

1 CORINTHIANS 5:5B

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. We're currently working our way through the second major section in this letter, which is found in chapters 5–6. The focus in this section is on the need for church purity. We've seen in the first verse of chapter 5 that the believers in Corinth were tolerating sexual immorality among them. And Paul clarified at the end of the verse that he was talking about incest. He said that a man was "sleeping with his father's wife." And most likely what Paul meant was that this woman was the man's stepmother. Even if she was a widow at this point, their relationship was still sin in God's eyes. But the Corinthian believers tolerated this sin, and they were arrogant in spite of the incest that was happening among them.

So Paul told these people in verse 2 that they should have been filled with grief instead of continuing to be arrogant. And he wanted the attitude of grief to lead to the action of removing the stepson from the church. They were to excommunicate him and not allow him to worship with them anymore. And in verse 3 Paul took the lead in helping them with this action, even though he wasn't physically present with them. But he was present with them through the Holy Spirit, who lives in every believer. And so he said that he had already pronounced judgment on the stepson.

Then in verses 4–5 of our passage Paul continued to give instructions about what he wanted his readers to do with this man. Look at what he wrote in these two verses: "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." Now the Christian Standard Bible gives us a new sentence in these verses, and so do most Bible translations. But there's actually no main verb here in the Greek text. It looks like there's a command at the beginning of verse 5. But in the original Greek we have an infinitive there, which is normally a subordinate verb.

So what's going on here is that there's actually one long sentence in verses 3–5. A better translation would be to put a colon at the end of verse 3 and then to add the phrase "that you" at the beginning of verse 5. So verses 4–5 flow from the verb in verse 3 about pronouncing judgment. These two verses show us what was involved in Paul's judgment against the stepson. Now in verse 4 we see the timing and circumstances of what Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to do as part of this judgment. The time was when they were assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. This statement is a reference to the weekly gathering of the church on the first day of the week. And Paul said that he was with them in spirit during that time. Because the Holy Spirit lives in every believer, there's a sense in which our human spirits are always joined together.

Then Paul ended verse 4 by talking about the power of our Lord Jesus. Paul was saying that whenever we gather in the name of Jesus, we have his power backing us up. And I think that Paul was probably making a subtle reference to the Holy Spirit here. After all, Jesus sent the Spirit to replace him after he ascended to heaven. And both of them have the same unlimited power, because they're both God. But we need to remember that the focus in the context is on the theme of judgment. The point here is that whenever we gather together to put someone under legitimate church discipline, we have God's power supporting us. We don't ever need to be afraid to obey God's Word, because we can be confident that He is working powerfully through us.

Then in verse 5 we see what Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to do when they were assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. As part of his judgment against the stepson, he told them to "hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." Now this statement is very tricky to interpret, and the key is to understand what Paul meant by the word "flesh." The Greek word for flesh can have different nuances. First, it can refer to the part of our body that covers our bones. Second, it can represent our body as a whole. And third, it can have the more figurative meaning of being dominated by sin.

Now at first glance the most straightforward interpretation seems to be that Paul was talking about our body as a whole. So the phrase "destruction of the flesh" would be referring to physical death. And we can certainly find examples in Scripture of professing believers who died because of their sin. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira died because they lied about the money that they gave to the church. And in 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul said that some of the Christians in Corinth had died because they weren't properly prepared to participate in the Lord's Supper. But these examples don't fit very well, because neither passage mentions Satan. Instead I think the idea is that God killed these people. But if Paul was talking about death in 1 Corinthians 5, he seemed to be saying that Satan would kill the stepson. Another problem with this view is that Paul talked in verse 11 about not associating with a professing believer who is a habitual sinner. But if Paul thought that the stepson would die shortly after being removed from the church, then there wouldn't be much point in talking about the ongoing need to avoid associating with him.

