

WHOLLY HOLY 1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-24

In Kenyan churches it is the custom for visitors to be asked to stand and introduce themselves at some point in the service. It is also the custom for these visitors, after stating their names, to say “Nime akoka!” (“I am saved!”).

Most Christians are familiar with the concept of *salvation*. It is a doctrine that is pervasive throughout Scripture, and, indeed, it is *the* main theme of the biblical story. Both Old and New Testaments repeatedly refer to God as our *Savior* or our *salvation*. Furthermore, the phrase “I am saved!” is part of our Christian vernacular. The refrain of one well-known hymn declares emphatically, “*Saved by his power divine; saved to new life sublime. Life now is sweet and my joy is complete for I’m saved, saved, saved!*”

It is altogether appropriate to say or to sing, “I am saved,” and to bask in the joy of that profound truth. But I’m afraid there’s a tendency for some Christians to *only* think of salvation as a past occurrence—to think of it as a point in time when we put our faith in Jesus and He rescued us from sin and Satan and hell.

But while we were, indeed, saved from all those things the moment we put our faith in Jesus, salvation is not *just* past tense. It is a continuous, present reality. In Peter’s first letter he said, “*You are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls*” (1:9). In other words, it is just as appropriate to say, “I am *being* saved,” as it is to say, “I am saved.” Not that we are being saved in the same way. We only get saved *once* from sin’s penalty and punishment. But we get saved from sin’s deception and destructiveness on a daily basis. At least, that is God’s intention and God’s provision.

We are going to be looking at a passage this morning in which Paul talks about this present tense salvation. It comes at the very end of his first letter to the Thessalonians. You’ll recall from the last couple of weeks that a major emphasis in this letter has been the *Parousia*—the Second Coming Christ—which is a reference to our *future* salvation.

Paul portrayed the *Parousia* as the pinnacle of the believer’s existence. He portrayed it as the event that we are living for, for it marks the beginning of when we start to really live. It marks the end of the reign of sin and Satan in this earth realm, the end of our sin-cursed minds and hearts and bodies, and the beginning of when all things will be made new and right, where there will be no sin, no pain, no tears, no fear, no struggle, and no death.

That is the time in which our salvation will be complete. The Apostle John said that “*when we see [Jesus] we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2). When Jesus comes, we will instantly and completely be perfected, for perfection is necessary to be in His presence.

But until that time and in preparation for that time, we are presently being perfected day by day. Which brings us to Paul’s closing statement in 1 Thessalonians. He says in **5:23-24**, ²³ *Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ²⁴ *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

These two verses are a benediction, which is a pronouncement of *blessing* or, more specifically, a plea for *God’s* blessing. It was common for Paul and the other apostles to conclude their letters with benedictions. But it is important to note that benedictions were not merely benign or polite epilogues tacked on to the end of letters. Some of the most potent, distilled theology in the New Testament is found in the content of benedictions. Such is the case with this one.

Before we actually look at the content, you need to know that in this particular benediction Paul employs a literary device called *Parallelism*, something with which every Jew would have been familiar since all Hebrew poetry is written in this genre. Parallelism describes two or more parallel lines that are essentially identical in meaning to one another. The purpose of parallelism is to *clarify, amplify, or reinforce* the meaning of the first line.

With that in mind, let's look more closely at what Paul is asking for in this benediction. He begins by asking, "*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...*" The verb "sanctify" is a synonym for "make holy", and it means "to be set apart," or "to be distinct." Paul addressed this matter of sanctification earlier in this letter when he said, "*It is God's will that you should be **sanctified**...*" (4:3a).

Since the parallel word for "sanctify" in verse 23 is "blameless", we can be certain that Paul is talking about a *moral* distinction. He is asking that God make them morally pure and righteous, and that they not be contaminated or corrupted by sin.

Paul explained this moral distinction when he wrote to the Ephesians. He said, *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (3:17-24).

