

KEEP HIS GRACE AND PEACE UNTIL THE END

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Shalom,

Entering the year 2018, we are required to put on the whole armor of God to fight against the devil with an eye to gaining victory. Instead of our emotion, knowledge/wisdom and experience, let's use the Word of God as our weapon because our will and thoughts come from Him. Didn't God create mankind - Adam and Eve - according to His image and likeness (Genesis 1: 26)? Therefore, Adam and Eve possessed His will and thoughts to manage and take care of the shipshape Eden in order to make it more beautiful. But ever since man failed to obey (one) God's command, man's will and thoughts were no longer in line with His blameless plan. An absolute victory will be ours if He is with us.

God fulfills His promise to be with us but we are to do our part in obeying His words. In reality, we often pray to the Lord Almighty to help us, yet we do not obey Him; the consequence is that He is no longer with us. Take the Israelites for example. Led by Joshua, they defeated the Amalek (Exodus 17: 8). However, on another occasion, they lost the battle due to their own conduct because they hanged on every negative word of the ten spies (Numbers 13: 25-33). And that aroused the Lord's fury that turned their 40-day journey into 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as punishment (Numbers 14: 32-35). After hearing that, the Israelites decided to go to war to occupy Canaan, but Moses forbade them to do it because the Lord was no longer with them. What did they do? They were determined to go up to the mountaintop only to lose the battle (Numbers 14: 40-45).

How do we get victory? By 'fighting' over what we want or maintaining the victory we have gained. Adam, for example, was in charge of running the show in the Garden of Eden but because of their transgression, the once beautiful garden became a dry land full of thorns where they had to toil, forcing a living from the land. If your marriage is in chaos, then 'fight' to bring the lost harmony back; and once your marriage has been restored, keep it that way at all costs.

To be honest, it is not easy to keep a good marriage and raise obedient children nowadays since our minds and wills get easily contaminated with the destroying technology (pornography, hoax and so forth). What does Ephesians 6: 13 say about this condition? "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

In reference to the diagram of the Tabernacle, the Epistel to the Ephesians points to the Table of Showbread. This letter ends up with a struggle of prayer in the hope that we can stay steadfast after finishing off every task and enjoy whatever we hold on to (Ephesians 6:18).

Further, let's learn about the blessing and joy of the Word of God written in Ephesians 1: 1-2, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace (irene, shalom) from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

How happy the Ephesians were (and we are) to receive grace and peace from the Lord (not from a man, no matter how great he is) in times of warfares. If someone gives us a souvenir, we cherish it with care, how much more should we cherish the gift of peace and grace from God.

Evidently, the Book of Ephesians starts and ends with God's blessing (Ephesians 6: 23-24). However, we are to keep His blessing by 'fighting.'

Why did Paul dare to call himself the Apostle Paul by the will of God and, in his letter, call the Ephesians saints? Don't we oftentimes feel unworthy to be called holy due to our numerous sins? When we do this, we have no faith and play down the blood of Jesus that has the power to change our old lives. If we commit sin, we must ask Him for forgiveness. He is mighty to cleanse our vile "life's clothes."

It is true that we have never known and met Paul face to face but we must never doubt his writing (13 scrolls) canonized as the Word of God. Illustration: Must we meet face to face with a science book writer just because we need his writings for our studies?

Who was Paul who dared to say that his post as an apostle to the gentiles was the will of God? He did not boast about his being an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee, (Philippians 3: 5-6) and a student of a celebrated teacher, Gamaliel (Acts 22: 3). But, what did he say about himself?

□ He saw himself as a chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Ironically, Paul was a great Torah observer who supposedly did not commit adultery, swindle tithes and that sort of thing, but he confessed publicly that he was the greatest sinner! Through his confession, he realized who he used to be. It just so happens that a servant of God, being prominent, at times fails to remember his past, right?

It was awfully difficult for the Jews to confess their sins, not to mention that they were called slaves (to sin) when Jesus rebukingly urged them to know the truth that could set them free (John 8: 33-34). Only God's grace in Jesus Christ was able to transform Paul, a Jew, so that he was not ashamed to admit that he was the worst sinner of them all.

Implication: Whatever our positions (pastors, lay pastors, assistant pastors and so forth), let's always keep in mind that only His grace makes our ministries possible; If not, arrogance and whines will come on the scene.

□ He considered himself the least of the apostles, like a premature baby who was not worthy to be called an apostle (1 Corinthians 15: 8-9). The Apostle Paul realized that he was 'born before his time.'

Nonetheless, he labored more abundantly than the other apostles because he did not want to waste away the grace of God (v.10) to the extent that he did not want to receive any help from the wealthy but arrogant congregation in Corinth. He chose to work to support himself on a daily basis.

All servants of God should take an example from the Apostle Paul. Instead of counting on tithes or donations from the congregation, they should learn to live independently since God, their Master, personally provides their needs.

□ He considered himself less than the least of all the saints (the congregation) but he was given the grace to preach to the Gentiles the mystery that has been hidden since the beginning of the ages (Ephesians 3: 8-9).

Considering his top-ranking position as an apostle, we can imagine how humble Paul was when he counted himself as the least of all the congregants, not to speak of gentile congregants! To the Jews back then, an apostle had a position of great prominence, but an apostle for the Gentiles was a good-for-nothing. Somehow, the Apostle Paul accepted it because he knew that the Gentiles would be fellow heirs, members of the body, and partakers of His promise in Christ (Ephesians 3:6).

Why did Paul call the Ephesians saints? Apparently, that title had been common when he (better known as Saul) bitterly hated the followers of Jesus and even threatened to murder them (Acts 9:1). On his way to Damascus, he saw a light flashing from above and heard a voice asking why he persecuted Jesus. Then he became blind and the Lord told Ananias to put his hand on Paul so that he could see again. At first, Ananias was scared because he had heard of Saul's wicked actions toward the saints in Jerusalem (vv. 10-13) and Damascus. From this event, we may learn that we should not anger too quickly when we see someone's hostile attitude toward Christians. The Lord may someday transform his life and use him as His instrument. Who knows?

Keep His Grace And Peace Until The End

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Saul was confused because he had never persecuted Jesus whom he had not known before, but after his repentance, it dawned on him that harming His followers (the saints) was the same as persecuting Jesus. So, never disfavor / discredit our fellow Christians. If we do, we treat Jesus the same way!

Remember that the saints receive grace and peace from Him. Admittedly, as saints, we are still not perfect because we still face a lot of problems and may stumble over one thing or another. However, no matter how big our problems are, Jesus has carried them. We only need to guard and 'take care' of the way we live in holiness so as to keep His grace and peace with us all the days of our lives. In this case, not a single pastor who has been shepherding his congregant right from his repentance should merit any gift from him. For example, a church member left his village and now lives in a town. And every month, his former pastor comes, asking for a tithe as the pastor feels that his church member was saved and baptized because of his ministry. The Apostle Paul called God (the Father) and the Lord Jesus Christ the way the Apostle Peter addressed the Israelites on the Day of Pentecost, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2: 36) because he had received the revelation from Jesus Himself. The Apostle Peter knew for sure that the Lord Jesus Christ – King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 17: 14) – had saved him. Let's bluntly call out the name of the Lord Jesus Christ aloud without the slightest hesitation when praying as well as casting out the devil since that name possesses great power.

We can win "the battle" – a mountain of problems – only if we rely on the Lord and His words. Let's keep our status as saints by keeping our life paths away from evil and vile things and by realizing how bad our old lives once were so that we will have no reason to boast about ourselves. We have received a gift of joy, namely, grace and peace from God. Let's cherish it until the end of our life journeys. Amen.