So because of these problems, more and more Bible scholars are rejecting the interpretation of physical death in verse 5. But some of them just tweak this interpretation so that it refers to physical suffering instead. That way these people remain alive indefinitely, and Paul's command to avoid associating with them makes much better sense. And there are some possible parallels for this interpretation as well. We know that God gave Satan permission to bring physical suffering on Job. And in 2 Corinthians 12:7 Paul said that a messenger of Satan was a thorn in his flesh and tormented him. But these parallels don't work very well either. Job and Paul were both very godly believers, and so it makes sense that Satan would want to bring suffering on them. But why would he want wicked people to suffer? One of the reasons that so many ungodly people prosper during this life is that Satan lets them!

So I think the best interpretation of the word "flesh" in 1 Corinthians 5:5 is that Paul was talking about our inclination to sin. And the best reason for taking this interpretation is that we have a strong parallel in 1 Timothy 1. In verse 19 Paul talked about how some people had shipwrecked their faith. And then in verse 20 he said, "Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan, so that

they may be taught not to blaspheme.” Now this verse doesn’t have the Greek word for flesh, but it does have some other Greek words that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 5:5. Paul referred to Satan in both passages, and he used the same Greek verb as well. In 1 Timothy 1:20 it’s translated with the word “delivered” instead of the phrase “hand over,” but the meaning is the same. In both places Paul was talking about handing people over to Satan.

But it’s very clear in 1 Timothy 1 that Paul was not talking about physical death. After all, he said that the purpose of handing these men over to Satan was that they would learn not to blaspheme. That statement doesn’t make any sense if they were going to die! Paul was assuming that they would live for a while, and he was hopeful that they would return to the Lord and grow spiritually. And that’s what I believe Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 5 as well. He wanted the Christians in Corinth to hand the stepson over to Satan for the destruction of his sinful tendencies. He wanted this man to turn away from his sin so that he could be restored to the church.

Now Paul wasn’t saying that our sinful inclinations can be completely eradicated during this life. He was just talking about the ideal direction of our lives. He basically wanted the stepson to pursue holiness as a result of being handed over to Satan. Now of course Satan doesn’t voluntarily help people grow spiritually. And so we shouldn’t understand this handing over to Satan literally. Paul wasn’t implying that Satan would meet the Corinthian believers at the door of their church and take this man off their hands. Instead Paul was just talking about excommunication here. When sinners are removed from the church, they are sent back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. And so they no longer enjoy the spiritual protection and blessings that come from being part of the church. The goal is that they will wake up and realize what they’re missing. Then they will be motivated to repent and start obeying the Lord again. In his sovereignty God can use their time in Satan’s realm for their good.

So in the beginning of verse 5 we’ve seen the immediate purpose that Paul had for telling the Corinthian believers to hand the stepson over to Satan. But now let’s look at some new material and cover the end of verse 5. Here we can see that Paul had a more distant purpose as well. He told his readers to “hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” Now this is the third verse in a row where we’ve seen the Greek word for spirit. In verse 3 I believe Paul was talking about the Holy Spirit. But in verse 4 he used a first person singular pronoun with the Greek word for spirit. And so it’s clear that he was talking about his own human spirit in that verse.

Now when we look at in verse 5 in the Christian Standard Bible, we see the phrase “his spirit.” In fact, we see that phrase in almost every major conservative Bible translation, including the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible, which are two of our most literal translations. And so we might guess that Paul used a third person masculine singular pronoun here. But there is actually no pronoun with the Greek word for spirit. All we have here is the Greek article, which is roughly equivalent to the definite article in English. The King James Version is the only translation I looked at that gives us the definite article. It has the phrase “the spirit” instead of “his spirit.”

So it’s theoretically possible that Paul may have been talking about the Holy Spirit here, just like he did in

verse 3. After all, he used the Greek article with the word for spirit in that verse as well. But it doesn't take long for us to realize that this interpretation doesn't make any sense in verse 5. That's because Paul talked about how the spirit will be saved. Now the Greek word for saved can have different nuances, as we're going to see shortly. But there's just no sense in which we can accurately say that the Holy Spirit will be saved. And even the translators of the King James Version were careful to avoid leading us to this interpretation, because they didn't capitalize the word "spirit."

