



Central Peninsula Church

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1 Thessalonians 5:

23-28

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What Are You Waiting For?

I hate to wait. My image of hell is that of spending an eternity waiting in line. When I wait I grind my teeth, my blood pressure rises, my vision narrows, and my temper erupts. And so I go to great lengths to avoid waiting. I try to avoid the freeways at rush hour. I even try new routes from one place to another to somehow save a few minutes of needless waiting. It's not uncommon for me to arrive someplace and say to Lynn, "I made it in 43 minutes and 22 seconds. That's a personal best!" Lynn looks at me as if to say, "who cares?"

Even though we may go to great lengths to avoid it, most of us are forced to wait several times a week - in traffic jams, in supermarket check-out lines, at the bank, and in fast-food drive thrus. And these everyday waits seldom fail to try our nerves.

But there is another kind of waiting which is much more difficult. I think of the waiting of a single person for marriage, the waiting of a childless couple for a child, the waiting of the chronically ill for health or even death, the waiting of those in dead-end careers for a breakthrough, or the waiting of the lonely to simply belong. This kind of waiting is far more than just a minor, passing irritant, it's a source of deep pain and prolonged heartache that drains us emotionally and spiritually. One of the things that makes waiting of any kind so difficult is that we live in a world afflicted by what one writer called "instantitis."

Listen to what Ben Patterson says about instantitis, "Whatever we want, we want it now! We believe we have a right to be happy - now! We want our fulfillment to come as fast as a McDonald's hamburger. We value people who take charge of their lives and seize life by the throat rather than wait. Not to have to wait is often a sign of success and privilege. Witness the black limousine escorted by the police directly to the entrance of the stadium while the rest of the peons wait; or the diner quietly slipping the maitre d' a twenty dollar bill to get a good table immediately. The

world is no friend to those who wait. You and I will receive no applause for waiting."

This morning we come to the end of our study on Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Paul has pushed and exhorted these folks to grow up in their Christian faith. But towards the end of the letter he does something a little different. He expresses to them what he trusts they will one day become. But they have to wait for it. He shares this with them in the form of a benediction or blessing. That's kind of like a prayer with your eyes open. Look at vv. 23, 24.

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

I. WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

A. Sanctification: Notice first in these verses what it is we are waiting for. Paul says, "**And now may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely...**" This word "sanctify" means "to make holy." Basically, the word means to be set apart for God and pure and righteous in character. Notice that Paul emphasizes the fact that he wants this sanctification to be complete or entire. He uses a remarkable word here. He actually invents a word that is used nowhere else in the NT. The word is holoteles. It's a combination of two other words. Holo means whole; teles means end or fulfillment. So the idea is to be whole to the end or whole to the point of fulfillment. That's why he calls him "the God of peace." "Peace" (shalom) contains the idea of wholeness - the God of wholeness will make us whole! And this same idea of wholeness is emphasized in the next line.

B. Wholeness: Paul says, "and may your spirit

and soul and body be preserved complete." The word translated "complete" here is a different word than the one just mentioned. This one means whole, not to the end, but whole in all its parts. And he even goes so far as to mention the various parts of us that will be kept whole - spirit, soul, and body. Theologians argue about whether we are made up of three parts or two parts. Here Paul mentions three parts; in other places he mentions only two. I don't think it matters much. The point here is that the totality of our person will be made whole. It's amazing to think that even our bodies are part of this transformation. Complete holiness involves our body as well as our spirit.

C. Blamelessness: And then Paul adds to this idea of wholeness the idea of blamelessness. Part of being whole is being without blame; without responsibility for any wrong doing; free from judgment or accusation. Paul is saying that when we're sanctified entirely, and when we're made completely whole, we'll also be blameless. There won't be any flaws in us at all.

So what are we waiting for? Paul tells us: wholeness. Wholeness that is holy and blameless. Are these things that you long for? Are these things that you're aching to have? Think of it this way: Can you imagine life without such things as fear, frustration, grief, anger, impatience, greed, jealousy, bitterness, confusion, guilt, remorse, loneliness, sickness, disease? All of us desire wholeness whether we know it or not.

One of the ways that God works in our life is to fan the flame of that desire - to make us aware of it. The only way he can do that is by somehow helping us to come to grips with our brokenness. If we're not aware of this ache for wholeness, it's probably because we haven't come to grips with the extent of our brokenness. We're still satisfied with who we are and what this world has to offer us. But, when God allows us to see our brokenness, then we can begin to appreciate how wonderful it will be to be whole. This helps me understand why Jesus said things like, "**Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.**" (Luke 6: 21). It's those that don't have it all now that are in a position to long for and

receive what God promises later on.

