and God – there's no unfinished business. There's peace, because of his grace.

Grace to you, and peace, says Paul. May you know both in these times, dear church.

These gifts are found in Christ – all goodness and grace and peace, every blessing is in him, and it's all found only in him – and it's all ours, because we are in him too.

Look at that first verse again – the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When God found you, and rescued you from your sin and your spiritual death, and you believed in him – he joined you by faith to Jesus Christ, so that in spiritual terms you are one with Christ Jesus, your body, soul, and spirit are united with him forever. You are in Christ. It's a profound mystery, but this is how the New Testament speaks about Christians constantly – it's Christ in you, the hope of glory; it's your life is hidden with Christ in God; it's I have been crucified with Christ, therefore it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. It's abide in me, and I in you, from our reading earlier; I am the vine

and you are the branches.

He's our head, and everyone who believes is united to him by the Holy Spirit through faith – you're in him, and so am I, and so is every believer in our church, and every believer in every church. I'm in him, and so are you – and so I'm in Christ with you. This union with Christ is the spiritual reality of our fellowship. We're apart, for now, but we share spiritually with each other, because we are together in Christ, we are one in Christ. We're separated in body, but not in heart, or in spirit – and we share together in fellowship this way especially when we pray for one another.

This is what it means in the Apostle's Creed when it says, 'I believe in the communion of saints', that we are united to Christ and share in him, and so we are united to every other Christian who is united to him, we share in our life together – it's fellowship, it's communion. That's why times of separation like this are so strange to us – our fellowship, our enjoying one another's company and gifts, and graces, and blessings, and joys and sorrows and burdens, this fellowship is a sign and symbol of our deeper union, with Christ, and his gifts, his graces and blessings, his joy and his suffering, his death and his life. We meet together not for a grand old chat and a sing along, but as a sign of this deep spiritual unity we have in Christ. We are all one in Christ Jesus, and without a hint of cliché or tired platitudes, we are all in this together. Your joys are my joys; your sorrows are my sorrows; your burdens are my burdens.

And so of course, in verse 2, Paul turns to prayer – it's how we can love one another, even in our absence, by praying for one another. Talk to God about your brothers and sisters in Christ, until you get the chance to see them again!

We give thanks to God always, for all of you, constantly remembering you in our prayers.

And we are, church, we are praying for you, Niall and I, and the deacons, we're praying for you, giving thanks to God for you, bringing your names and needs before him. Join us in this – pray for one another, pray for us, pray for our brothers and sisters in the other churches in town, around the nation and around the world. We are all one in Christ Jesus – pray for the church.

And let the knowledge that you are being prayed for, that your name is being brought before the Lord Almighty by your fellow believers – let that knowledge spur you on to pray for others. May we all know God's comfort and strength through his Holy Spirit in these days.

I'm praying for you, and as well as your needs I'm giving thanks for your faith, your love, your hope, as Paul writes – your faith at work, your labour of love, your steadfast hope in Christ.

As you seek to follow the recommendations of the government just now, nevertheless, don't get paralysed by fear, don't get apathetic, don't panic – faith that is true is faith that works, that does something; love that is true is love that labours; hope that is true is hope that is steadfast. Trust God in every hardship and struggle, and keep your eyes and ears open for ways to love others, to serve them - whether by prayer, or by hands-on helping – these things are the way we put faith into practice. Yes - prayer is practical. It's bringing the needs of your neighbours to the throne room of the Almighty – the one for whom nothing is too hard, nothing is impossible. Be steadfast in hope, that God is at work for your good in all this – as we said last week, that he is shaping you more into the likeness of Jesus in these difficulties, which is our real good, more than comfort or health, or even life itself.

And finally, in verse 4:

We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Because you believed the gospel –
because it wasn't just words to you but the power of God for salvation –because you were empowered to believe, repent, and live differently –
because the Holy Spirit is in you –
and because your conviction, your confidence is in Christ –

because of all this, Paul says, we know that he has chosen you, brothers and sisters loved by God.

Faith in him, and the kind of life that testifies to the genuineness of that faith – these are signs that God chose you before the foundation of the world to be his. He has begun a work in you that he will see through to completion, because you are his, he has set his name on you, he chose you, and he never loses those whom he chooses.

And so for all the uncertainty of these times, just as the Thessalonians faced the uncertainty and threat of persecution – for all the uncertainty, this is certain:

If you believe in him, you have peace with him. He has shown his grace to you. You are

united with him. You are his. He has chosen you. And he never loses those whom he chooses.

As we read in Isaiah earlier:

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
forever and ever,
Amen.

Intercession

Lord, Jesus Christ, we come to you carrying the fears and uncertainties of this current crisis, hearing your invitation to cast all our cares on you.

Jesus, the Great Healer,

for those suffering the symptoms of coronavirus, bring recovery, immunity and new strength.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace

for those full of fear at what might come to pass, let the knowledge of your presence calm their troubled hearts.

Jesus, the Servant of All,

for those providing health care in these demanding times, give strength, skill and support.

Jesus, Lord of the Church,

For the sake of your world and the glory of your name, raise us up for deeds of compassion and mercy in these days.

Jesus, Crucified and Risen Saviour,

may your power be made known, for the blessing of your world and the glory of your name.

Amen.

Blessing

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!

May he send you help from the sanctuary
and give you support from Zion!

May he grant you your heart's desire
and fulfill all your plans!

May we shout for joy over your salvation
and in the name of our God set up our banners!

May the LORD fulfill all your petitions!

Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed;

he will answer him from his holy heaven

with the saving might of his right hand.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,

but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.