

Analyzing the Text of 1 Thessalonians 5:23—Spirit, Soul, Body: What Did Paul Mean?

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One of the more difficult texts of the New Testament is an incidental reference found in the conclusion of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. That the text is not easily translated can be seen in the variety of translations.

Here is the ESV translation: **"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."**

A literal translation clarifies word usage while reflecting the original word order.

Now¹

**He himself the God of peace, may sanctify² you complete³ to the end,
And the whole/wholeness⁴ of you, the spirit and/both⁵ the being and the body, blamelessly⁶ in the
presence⁷ of our Lord Jesus Christ be kept.**

¹The word "now" may be translated "and" or "so."

²Sanctify means to make holy or to consecrate.

³An adjective, not an adverb. Thus, complete, not completely. The adjective matches and modifies you. The result of God's sanctification is that you (plural) be complete. The compound word combines the idea of completeness and a goal—finality or maturity.

⁴The adjective is nominative/singular/neuter. The adjective may function as a noun (the entirety or wholeness of you) or it may modify a matching noun—in this case, the word spirit is the closest matching noun. These two possibilities are easily seen in the interlinear, and are explained in detail below.

⁵The "and...and" construction can also be translated "both...and"

⁶An adverb, not an adjective. The adverb modifies the verb, kept blamelessly.

⁷Parousia is literally presence, but is frequently used to refer to the coming of Jesus.

Greek

1Th 5:23 αυτος^{G846 P-NSM} δε^{G1161 CONJ} ο^{G3588 T-NSM} θεος^{G2316 N-NSM} της^{G3588 T-GSF} ειρηνης^{G1515 N-GSF} αγιασαι^{G37 V-AAO-3S} υμας^{G4771 P-2AP} ολοτελεις^{G3651 A-APM} και^{G2532 CONJ} ολοκληρον^{G3648 A-NSN} υμων^{G4771 P-2GP} το^{G3588 T-NSN} πνευμα^{G4151 N-NSN} και^{G2532 CONJ} η^{G3588 T-NSF} ψυχη^{G5590 N-NSF} και^{G2532 CONJ} το^{G3588 T-NSN} σωμα^{G4983 N-NSN} αμεμπτως^{G274 ADV} εν^{G1722 PREP} τη^{G3588 T-DSF} παρουσια^{G3952 N-DSF} του^{G3588 T-GSM} κυριου^{G2962 N-GSM} ημων^{G1473 P-1GP} ιησου^{G2424 N-GSM} χριστου^{G5547 N-GSM} τηρηθειη^{G5083 V-APO-3S}

Interlinear

1Th 5:23 And he, ^{G1473 G1161} the ^{G3588} God ^{G2316 G3588} of peace, ^{G1515} may he sanctify ^{G37} you ^{G1473} perfectly complete; ^{G3651} and ^{G2532} may your entire ^{G3648 G1473 G3588} spirit, ^{G4151} and ^{G2532 G3588} soul, ^{G5590} and ^{G2532 G3588} body, ^{G4983} [²blamelessly^{G274} ³in^{G1722} ⁴the ^{G3588} ⁵arrival^{G3952 G3588} ⁶of our Lord^{G2962} ^{G1473} ⁷Jesus^{G*} ⁸Christ^{G5547} ¹be kept]. ^{G5083}

English with parsing

And/now/so

May God himself, [the God] of peace sanctify/consecrate you (accus-plural), [making you] [totally] complete (adj-accus-plural) [to the end]

And may your entire (nom-sing-neuter) spirit (pneuma, nom-sing-neuter), both [and] being/soul (psyche, nom-sing-fem) and body (soma, nom-sing-neuter),

Be kept/watched over (3rd-sing*) blamelessly in the presence (coming) of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Neuter plurals can take a singular verb*

[Note: brackets are used in the translation above to indicate words that are not in the original Greek text, but are assumed, inserted here to make the most likely meaning clear]

More Observations

The first part of the verse is relatively easily translated: And/so/now (in conclusion), may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you so that you are totally complete... The interlinear is not smooth English, but accurately reflects the Greek and communicates the idea: may he sanctify you perfectly complete.

The second part of the verse is most problematic. And may your entire spirit and being and body... (1) The first question is whether the adjective entire should be understood as functioning as a nominative. An adjective can be used as a noun referring to a group of people (e. g., the rich, the poor, the needy). The singular adjective describes a plurality. Thus, the entirety (of you), or may your entirety (anticipating the rest of the phrase). (2) The second possibility is that the adjective modifies the nearest matching noun, your entire spirit. This possibility raises the question about whether spirit is used to describe one's spiritual existence or life.

Continuing in the second part of the verse, what is the connection between spirit, being, and body? In #1 above, the meaning is something like this: (a) may your entirety, spirit and being and body, or (b) may your entirety, spirit, both being and body... In #2, the meaning is: may your entire spirit, both being and body... The two options differ little in meaning. May your entirety, your spirit, both your being and your body...

Understanding the verse depends more on correctly distinguishing spirit (pneuma), being (psyche) and body (soma) than it does on the grammar. An extended article surveys the breadth of these concepts and words, both in the Old Testament and New Testament

(http://www.bobyoungrsources.com/studies/understanding-biblical-usage_body-soul-spirit_2.pdf). Briefly, human beings with a dual nature have existence (psyche, soul or being). This existence is both spiritual (pneuma) and biological. Biological existence is made possible because of the physical body. The concept of being relates both to the spiritual and the physical, depending on context. In the Old Testament, animals have being (nephesh, psyche) as does God.

The third part of the verse presents few questions. Parousia likely refers to the return of Jesus, given the context of 1 Thessalonians where there is a reference to the coming of Jesus at the end of every chapter. The singular verb (be kept) can take a singular subject or a neuter plural subject. What is to be blamelessly kept? Either your entirety, your spirit, or the entire list.

Conclusion

Paul's concluding doxology reflects themes he has already treated in the book. Sanctification was a command and a goal, necessary to reach completeness or maturity. Paul's prayer was for their entirety (either individually or collectively)—spirit, with both being and body—to be kept blamelessly (pure) in anticipation of the coming of Jesus. Obviously, sanctification has a primary application to the physical body, although holiness also has spiritual implications.

May the God of peace sanctify you so that so that you are continuously complete.
May your entirety—your entire spirit, both your being and your body,
Be kept blamelessly in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.