The question is, when will all this happen? When will we be satisfied? When will the ache be taken away and replaced with wholeness? Paul tells us: "at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

II. WHEN WILL THE WAIT BE OVER?

We know that Paul is referring here not to the first coming of Jesus, but the second coming. And this idea of our being transformed into all that we long to be at the second coming of Christ is one that really captured the NT writers. For example, look at what John writes in I John 3:2, "**Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is.**" Child of God, you have nothing to fear in that day, because you will be like him - blameless.

Paul has said a lot in this letter about the future appearing of Jesus Christ. This is something that consumed the early church. I don't think a day went by in their life when they didn't wonder if this would be the day. Why is it that we have lost this vision of what the early church called "the blessed hope?" I'm reminded of a two-year-old child who had just learned how wonderful heaven was going to be and was announcing that she, her Mommy and her younger sister were going there. Her Dad asked, "What about me?" She looked at him and said, "No Dad. You have to go to work!" I'm afraid that for many of us, the necessities of life in the here and now crowd out the vision of what life will be like in the there and then. And without even knowing it, we've rid our Christian faith of the one thing that really makes it worth living. This is the "*blessed* hope" - it brings blessing and meaning to our lives now. One writer has defined hope as "hearing the melody of the future" and faith as dancing to that melody in the present. We ought to be like joggers with Sony "Walkmans" affixed to our ears listening to a melody no one can hear - the melody of the promise of the coming of Christ. We hum and tap our feet as we go about our work because that promised future invades our present and brings joy and energy to all we do.

But, we still have to wait for it. And sometimes the waiting is hard. Sometimes we lack the faith to dance to the

melody of the future. We wonder if it really ever will happen and if it does will we really be included. We know ourselves and we know that if it were left up to us we just might do something to disqualify ourselves from this blessed hope.

III. WHY WILL THE WAIT END IN FULFILLMENT?

It's to this doubt that Paul speaks in v. 24. **"Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."**

Paul says something very important here to speak to our doubt. He says that the God who calls us is faithful and because He is faithful He will carry out that which He calls us to. As Paul says, "He will do it." Who will do it? The God who calls you. This idea of God's calling reminds us that it was He who initiated the relationship in the first place. It was God who chose us, we didn't choose Him. And wrapped up in that initial calling was a promise to complete the work in us which He began (Phil. 1:6). If God doesn't carry that out, then He is proven to be unfaithful. God is bound by His very nature to complete our salvation and make us whole. Nothing, not even our own unfaithfulness, can stop Him from fulfilling His promise. As He says so often in the OT to His people, "You have been unfaithful to me, yet because of my faithfulness to my name, I will still carry out my promise to you." God will keep his promise to make you whole. Why? Because you try really hard to follow Him? Because you're basically a good person? No! Because He's faithful to his name!

God's promise is unconditional in nature. There is nothing we can do to change His mind about us. If we've been called, which basically means we've heard and believed the gospel, then we'll be transformed into His likeness at His coming. Nothing can change that because of who God is. God has pledged Himself to make you and I holy. For Him to deny that pledge is to deny Himself; to deny His nature as one who is faithful.

I hope you can see the radical nature of these two truths. Most Christians do not live with this kind of assurance and it renders their Christian life ineffective. They've believed God for the forgiveness of their sins and because of that have some sort of vague sense that they will make it into heaven, but they lack the assurance that God is absolutely committed to making them whole. He has sworn Himself to it

and nothing, including sin, death, and the devil, can stop Him!

IV. WHAT TO DO IN THE MEANTIME?

But, all this raises a question. If our future is so secure, what about the present? How does this certain hope affect us today? Some would say that it makes us complacent. I mean, if I know for certain that one day God is going to make me holy and meanwhile I can't do anything to make that happen sooner, then why should I even make an effort to change and grow? Why not just relax and do what I want? But that's not how it works. Instead, this sure hope of wholeness motivates us to be responsible in the present.

