

No one likes to wait. We all try to avoid rush hour, so we don't have to wait in a traffic jam. We grind our teeth waiting for a decent internet connection. We hungrily stare at our food while we wait for it to cool off so we can gobble it down. We impatiently try to get by the sweet old lady walking in front of us, blocking our way. We compulsively count how many people are in the supermarket check-out lines so we can join the shortest one and wait the least amount of time. We do all kinds of things to avoid waiting.

But there's other kinds of waiting, which are much more difficult. I think of a single person waiting for marriage, the waiting of a childless couple for a child, the waiting of the chronically ill for healing 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, which drains us emotionally and spiritually.

One of the things that make waiting of any kind so difficult is we live in a world afflicted by what Ben Patterson calls "instantitis." Ben, the campus pastor at Westmont College, wrote,

"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 another one of the benedictions or blessings in the Bible. It's found at the end of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Paul pushed and exhorted these folks to grow up in their Christian faith. However, towards the end of the letter, he did something a little different. He expressed to them what he believed they would one day become. But they have to wait for it. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our

Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1Thessalonians 5:23–24)

What Are We Waiting For?

Sanctification: Notice first in these verses what it is we're waiting for. Paul said, "*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.*" This word, sanctify, means "to make holy." Basically, it means to be set apart for God; to be pure and righteous in our moral character. Paul wanted this sanctification to be "*through and through*"—complete or entire. He used a remarkable word here, used nowhere else in the Bible. The word is *holoteles*. It's a combination of two other words. *Holo* means whole; *teles* means end or fulfillment. The idea is to be whole to the end or whole to the point of fulfillment. Maybe that's why he called God, "*the God of peace.*" Peace (*shalom*) contains the idea of wholeness—the God of wholeness will make us whole and complete! This same idea of wholeness is emphasized in the next line.

Wholeness: Paul said, "*May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless...*" The word translated "*whole*" 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 went so far as to mention the various parts of us that will be kept whole—spirit, soul, and body. Theologians argue about whether humans are made up of three parts or two parts. Here Paul mentioned three parts.

He started with our spirit, the part of our personality, which ties us to God. When we put our faith in Christ, our spirit is regenerated. It's through our spirit we communicate with God in prayer and worship. Our spirit enables us to pray, sing, meditate, feed on God's Word, fight spiritual battles, overcome the evil one, and draw near to God day and night. God wants our spirit to be sanctified.

And then he mentioned our soul. This is the seat of our personality, what the Bible elsewhere calls the heart. It refers to our emotions, desires, and the self-conscious part of our personality. God wants our soul to be sanctified. That includes our thought life, our imaginations, our dreams, our secret desires, our idle speculations, our ambitions, our emotions, and our goals and priorities.

Finally, he mentioned our body. It's amazing to think even our bodies are part of this transformation. In Romans, we're told to present the members of our body to God as weapons of righteousness, and our whole body to God as a "*living sacrifice.*" I heard about a

missionary who said in the city where the Lord had called him to work that the people are only saved “from the waist up.” He didn’t specify what that meant, but I can imagine. This is what Paul had in mind earlier in this very letter when he wrote:

It is God’s will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.
(1 Thessalonians 4:3–7)

You see, that’s talking about the sanctification of our bodies. Complete holiness involves our body as well as our spirit and soul. In commenting on this text 350 years ago, John Calvin used a picturesque expression. He said God intends “the entire renovation of the person.”

When I think of renovation, I think of a house. Years ago we moved into the house I grew up in. It was an old house, and we never felt like we could keep up with all the work it required. We had to replace the surface of the patio, the roof, the flooring, part of the heating system, and then there was landscaping and painting. It’s like the job was never done. After 20 years we sold it and moved into a home, which was brand new, just because we were tired and broke!

If you think houses are hard, try renovating a human life. That’s a job so tough only God would attempt it, and it takes a lifetime. Eventually, God just says, “I’ve done all I can do down there. Come on up here. I’ll finish the job and make your house brand new.”

