

1Thessalonians 5:23-28

God Does It Himself

In verses 12 through 22 the apostles have been citing brief descriptions of what the Christian life and church family life should be like.

The life that is described is in reality a description of what Jesus' own life was like.

For example look at verses 14-15, "...warn [admonish] *those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone* [don't ignore them because they haven't been nice to you], *but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.*"

That is the way Jesus lived—He lived His life as an example and pattern for how each of us are called to live our lives

And much of what is described in verses 12-22 is, humanly speaking, practically impossible for anyone to do—anyone except Jesus.

Look for example at **verses 16-18**, "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks.*"

Nobody in their own natural strength can do this always, without ceasing and in every situation. And yet this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Remember Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:48**, "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.*"

Now in today's text the Bible is going to tell us how such a life is not only possible but is guaranteed.

1Thessalonians 5:23, "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

This very concise verse is absolutely jam packed with amazing truths so we are going to spend some time looking at each of its contents.

To begin with, the words "Now may" indicate that a blessing is being pronounced by Paul upon the Thessalonian believers. What does it mean to pronounce a blessing?

In the Bible to pronounce in this way a blessing on others was much more than expressing what you wished for them; it was more even than a prayer for them.

To pronounce a blessing in this way was a form of prophetic utterance in that the one giving the blessing was speaking not his own desire but the will of God for the people.

But was more than simply a prophecy, it wasn't simply stating what was going to happen but the act of speaking the blessing actually authoritatively conveyed or triggered or put into motion the thing that was spoken. (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*)

There are other non-authoritative forms of blessing that just wishing another person well. But that is not what we are looking at here.

It is a bit like an official representative at the opening ceremonies of a sporting event making the declaration, "Let the games begin!" That declaration officially starts the event.

Or like a pastor officiating at a wedding who declares, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." That statement, though it doesn't create the marriage, it officially begins the marriage putting it into action.

So to pronounce a blessing was to convey or to transfer a gift from God to the people by way of an authoritative and potent utterance. (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*)

Therefore when Paul declares in verse 23, "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely...*" he was speaking authoritatively and officially on behalf of God to pass on a spiritual gift from God and to activate it.

Before looking at what gift the blessing involved let's look at who the blessing is coming from. Who is the giver of the gift?

"*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely...*" The blessing was coming from the God of peace (peace meaning wholeness, security, abundance, forgiveness and right relationship).

The Lord is referred to as the God of peace because He is the God who brings into our lives wholeness, security, abundance, forgiveness and right relationship.

Now what is the blessing, what is the gift that our God of peace is giving? "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely...*"

The blessing that God is giving is complete sanctification.

Sanctification is the process of conforming us to the image of Jesus; or the process of making us like Jesus. Complete sanctification is when the process is finished and we are perfectly Christ-like in our character.

In case you are thinking you missed out on something when you put your faith in Christ we need to clarify, when will this *complete* sanctification happen?

1John 3:2, "*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed [notice the timing of when this will be accomplished—when He is revealed], we shall be like Him [that is complete sanctification], for we shall see Him as He is.*"

Philippians 1:6 ESV, "*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*"

And what is the day of Jesus Christ when He is revealed?

1Thessalonians 4:15-17, *“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”*

So remember what I was saying a few minutes ago about 1Thessalonians 5:12-22 being a concise description of the Christ-like life. Now that whole section of instruction in Christ-like living is being wrapped up in verse 23 by the pronouncement of a gift from God to the people of God, and the gift is that God Himself will make you to be completely Christ-like—He will make you perfectly Christ-like.

Notice the word *“Himself”*. That is important. It emphasizes the truth that God will do this by Himself, not with help from anyone else—including not with help from you and me.

This is not a 50/50 proposition (God does half and you do half); it’s not a 60/40 proposition; it’s not even a proposition that God does 99% and you do your 1% share of the bargain.

Look at what it says, “the God of peace Himself sanctify you...(how much will He do Himself?) He Himself will sanctify you completely!

This is the grace of God as we saw it described repeatedly in our study of Galatians—grace means God does it all!

This is a marvelous gift. We are not left on our own to try to figure out how to be patient with all, to always pursue what is good for others, to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, in everything to give thanks, and to not quench the Spirit but to let the Spirit of God speak through us.

The God of peace Himself will accomplish this in us—He will sanctify us completely.

Our part is to simply, by faith, receive this gift and trust in Him to begin working it out in our lives, and to know and trust that it won’t be completed until the rapture when the Lord comes to take us home.

Philippians 2:12-13, *“...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ [AMP not in your own strength] for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”*

Amplified *“[Not in your own strength] for it is God Who is all the while effectually at work in you [energizing and creating in you the power and desire], both to will and to work for His good pleasure and satisfaction and delight.”*

This is important to understand, we cannot produce our own sanctification, we must trust God to work it out. We cannot make ourselves become more like Jesus by our own efforts.

Failure to understand this is what leads to so much frustration and sin for many people in their Christian life. They have trusted in Jesus to save them from their sins, but now they are trying hard by their own efforts to live the kind of life that Jesus lived—but we simply can't do it.