So we should conclude that Paul was talking about a human spirit here. He was referring to the stepson's immaterial being, even though he didn't use a pronoun. The Greek article is pretty flexible and can have a variety of nuances. And one of these possible nuances is possession. We can see this fact clearly in an important command that Paul gave in two of his letters. In Ephesians 5:25 and Colossians 3:19 he said, "Husbands, love your wives." But in both places he did not use a pronoun in the original Greek. Instead he just used the Greek article. But he wasn't implying that a husband should love the wife of another man in the same way that he loves his own wife. Of course the Bible teaches that we should love all our fellow believers. But in these passages Paul was clearly talking about the need for a husband to love his own wife in a special way that doesn't extend to other women. He was implying possession without using a pronoun, and I believe he was doing the same thing in 1 Corinthians 5.

So in verse 5 Paul's ultimate goal for the man who committed incest was that his spirit or immaterial being would be saved. The Greek word for saved is used 105 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 29 of them. It's used a total of nine times in 1 Corinthians, which is more than any other letter that he wrote. Now sometimes this word refers to physical deliverance. For example, in Matthew 8 Jesus and his disciples were traveling in a boat when there was a huge storm. But Jesus was sleeping, and so verse 25 says that "the disciples came and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We're going to die!'" So it's obvious that the disciples were asking Jesus for physical deliverance there.

But normally the Greek word for saved refers to spiritual deliverance in the New Testament. We've already seen this word three times in 1 Corinthians, and in all three cases it has this nuance. For example, in chapter 1 and verse 21 Paul said that "God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what was preached." And I think it's likely that Paul was referring to spiritual deliverance in chapter 5 and verse 5 as well. We already concluded that he wasn't talking about physical death at the beginning of the verse. And so it doesn't make sense that he would talk about physical salvation at the end of the verse. Instead he was talking about spiritual salvation.

Now I should point out that the Greek word for saved is a verb in the passive voice. That fact is indicated by the word "be" in our Bible translations. The passive voice just indicates that the subject doesn't perform the action of the verb. Instead it receives the action of the verb. And the subject of the verb here is the word "spirit." So the point is that the stepson's spirit would not do the saving. Instead Paul wanted his spirit to receive salvation. Someone else would save his spirit. Now we don't have a clear reference here about who would do the saving, but I think it's pretty obvious from Scripture as a whole that God is the one who saves people spiritually. I just read 1 Corinthians 1:21, which says that "God was pleased to save those who believe."

Now we tend to think about salvation as something that we received in the past, and certainly Scripture uses that kind of language. In Titus 3:5 Paul said that God saved us, and he used the Greek aorist tense, which normally refers to a simple past action. So the idea is that God secured our salvation when Jesus died on the cross, and the benefits of his death were applied to us when we put our faith in him. But there's also a sense in which we will be saved in the future. After all, we still sin and go through difficult circumstances on this earth. But in the future God's going to rescue us from this evil age, and we won't be punished for our sins on judgment day. That's what Paul was talking about in Romans 5:9. In that verse he said, "How much more then, since we have now been declared righteous by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath."

So as Christians we're not going to experience God's wrath in the future. And I believe this is what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 5:5. That's because he ended this verse by talking about the stepson's spirit being "saved in the day of the Lord." The Greek word for day is used almost 400 times in the New Testament, but Paul used it only seven times in this letter. And the first one is found back in chapter 1 and verse 8. There Paul said that God "will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." So in both verses we see the word "Lord" used in conjunction with the word "day." Now some Bible translations have the word "Jesus" in both places as well, like the New American Standard Bible. But most translations don't have this word in chapter 5 and verse 5 because it's not found in the oldest copies of the New Testament.

However, Paul was clearly referring to Jesus when he used the word "Lord" in this verse. After all, we just saw this word twice in verse 4, and in both places it was followed by the word "Jesus." And in chapter 1 and verse 8 we see the same thing. In that verse Paul referred to "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," and this phrase lays the foundation for the shorter version of the phrase in chapter 5 and verse 5. So we know that this day is somehow connected to Jesus. But what exactly was Paul talking about? Which day was he referring to? To answer that question we need to go back to the Old Testament. What we find there is that the phrase "the day of the LORD" occurs repeatedly there.