Blamelessness: Notice Paul adds to wholeness the idea of being “*kept blameless.*” Part of being whole is being without blame; without responsibility for any wrongdoing. It’s like when we stand before him; he’ll say, “Does anyone in the whole universe have any accusation they can make against this person?” At that point, there’ll be a loud silence as no one—not angels or demons, not saints or sinners—no one in the entire universe will be able to bring any charge against us. The Good News Translation states God will sanctify us so we’re “*free from every fault.*” Phillips uses the phrase “*spotless integrity.*” There won’t be any flaws in us at all. We know when we come to faith and are placed “in Christ,” we’re given the gift of righteousness. It’s not inherently our righteousness but Christ’s, given to us as a gift, making us completely acceptable to the Father. But this is different. This is when we’ll become blameless in our character.

So what are we waiting for? Do you long for complete sanctification, wholeness, holiness, and blamelessness? Are these things 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, injustice, not to mention sickness and disease? All of us desire wholeness whether we know it or not. You see, because of sin, we’re all are like a beat-up old house. If we want to be truly beautiful and function like we were intended, we need a complete renovation. God is slowly working, room-by-room, on each of us to transform our entire being. Although, at this point, we might look like a disaster, one day God will bring his work to completion.

One of the ways God works in our life is to fan the flame of the desire to be made whole. The only way he can do that is by helping us 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. When God allows us to see the reality of our sin, then we can begin to appreciate how wonderful being without sin will be. This helps me understand why Jesus said things like, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*” (Matthew 6:6). It’s those who hunger now, those who don’t have it all now, who are in a position to long for and receive what God promises later on.

When Will Wait Be Over?

The question is, when will all this happen? When will the waiting be over? When will the ache be taken away and replaced with wholeness? Paul tells us: “*at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” We know he’s referring not to the first coming of Jesus, but the second coming. And this idea of our being transformed into all we long to be at the second coming of Christ captured the New Testament writers. For example, look at what John wrote in 1 John 3:2, “*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*” When you think of Jesus returning in all his glory and power, how does it make you feel? Maybe it scares you. But as a child of God, you have nothing to fear, because, in an instant, you’ll be transformed into his likeness; you’ll be like him—holy and blameless.

Paul has said a lot in this letter about the future appearing of Jesus. This hope 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 we’ve lost this vision?

It’s like a three-year-old child who just learned how wonderful heaven was going to be and announced 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 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 knowing it, we rid our Christian faith of the one thing that really makes it worth living, which is hope. The first Christians called it the "blessed hope" because 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 go through life like joggers with earphones 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 the 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 will really ever happen and if it does, will we really be included. We know ourselves, and we know if it were left up to us, we just might do something to disqualify ourselves from this blessed hope.

How Can We Be Certain We'll Get What We're Waiting For?

It's to this doubt that Paul spoke in v. 24. *"The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."* Paul speaks into our doubt and fear here. The God who's calling us is faithful, and because He's faithful, He'll carry out that which He is calling us to. In the Greek, the word *"faithful"* comes at the very start of the sentence for emphasis: *"Faithful is he who is calling you..."* Paul said, *"He will do it."* Who will do it? The God who is calling you. This idea of God's calling reminds us it was He who initiated the relationship in the first place. God chooses us; we don't choose Him. And wrapped up in the calling is a promise to complete the work in us which Philippians 1:6 states, *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."* If God doesn't carry it out, then He's proven to be unfaithful. God is bound by His very nature to complete our renovation. Nothing, not even our own unfaithfulness, can stop Him from fulfilling His promise. Paul wrote, *"If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself"* (2 Timothy 2:13). God will keep his promise to make you whole. Why, because you try really hard to follow Him; or because you're basically a good person? No! Because He's faithful to his name! God has pledged Himself to make you and I holy. For Him to deny this pledge is to deny Himself; to deny His nature as One who is faithful.