That is a terrific description of sanctification or being made holy. We have shed that old cocoon and have become the butterflies God intended us to be. We have become *new* creatures with new capabilities. However, that transformation is not complete—it is a process that is ongoing. We are *being* continuously transformed into the likeness of Jesus with ever increasing glory (2 Cor. 3:18). We are being progressively conformed to His image and character, not just in our external behavior, but in our inner beings, including our attitudes, perspectives, thought patterns, paradigms, priorities, passions, responses, and reactions.

A Christ follower ought to be able to say, "I'm not the man or woman or child I was. Oh, I'm not perfect, but I'm being perfected! God is doing things in me so that I'm continually changing, progressing, developing to become *better*."

Isn't that wonderful? As children of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we do not have to be stuck in a rut. We do not have to be shackled by our sins. We do not have to be paralyzed by obsessions or crippled by compulsions. By God's grace and power, we can live in freedom from these things; we can be victorious, because God is in the process of progressively sanctifying us to become more like Jesus.

And notice what Paul says about the extent of that process. **Verse 23**, ²³ *Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Again, these two statements are parallel, and so "completely" in the first line corresponds to "whole spirit, soul and body" in the second. Paul is asking God to thoroughly *perfect* the Thessalonian believers. To make them wholly holy.

What does that mean? I told you about the custom in Kenyan churches where visitors are asked to introduce themselves and along with giving their names they say, “Nime akoka!” (I am saved!). However, if they really want to endear themselves to the people in the church they say, “Nime akoka *kabisa!*” (I am saved *completely!*). And typically, when someone says, “I am saved *completely!*” the congregation applauds and shouts, “Hallelujah,” and pats the brother or sister on the back.

But here’s the thing: nime akoka *kabisa*, for the Kenyans, has a specific meaning. It means “I don’t go to the disco, I don’t smoke cigarettes, and I don’t drink *Tusker*, the local beer.” (By the way, guess where the Kenyans learned this? They learned it from the missionaries who came to Kenya a hundred years ago and told them this is what it means to be a “good” Christian).

Please understand that is *not* what Paul meant when he talked about being wholly holy in verse 23. He was talking about God transforming and perfecting our entire beings from the inside out, starting with our motives, attitudes, desires, loyalties, affections, dreams, ambitions, etc.

So, let me ask you a question. How is the process of sanctification going for you? Are you progressively becoming more like Jesus? Are you getting better with age?

I’m sure you’ve noticed that a lot of people seem to deteriorate with age, and I’m not talking about physical deterioration. I’m talking about attitudes and demeanor and behavior. Some people get progressively more fearful and anxious, the older they get. Some get more stubborn or more irritable or critical or judgmental or cynical. Some get more contentious or prideful or self-centered.

I realize that for some people there may be some mental, chemical, or hormonal factors that contribute to this deterioration. But I submit to you that it is God’s desire and intent to progressively perfect our *entire* beings, which means that the *norm* for every Christian is that we get *better* with age.

We become kinder and gentler and more considerate and more gracious and more patient and more forgiving. We become easier to be around and easier to live with. We become less selfish and more generous. We have a greater abhorrence for sin—any sin—and a greater attraction to righteousness. Resisting temptation rather than succumbing to temptation becomes more and more the pattern of our lives. We become less and less preoccupied with the things of this world and more and more preoccupied with Jesus and His kingdom. Our love and devotion to the Lord deepens; our love and commitment to our spouses and children strengthens. We become wiser and humbler and more peaceful and more fruitful.

I’m not saying we become perfect or that we completely “arrive” in this life. I’m saying that we are continually and increasingly getting better—we are being perfected in every way.

When Mary Poppins sailed into London on her umbrella, after being introduced to the children, she retrieved her measuring tape from her magical carpet bag because she wanted to see how they measured up. But this tape did not measure height or length; it measured attitudes and behavior.

Mary measured Michael first and discovered, despite his protests, that he was extremely stubborn and suspicious. Then she measured Jane and learned that she was “rather inclined to giggle and didn’t put things away.” Afterward the children pleaded with Mary to measure herself. When she did so, she informed them that, just as she suspected, she was “practically perfect in every way.”