Later today I am officiating at a wedding for one of my nieces. We've all been looking forward to this for a long time. About a year ago, they announced their engagement. It came as kind of a surprise because she had only known this guy for a few months, plus he was from Alabama! We were all even more surprised when they said they wanted to get married in just a couple of months! Fortunately, we were able to convince them to wait a year. So for the past year they've been engaged, looking forward and anticipating the big day. But of course as they wait they are working and preparing. I always tell couples you need some time, not only to prepare for the wedding, but to prepare for the marriage. It wouldn't be right for them to say, "Well, now that we're engaged we can just goof off; we can just do nothing." No! I mean, like getting a job helps, and finding a place to live helps. Their love for each other and the reality of their soon and coming wedding day motivates them to do certain things in the mean time.

Do you see the point? We've been told that when Jesus comes we'll be made whole. We'll be blameless at his coming. Now some of us might hear that and we think, "Well, that's nice. It's nice to have the promise. It's nice to have the ring on my finger. And then we just goof off and do nothing." But that's not what this waiting period is all about. Because we love Him and because we long to be with Him we're more motivated to please Him in everything we do! So this sure hope doesn't make us complacent, it makes us

more energetic to become what we know we shall be!

In vv. 25-27 Paul closes his letter by mentioning three things to do while you wait. First he says, “**Brethren, pray for us.**” I love Paul’s vulnerability here. He needed their prayers. He depended on them in that way. One of the things we do while we wait is pray. Intercessory prayer is when we pray for others; we intercede on their behalf. We all should have a list - a list of people we’re praying for. I performed a memorial service recently. Afterwards an older couple approached me and said, “Are you the Mark Mitchell who grew up in Los Altos?” I said I was. They said, “Well, we lived right around the corner from you. You didn’t know us but we knew you. We heard you became a Christian in high school, and we prayed for you back then. You were on our list.” I was dumbfounded! Isn’t it wonderful to know that people pray for you; that you’re on someone’s list? Paul says, “Put me on your list.” I’m convinced that some people have a special calling to intercessory prayer. How we need them in the body of Christ! How little would get done without them!

Second, he says, “**Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.**” In other words, don’t leave anyone out. He wants everybody included. The holy kiss was kind of like an affectionate handshake today, or even a friendly hug. It’s a holy kiss; not the other kind of kiss. At the end of the wedding I say, “You may kiss the bride.” And some of these couples just go crazy. I want to say, “You may STOP kissing the bride!” It’s like the guy is munching on a lamb chop! But this was a holy kiss. Christians adopted it because it expressed the warmth of love within the family of God. While you wait, stay connected to the family. Be an affectionate and enthusiastic part of the fellowship. Don’t stand on the sidelines like an outsider looking in. Don’t be an armchair quarterback, questioning the calls and criticizing the play of those in the trenches. Be a part of the family.

Third, he says, “**I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.**” Once again, don’t leave anybody out. Share it with the whole family

(“all the brethren”). He uses strong words, essentially putting them under an oath. Paul was probably concerned with certain factions in the church using his letter just to support their particular cause. Paul says, “In the name of the Lord, swear that you won’t do that! Read this letter to the whole church.” What we see here is the importance of Scripture. Paul’s letters were inspired by God. They are part of what we call the NT today. While you wait, immerse yourself in the Scripture. Read it in church. Read it at home. Read it in your small group. One of things the brethren do for one another is get our noses back in the book.

So, while you wait, you pray, you participate as a member of the family of God, and you immerse yourself in the Scripture. It might seem like that’s a lot of work. And it’s true, waiting can be hard. But here is the good news: while you wait, God does something for you as well.

On Friday I showed up at the new Ikea down in East Palo Alto at 10:00 when it opened. But I had to get in line to wait. It was about 100 yards long. But as I got closer to the entrance of the store, I noticed that there was a table set with coffee and cinnamon rolls on it, just for those who were waiting in line. It kind of made the waiting bearable.

CONCLUSION

What makes our waiting bearable? In v. 28 Paul ends his letter with these words: “**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**” Not just when you arrive, but now. Grace. Paul never just said goodbye; he almost always started and ended his letters with this word - grace. And not just any grace, but the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It comes from Jesus. He is the giver of grace. I like what one writer says about Paul’s words here: “Whatever God has to say to us...begins and ends with grace...All that God has been to man in Jesus Christ is summed up in it: all his gentleness and beauty, all his tenderness and patience, all the holy passion of his love, is gathered up in grace. What more could one soul wish for another than that the grace of the Lord Jesus should be with it?” And by the way, you can’t earn it; by definition it’s a gift. You have to wait, but while you wait, you get a gift; you get His grace.

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