In my mind's eye, I picture God as a sculptor working with a rough piece of marble. He's working on a big chunk named "Mark Mitchell." It's a hard job because the chunk is badly marred, misshapen, discolored, and cracked. The sculptor has a massive job to reshape this hunk of marble. But he's undeterred, and he

patiently chips away the bad parts, chiseling an image into the hard stone, stopping occasionally to polish here and there. One day he finally finishes one section of the statue. The next day when he returns the section is messed up. He says, "I thought I finished that yesterday. Who's been messing with my statue?" It turns out I'm the culprit. What I thought would improve things has only messed them up. Over 100 years ago, Professor James Denney put it this way, "How many have tried to work off a vicious temper, to break for good with an evil habit, or in some other direction to sanctify themselves and to keep out of God's sight until the work is done." It never works, but God is faithful. He patiently picks up his chisel and goes back to work. He won't quit until the job is done.

I hope you can see the radical nature of this truth. Most of us don't live with this kind of assurance and confidence in God. We believe God for the forgiveness of our sins and have a vague sense we'll make it into heaven, but we lack the assurance God is absolutely committed to making us whole. The truth is, He's sworn Himself to it and nothing, including sin, death, and the devil, can stop Him!

What Do We Do While We Wait?

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 it makes us complacent. I mean, if I know for certain one day God is going to make me holy, and meanwhile, I can't do anything to make that happen sooner, why should I even make an effort to change and grow? Why not just relax and do what I want? That's not how it works. Instead, this sure hope of wholeness motivates us to grow in the present.

Recently I officiated at the wedding of a good friend's son. We'd been looking forward to this day for a long time. About six months earlier, they announced their engagement. And for the six months they were engaged, they were looking forward to and anticipating the big day. As they waited, they were working and preparing. I always tell couples you need some time, not only to prepare for the wedding but also 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 saving money helps; finding a place to live helps; getting to know each other better helps. Their love for each other and the reality of their coming wedding day, motivates them to do certain things in the meantime.

It's no mistake this promise comes immediately after several commands, which deal with how we live our lives. He says we should...

appreciate and esteem our leaders (vv. 12-13)

live in peace with one another (vv. 13b-15)

rejoice always (v. 16)

pray without ceasing (v. 17)
give thanks in everything (v. 18)
don't quench the spirit (v. 19)
test everything (vv. 19–20)
hold onto what is good (v. 21)
reject every kind of evil (v. 22)

Do you see the point? We've been told when Jesus comes back; we'll be made whole. We'll be blameless at his coming. Now some of us might hear that and 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 is all about. Because we love Him and long to be with Him, we're more motivated to please Him in everything we do! So this hope doesn't make us complacent, it makes us more energetic to become what we know we shall be!

So wait with an assurance that God will make you whole? Why? Because the God who called you is faithful, and He will finish the work He began in you.

This should give you great confidence in God. His promise leaves no room for doubt. He's faithful to keep his promises. He's ordained you'll be like Jesus inside and out. And he's working now to shape you in his likeness. Don't doubt his purposes even though you can't always see his hand at work.

This should also give you motivation to grow. God is at work in you! Your choice is whether or not you'll cooperate with Him.

Some of us grow slower than we should because we fight against God's purposes. We harbor wrong attitudes—lust, bitterness, pride, sloth, envy, and all the rest—and then we wonder why we're not growing.

This should give us perseverance in prayer for ourselves and for others. Many of us have struggled for years with certain behavior patterns, and then give up because we're so discouraged. Progress often comes slowly. So we ought to keep on praying precisely because we believe God is at work in us even when we don't see it.

This should give us patience toward others. If God isn't finished with me yet, he's not finished with others either. If I want them to be patient with my weaknesses, they should expect the same from me.

Finally, this should teach us gratitude for every small step in the right direction. Years ago we used to sing a chorus, which went like this: "Little by little, day by day, little by little, in every way, Jesus is changing me." That's how it is for us. We grow little by little; we make progress day by day. It's not fast, but the Lord is never in a hurry. He takes his time because he's the Master Craftsman. So we can take heart in every small step forward we take because it comes from the hands of a loving Father, who's at work in ways we can't see and probably couldn't even imagine.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.