For example, look at Isaiah 13:6–9: "Wail! For the day of the LORD is near. It will come as destruction from the Almighty. Therefore everyone's hands will become weak, and every man will lose heart. They will be horrified; pain and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look at each other, their faces flush with fear. Look, the day of the LORD is coming—cruel, with rage and burning anger—to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners." So we can see that the day of Yahweh here is a time of God's judgment on sinners. And this is the normal way that the day of Yahweh is portrayed in the Old Testament. Joel 2:11 says, "The LORD makes his voice heard in the presence of his army. His camp is very large; those who carry out his command are powerful. Indeed, the day of the LORD is terrible and dreadful—who can endure it?" Amos 5:18 says, "Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! What will the day of the LORD be for you? It will be darkness and not light." Malachi 4:5 says, "Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes."

Now some of these Old Testament passages refer to a time of judgment in the immediate future. But that last verse in Malachi seems to point forward to a time of judgment in the more distant future. And so it's

no surprise that we see this concept taught in the New Testament as well. Look at what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3: “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. When they say, ‘Peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Look at 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed.”

So in Scripture the day of the Lord is primarily a reference to God’s judgment on the earth and especially the sinners who inhabit the earth. It’s not necessarily referring to a 24-hour period of time. Instead it can refer to different occasions that last for various lengths of time. But one of those occasions is still coming in the future, and we read about it in the Book of Revelation. It’s a time of terrible judgment on the earth that will last for seven years. And it will culminate with the return of Jesus to defeat his enemies and rule on the earth for a thousand years. This is why Paul talked about “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” in chapter 1 and verse 7 right before he talked about “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” in verse 8. The return of Jesus and his judgment are linked together.

But as Christians we won’t have to experience this future time of judgment. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 that “God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We won’t have to live through this future time of judgment on the earth. Either we’re going to die first, or Jesus is going to take us home to be with him. And this is what Paul wanted the stepson in 1 Corinthians 5:5 to experience as well. His hope was that this man’s removal from the church would wake him up and motivate him to turn away from his sin. Then he could be restored to the church, and he would show that he was a genuine believer. Instead of experiencing God’s wrath, he would experience God’s salvation. His spirit or his immaterial being would be saved in the day of the Lord.

Now this doesn’t mean that only our spirit will be saved and not our body. Paul emphasized later in this very letter that one day our bodies are going to be raised from the dead. In chapter 15 and verse 20 he said that “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” In other words, we’re going to be raised from the dead in the future, just like Jesus was. And later in the chapter Paul gave more details about what this will look like. In verse 54 he said, “When this corruptible body is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: Death has been swallowed up in victory.” One day we’re going to have new bodies that will never die again!

So both our body and our spirit are going to experience God’s salvation. But in 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul was just emphasizing the salvation of our spirit. We see the same thing in James 1:21, which says that we should “humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The word “soul” is roughly synonymous with the word “spirit.” So in both passages the writer was focused on the salvation of our immaterial being without denying that our bodies will be saved as well. And this emphasis is appropriate, because our immaterial being is the core of who we are. What we do with our body flows from who we are in our spirit. Plus we can actually exist without a body, and that’s exactly what our life will be like if we die before Jesus comes back. We will be with Jesus, but our body won’t be raised until later.

So what we've seen in the first five verses of 1 Corinthians 5 is that we need to excommunicate professing believers who are living in sin. We should follow the four-step process of church discipline in Matthew 18, but if the sinner refuses to repent at each stage, eventually we need to remove that person from the church. This is something that we should do when the whole church is gathered. We all need to participate in this step, not just the leaders of the church. We should be unified and agree with what is happening. And when we do that, we're sending the sinner back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. Our immediate goal is the destruction of the sinner's flesh. In other words, we want his sinful tendencies to be increasingly destroyed. And our ultimate goal is that he will be saved in the day of the Lord. Our hope is that he will show himself to be a true believer who won't have to experience God's wrath. Let's close in prayer and ask God to help us discipline our fellow Christians when they fall into unrepentant sin.