Practically perfect in every way. That is God's desire and intention for every one of us. While we live on this earth, He is in the process of perfecting our *entire beings*. In other words, the work that He is doing in us is *thorough* and *comprehensive*. He is not content to sanctify just a few (or even several) areas of our lives. He wants to sanctify us through and through.

Let me illustrate: Some of you men might have a terrific testimony on your job site. You might be cheerful, faithful, loyal, hard-working, conscientious, honest, and dependable. But when you get home after work it's a different story. You're grumpy; you're sloppy, you're a couch potato; you expect and insist that your wife and children wait on you, and when they do something that gets under your skin you get irritated.

Look, it's great that you can be a good testimony on the jobsite, but what you are at home is the *real* you! That is the part of you that God is most concerned about. That is the part He *really* wants to sanctify. He wants to take that selfishness, that sense of entitlement, that insensitivity and burn it up! He wants to replace it with patience and kindness and cheerfulness and helpfulness. He wants to form Christ in you so that the character and attitudes of Christ are expressed through you to your wife and children. And until you allow Him to do that, until you cooperate with Him to do that, your testimony at work, as stellar as it might be, does not impress Him.

So, you need to get saved. You need to be saved from sin's deceptiveness and destructiveness each day when you come home from work.

Likewise, there may be some women who are incredibly gifted at leading and inspiring other women. You can teach the Word with great eloquence; you can organize events and activities and facilitate meetings so that people come away refreshed and exhilarated. But when you are with your closest friends you are a habitual gossip. And you have done it for so long and so often that you don't even know that you're doing it, and it doesn't bother you in the least.

It's great that you have those spiritual gifts and skills and that you're using them to encourage others. But those gifts and skills don't mean a thing to God as long as you're tearing down people He loves and for whom Jesus died in your private conversations. And so, you, too, need to get saved. He wants to save you from your critical spirit and your uncharitable attitudes. He wants to replace it with His love and His graciousness. He wants to form Christ in you so that the character and attitudes of Christ are expressed through you when you are with your friends.

All of us have our own particular vulnerabilities when it comes to sin and temptation. Some of us have a propensity to be greedy, others lazy, still others impatient and easily angered. Some of us tend to be worriers, or gluttons, or sports addicts. Unfortunately, we have an awful habit of grading our sins and then convincing ourselves that some are really not that bad—at least not nearly as bad as others.

"Sure, I may have a little tendency to gossip, but I've never committed adultery!"

"Yeah, I admit I'm an impulsive shopper and that I've run up some serious credit card debt, but I'm not stingy, I'm actually quite generous."

"Okay, so I've got a lead foot. At least I've never been late for work!"

Let me remind you that God wants to sanctify us *through and through* because *all* sin is offensive to him. And if there is *any* sin in our lives, no matter how small or inconsequential it may seem to us, He intends to remove it so that Jesus can be fully formed in us. Remember, Jesus and sin are incompatible—they cannot cohabitate.

For the first few years of our married life my dear wife would do something that I, for the life of me, could not understand. She used to pick the skin around her fingernails, what she called “dead skin”, and she would pick it so much that she would peel pieces off until her fingers would bleed (which, I concluded, meant that it wasn’t dead after all).

In those days if you were to examine Mindy’s hand you would see scabs and bloody hangnails around most of her fingernails. And it bugged me! I pleaded with her to stop doing it. Eventually, she realized how unattractive her bloody fingers were to me, so she got serious about breaking this habit. And for a while she completely stopped picking...*nine* of her fingers. But she continued to mutilate her right index finger.

Then she would say, “Stan, look how good my fingers look!”

I would say, “Let me see your right index finger.”

And she’d say, “But look at all these other nine! Can’t you appreciate them and be happy with nine out of ten!”

And I would respond, “But when I look at your hands I have a hard time noticing those nine when that one finger looks like it got caught in the garbage disposer!”