For 1,500 years of Jewish history after God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, people tried to keep the law but not a single person succeeded, until Jesus came along and He lived the perfect, sinless life.

With the backdrop of 1,500 years of human failure, it was proof that only Jesus can live a completely sanctified life.

Then He died to pay the penalty for our sins. And He rose again to show that He has power to save us from death.

But that wasn't all that He did for us. He then gave us His Holy Spirit to live within us. Why?

So that He, by His Spirit living inside of us, could enable us to live the kind of life that only Jesus was able to live.

That same Spirit that lived inside of Jesus now lives inside of us.

But He will not force Himself upon us. We must trust that He is in us to empower and enable us to live a godly life, and we must moment by moment give our consent and agreement to let Him live through us.

When we try to do 75% and just call on Him for the hard stuff, we fail and are humbled. So we learn to trust Him for more, but we still try to half and say, "I'll call on you when I start getting in trouble—but we fail and are humbled.

This continues for a while until we perhaps trust Him for 95%, but we still like to contribute our part from time to time—"Lord just let me make this one decision on my own," and we fail and are humbled.

This struggle to surrender our will 100% to Christ continues our whole life long, it will never end until the Lord returns and delivers us completely from this body of sin.

The blessing pronounced now at the end of the letter is that the God of peace all by Himself will accomplish this work of sanctification in us.

Let's look at the rest of verse 23 which further clarifies that God does it all.

1Thessalonians 5:23b, "and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Sanctification is a gradual process of being conformed to the likeness of Christ. But there are three distinct stages of sanctification which are each related to the three major aspects of our human make-up.

We were made in the image of God who is a triune being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are not triune as God, but there are three aspects to our nature: we are spirit, soul and body.

We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and just as the temple had three components, the Most Holy place, the Holy place and the outer courts, so we have three components, a spirit (which corresponds to the most holy place), we have a soul (which corresponds to the holy place) and we have a body (which corresponds to the outer courts of the temple).

Our spirit, the innermost part of our being, was completely sanctified, absolutely holy and sinless instantly the moment we were born again and received a sinless new spirit. That is a past and completed work of sanctification.

Our souls, however, (that is our mind, our will and our emotions) were not instantly transformed and made Christ-like.

But our souls are in a life-long process of being renewed, a life-long process of learning to submit to the authority of God, and a life-long process of learning to rejoice always and in everything give thanks.

But our bodies, the third part of our human make-up, are not improving, they are not becoming more and more glorified—quite the opposite, they are constantly deteriorating and becoming weaker.

The inner man is being renewed day by day but the outer man is perishing (2Cor 4:16).

But the Bible promises that there is a future day when our bodies will be glorified—we will get new bodies, and when that happens our sanctification will be complete.

1Corinthians 15:42-53, NLT *“Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die [think about it, our spirit and our soul can go to heaven when we die, but our bodies have to stay here and wait for their turn to be sanctified—only that which is sanctified can go to heaven], but they will be raised to live forever.⁴³ Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.⁴⁴ They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies.*

⁴⁵ *The Scriptures tell us, “The first man, Adam, became a living person.” But the last Adam—that is, Christ—is a life-giving Spirit.⁴⁶ What comes first is the natural body, then the spiritual body comes later.*

⁴⁷ *Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven.⁴⁸ Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man.⁴⁹ Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man.*

⁵⁰ *What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. These dying bodies cannot inherit what will last forever.*

⁵¹ *But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed!*⁵² *It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed.⁵³ For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies [that will never die].”*

When this happens and we receive our immortal, glorified bodies, then we will be completely sanctified, spirit, soul and body.

1Thessalonians 5:24, “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”

This is added for clarification, just in case you aren’t yet convinced.

He who calls you unto salvation, is faithful to finish in you what He started.

Philippians 1:6, “...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ”.

Romans 8:28-30, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. [What is that good outcome that God is working all things toward?] ²⁹ For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son [Sanctification], that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰ Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified [that is to be sanctified completely, spirit, soul, and body].”

God does it all, we simply trust, using the faith that He gives us, and humbly obey using the strength that He gives us.

To God be all the glory for what He has done—and He has done it all.

1Thessalonians 5:25-26, “Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.”

Greeting friends and relatives with a kiss on the cheek or forehead was a common cultural practice of that day.

The church was to recognize one another as family and to greet one another appropriately.

However, it is likely that what Paul, Silas and Timothy meant by this instruction was for those who received this letter to greet all the believers on behalf of Paul, Silas and Timothy, and to give everyone a kiss for Paul, Silas and Timothy.

When I talk to my parents on the phone they always end every conversation with the request that I give a hug to all their grandkids for them.

1Thessalonians 5:27, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.”

They were supposed to be sure that this letter was read to all of the believers.

1Thessalonians 5:28, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”

This was not a mere formality, this was a continuation of the blessing he gave in verse 23.

It was a pronouncement that as a free gift from God they had all the power and enabling of God to carry out what God had called them to—He who calls you is faithful, He will also do it.

God does it all—that is grace.

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