

Advent 2

Grace and peace be yours from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Notice:

Christmas Day falls on a Friday this year, so I am asking if you would like a Christmas Day service and a service on the Sunday 27th?? Or we drop one or the other of the services. Let me know today if you make your mind up if not, I need to know by next week. (If you are reading this you can email me, text, phone, or carrier pigeon, whichever is easiest)

Let us Pray....

God of revelation, we thank you that you are not a silent God isolated from humanity, leaving us to guess and speculate about the things that matter.

We pray for those who serve you by studying manuscripts and clarifying texts, for scholars and preachers who wrestle with the words of life for the building up of your church. For the linguists, translators and publishers who continue to serve the cause of Your gospel by making the Bible available to more and more people.

Lord create in us a hunger for your word, a thankfulness for your gospel and a faithfulness to your commands, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of eternity, when the voice of the prophet was silent and the faith of Your people low, when the dark had obscured the light and indifference displaced zeal, You saw that the time was right and prepared to send your Son. Set us free from fear and faithlessness that we might be ready to welcome Him who comes as Saviour and Lord Amen

What God Gives Us Before Christ(mas) Comes

If you have your Bibles please turn to 1 Thes 5:16 – 24, I will be reading shortly. But just to say that this letter was written by Paul to the church at Thessalonica primarily, but also for believers everywhere. Paul's purpose of writing is to give Christians an assurance of Christ's return.

So, Christmas is on its way, where has this year gone? I know it is a little early, but have you opened any presents yet? I would not be surprised if you have because there is such a thing as an early Christmas present. It is something someone gives you and says, you can open it now! Sometimes they just want to see the look on your face when you open it, sometimes they just want you to say 'Oh you shouldn't have' and again sometimes, it is a gift you can use right away, like jewellery, or clothing you can wear to a Christmas party, or something you can use for your trip over the Christmas break, if you're lucky enough to go away. You would be lucky if you manage to get away this year, so well done if you have managed that!

This morning we are in the period of waiting for Christmas we are anticipating its arrival. Knowing it will happen, as it does every year, on time, with no delays. The children are getting excited, waiting for the day to arrive for the opportunity to rip open the wrapping paper to see what delights they have before them. And for some of us, as believers, we are waiting with excitement and anticipation; waiting for Jesus to return on that Last Day.

So, I know it is early, I know it is not Christmas YET, nor has Lord returned, to my knowledge! But God reveals His gifts to us today that He wants us to open and use **BEFORE** His Return.

Let us read what those gifts are: 1 Thes 5:16 - 24

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's Will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to the good, reject every kind of evil. May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

So, what is you are thinking? You read **Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances**. Are you thinking, 'this isn't a list of early Christmas presents, It's a to-do list! God wants me to do better before He comes back; I need to practice on being happier, (and I would say that there are a fair few people that would say that of me, including my daughter in laws). But are you also thinking, I need to work on my prayer life and remember to say 'thank you' God for all His blessings. You have read, and heard me talk a lot about prayer these last few weeks, and how it has challenged me, especially in these strange times we are living in. Here, Paul seems to write to us like a golf coach trying to fix your swing. Loosen your hands, keep your weight on the front foot, watch your rotation. I have had some golf lessons recently and the professional has changed my whole stance and swing, it makes me feel that I have just started to play all over again. I think my grandson could beat me now.

But for us Christians, we need to be joyful, we need to pray and give thanks, that is what we need to be doing. But that was difficult enough before Covid-19 came along. Paul says, **'for this is God's Will for you in Christ Jesus'**. Paul is making a point here, as he often does. It is not to add to our list of failures and shortcomings and show us what to fix. What Paul is saying is, look at what God has Willed for you, for Us; look what God has planned and accomplished **FOR** us. Open the gifts He has given you in Christ Jesus. Joy, through prayer and thanksgiving are things we have through Jesus. Open these gifts now while we are waiting for Jesus and use them in our everyday life, especially after the year we have had, and there might be more to come. Paul is unpacking these gifts of God before our eyes; they are gifts God knows we need right now. God knows our sin; He knows our weakness and struggle with temptation. He knows about the miserable year we have just had. He knows the problems we are all facing. He knows the challenges in your spiritual life you cannot seem to overcome. He knows the pressure you feel to keep your faith private. He knows the injustice you receive at the hands of wicked people. But! At this time of waiting, before Christ's return; for Christians all over the world, this is warfare; we are in a battle, with sin and all its consequences, we live in a fallen world. **BUT!** This is what God says. Open it, open it now, you need this gift, you need it right now. **I, the Lord, give you the gift**

of my Son. This gift of a Saviour is the culmination of God's eternal Will for us all. He is truly a God of peace who always had a plan to restore a fallen people back to a perfect, and peaceful relationship with Him. That is why Jesus died on the cross, removing the sin, that separates us from God giving us a way back to the Father. In Jesus we have an answer to sin, it is the joy of forgiveness.