I want to repeat, God is not interested in partially sanctifying us. He’s not content to purify just a few or even *several* areas of our lives—He wants to make us wholly holy. And do you know why? Because He wants us to be presentable at the *Parousia*. Look at **verse 23c**. *May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul reminds us, once again, that the Parousia is the pinnacle of our existence. Everything is building toward that climactic event. It is what we are living for, for it marks the beginning of when we start to really live. And getting *prepared* for that event is what our lives on earth are all about.

In 2009, our future daughter-in-law, Grace, was in Cambodia on a missions’ trip for seven months. While she was there, it was interesting to watch our son Lucas prepare for the time when he would be reunited with her and then ask her to be his wife. Almost everything he did during those months was in preparation for that. The way he so thoughtfully and carefully designed a ring, and then worked his brains out to pay for it. The way he scrimped and saved to buy a plane ticket to Hawaii so he could meet her on her return trip and propose to her there. The way he collected things for the home they would be living in after they got married. The time he spent wooing his soon-to-be mother-in-law. The two hundred push-ups a day he did to impress her with his rock-hard abs. The books he read, the conversations he had, the advice he sought, the prayers he prayed.

Lucas focused an extraordinary amount of time and effort and energy to make sure that everything would be just so when Grace came home from Cambodia, because he wanted to please her, he wanted to be presentable for her, he wanted to convince her that he was worthy of her.

And guess what? It worked. She said “yes!”

Our heavenly Father wants to make sure everything is just right when Jesus comes. He’s making us presentable for Him. He’s cleaning us up; He’s taking the edges off; He’s getting rid of those things that are offensive and unpleasant so that Jesus will be thoroughly pleased and thoroughly impressed. He’s making us worthy of Him.

And it is when we see Jesus face to face when He comes again that the process will be finished—our salvation will be completed. We will be *fully* sanctified. In other words, we *will* be presentable, and He *will* be pleased.

I want to hasten to add that it's not that we make ourselves presentable for Jesus; it's our heavenly Father who makes us presentable. Look at **verse 24**. *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

You might be thinking to yourself, "There is so much that needs to be done in my life if I'm ever to be presentable for Jesus! There's so little evidence of Christ's character in me right now and so much evidence of the remnants of my old sinful nature! I'm discouraged with how little progress I'm making and how long it seems to take!"

Take heart, dear friend. God is your Savior. He has taken responsibility for your salvation, which includes your sanctification. And He is faithful...He *will* do it! As Paul told the Philippians, "*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ*" (1:6).

Now, that is not to say that we're just along for the ride—that we just sit back and let Him do all the work. No. We have a significant role in the process of sanctification, and if we do not do our part we can hinder the process; we can prevent God from doing what He wants to do and forfeit the blessing as a result.

Our role is to cooperate with Him. When He speaks we obey; when He convicts of sin, we repent; when He prompts, we move; where He leads, we follow. Paul said, "*...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose* (2:12-13).

God is at work in us to conform us to the image of Christ, but we are not passive in the process. Working out our salvation is just that...work! It requires discipline, diligence, self-denial, self-control, and perseverance, all of which involve the exercise of our wills. If we do not exercise our wills to work out our salvation, we are not going to make any progress.

However, when we do exercise our wills, God does His sanctifying work so that we can be presentable to Him at the Parousia.

I have entitled this 3-week sermon series, "Preparing for the Grand Finale." The Grand Finale is the Second Coming of Jesus. Are you prepared? Being prepared is more than just looking forward to His return or keeping an eye out for His return. It involves progressively becoming everything God intended us to be. That means that we are becoming wholly holy.

I will be starting a new four part series called "Holiness in the Coronavirus Pandemic" in which I plan to be very specific about what holiness looks like and what it means to express the character of Christ during the crisis we are living through.

Wholly Holy **I Thessalonians 5:23-24**

Main Idea: God is in the process of progressively perfecting our entire beings, a process that will be completed when Jesus comes again

Present Tense Salvation (23-24)
God's Personal Involvement (23a)

Becoming Perfect (23b)
A Progressive Process

A Comprehensive Process

Presentable at the Parousia (23c)

Guaranteed Completion (24)

Our Role in the Sanctifying Process