We have God's strength as our help against temptation. We are given a Heavenly Father who listens to us and answers our prayers, even telling us that our prayers are powerful and effective. We can give thanks in all circumstances, even after the worst day, even then, we know that God worked something good for us and for others by what happened that day. There is a saying, something along the lines of, 'it might not have been a good day, but there was something good within it'. Open the early Christmas gifts in Christ Jesus, the gift of prayer, the ability to give thanks in all circumstances because that is our reality with God, it is what we have from Him through Jesus. So, take these early gifts and use them while you wait for Him to return.

Remember to rejoice always. Pray whenever and wherever about whatever – that's God's gift to you. Give thanks whether you are with Paul in prison, being persecuted for your faith, or staring trouble in the face. I think after this year we can all relate to that in some way, can't we?? In Christ, God has brought victory over sin and its consequences into our lives through faith. Take that victory and use these gifts in your everyday life, not because you must, but because they are all yours to use, for your benefit and help. What peace God brings to all parts of our lives, it is a peace revealed to us in God's Word, and it is the Word which Paul talks about next. **'Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to the good, reject every kind of evil'.**

Put yourself in the context of the early church. At that time God's people did not carry a Bible with them. Jesus promised them that He would send His Spirit who would guide them into all truth. So, when they gathered to worship the Spirit gave the gift of speaking in tongues and interpretation, and the gift of prophecy, which is a **speaking forth** of God's Word. Through these messages the Spirit did not just talk about the future, but gave encouragement, guidance and comfort. But if prophecy were such a good thing, why would anyone want to extinguish it, or treat it with contempt?

Imagine, if for every prophet then, there was also a false prophet! And so, all the prophets around, disagreed with each other. Pretty soon prophecy did not have much meaning because it was too confusing one says one thing, but the other says another thing. It is exactly like the 'Fake News' we have today, you never know what to believe, so we tend to dismiss it all. When prophecies disagree, how do you know? Who is telling the truth? How can you say one is right and the other wrong? So, some Christians decide to promote deeds not creeds, why get hung up on doctrinal differences, just skip it. That is what some were doing with prophecy in the early church, it had become meaningless to them. Paul had a better idea. He says, this comes from the Spirit! **Do not treat them (the prophecies) with contempt, test everything, hold on to the good, reject every kind of evil.**

Just because there are differences does not mean we give up. It means do your homework. Study the Word to see which teachings you should hold on to, and which you should avoid. If we give up that necessary homework of Bible study, we will lose our peace and our

confidence, then we are not able to test teachings for ourselves, we lose the truth that brings peace and confidence. We lose our early Christmas present to help us in our 'waiting' for Christ to return. Studying the Bible gives you, us, a solid foundation on which to put your trust. If we don't study God's word, we will lose the ability to determine what is God's Truth, and what is Satan's lie.

The FBI when studying to become agents are given real dollar bills to study and they are tested on it. This is done because if you study the original long enough, you will spot a fake when it is in front of you. God is the Original, Satan it the fake. All these things so far are weapons in our hands given by God. The joy, the prayer, the thanksgiving in all things. We need these gifts even more, as we leave 2020 and prepare to enter 2021. The Word given to us by the Holy Spirit, are God's early Christmas presents for our use before His return. Now Paul concludes with a prayer, **May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is Faithful, and He will do it.**

What a perfect finish! **'The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.** God will not fail to support us when we need it. He will not fail to deliver you from evil. He will not fail to keep you, to guard and defend you. We need that confidence while we wait for His return, don't we?? Just to know that God will not stop bring us joy, answering our prayers and giving us a reason to give thanks in all things. While we are lacking so much of ourselves, God fills up every missing piece with His gifts, and He will do it! So, be bold in your prayers, courageous in your joy, and give thanks when you have absolutely no earthly reason to give thanks.

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen

Blessings

Mike