

Sanctification- How Long?!

“The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit,”

2 Corinthians 3:17-18. (NIV).

One thing I’m sure of is that whatever God does is perfect. He has a better plan than me for all of it. We don’t know why God has chosen to do many of the things He has chosen to do. Ultimately, our only certainty in all things is God Himself. I trust in His wisdom. I deeply believe that *most* of the reason for this life will not be made known until life as we now know it is complete. Eternity will educate us all in a trillion ways as to the whys. Why did God design a life where His children suffer against the effects and influence of sin for years?

The Christian life is one full of sin. Christians fail by sinning every single day and have to continuously come to God for forgiveness. Sometimes sin can seem overwhelming. It can seem that way, and this is not altogether bad because sin sucks. Oh, the dark night of the soul! It can seem overwhelming but it’s then that we have to remember our overcoming in Christ the overcomer, 1 John 5:4; John 16:33. God’s word, however, offers us great comfort. Sometimes we really need it. Looking at salvation has to sometimes be from different vantage points to be truly appreciated. That’s what this letter is about. It’s like looking at a fine piece of art. You can put your face two inches from the canvas and appreciate the artist’s intricacy but if you never step back you won’t see what he painted.

I think we have to take a proper perspective on the eternal vocation of our growth in Christ or we won’t truly see it right. Step back with me. Our work as Christians is to believe, John 6:28-29; our belief is our rest, Romans 4:5. If we fail to rightly esteem the *eternal* work of God the Holy Ghost in our lives we will surely lose heart along the way having suffered so many defeats. The difficulty of this life then emerges in us...it’s our immaturity, it is our inability. Because of our sinfulness and non-conformity to Christ we see sin and are faced with the reality

of our imperfections daily. This struggle gets hard. CH Spurgeon once said, “The branch with the most fruit hangs lowest to the ground.” This is to illustrate that the more we grow in holiness, the more we perceive our sin. Christians are growing up in Christ. They are becoming conformed to His glorious image day by day. Along the way it sometimes doesn’t appear so because they become more aware of their sin. In this letter I intend to talk a bit about stepping back and gauging the work of God as I think He would have us to do. In this I pray you’ll find strength to go out again into the fray.

There are two terms that I need you to be familiar with if you aren't already- justification and sanctification. These are two terms that identify two very different yet related things. Let me define them as quickly as I can. Justification is God’s one time act of declaring a man forgiven for all sin. Think of it like a legal decree where a case is dismissed and a defendant is pronounced not guilty. Justification is the grace of God credited into a person’s life. Grace = forgiveness. Once this grace is imputed (given) to a man it cannot be improved. It’s perfect because really it’s not an “it” at all; it’s a “Him.” The righteousness imputed to Christians is in and by fellowship with Jesus Christ. He is the grace we receive. His righteousness and His righteousness alone is the righteousness that makes a Christian righteous. It isn’t a believer’s righteousness *and Jesus’* righteousness that saves someone; it’s Jesus’ alone. His loving pardon for all sin is the grace. Christians share in Jesus’ merit and this is what forgives them their sin debt. He earned it and we partake of all He is. At the moment a person is saved by grace he will never be any more saved than at that very first moment. The Westminster divines, in chapter 11 of the Westminster Confession of 1646, articulated this Bible truth in this way:

Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies (1); not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, (2) they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God, (3).

http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html

As proof for this three parcel statement above they cite Romans 8:30; 3:24; 4:5-7; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21; 3:22-28; Titus 3:5-7; Ephesians 1:7; Jeremiah 23:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30-31; Romans 5:17-19; Acts 10:44; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9; Acts 13:38-39 and Ephesians 2:7-8. Basically, what they're saying is that the righteousness Jesus Christ earned by His perfect 30 year life, death and Resurrection is 1) perfect, and 2) what Christians are given freely by God at the point they are accepted by Him. That grace we receive is a something we speak of, but it is only by or because of the one who earned it. Justification then is done in all Christians because Christ's work to merit and bestow it is likewise done. Once you're justified, you're justified. Sanctification is different.

Sanctification only begins after justification. Justification never comes after it, and no one is sanctified in any saving way before being justified once these two terms are understood in their New Testament context.

Sanctification is the process that all true Christians are undergoing. It's the narrow path Jesus spoke of in Scripture, Matthew 7:14. It's not radical for the believer to be on this path. It's quite normal. Sanctification is the life of all of Jesus' disciples. Jesus is their passion and pursuit. This produces conflict inside us because there is much work to be done to make us truly holy. Unlike justification, sanctification is *never* perfect in this life. No one gets perfected before death, not even the greatest of Christ's saints. Sanctification is, however, about becoming more and more like Jesus in our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is progressive and cooperative and our salvation (justification) is wholly secured while we undergo this great work. Sanctification ends at death or the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the earth, whichever comes first. No Christian is truly perfected in this life, but it's like one preacher said: "It's not about perfection, it's about direction." The term "Christian" can be defined as "Being Christ-like." Christians are on the path to heaven and are daily, by God's grace, becoming more like their master Jesus.

So Christians are fully justified, but *not* fully sanctified. One comes before the other and sanctification is where the difficulties really arise for us. It's here that I want to focus.

So why didn't God just immediately perfect us? Why is this long road of life filled with so many failures during our sanctification? Some of us were saved at age 11 and may be reading

this letter 80 years later. Of course, this life is also full of so many wonderful graces, but we're pretty quick to forget those, aren't we? It's when you struggle that you wonder, if you're like me. First, I want to tell you to pray for a rock-solid grasp of just how amazing being justified really is. Read and pray to know that you know that you're saved by Christ and *not* by your performance. This doesn't come naturally to us, especially as time goes on. We have to work to root ourselves in it. If God forgave you then He died for every sin. He saw it all coming. Not just the sins up till you were brought into His family, but every sin in your whole life. In fact, if you're truly saved it's because God chose you despite all you've ever done before He made this world, Ephesians 1:3-6. Your work is to prove this election before Him and everyone else, 2 Peter 1:10. All sin. Past, present and future must be forgiven in Jesus if you've been justified. How else could we declare that we have peace with God now, Romans 5:1? Think on this. This is no license for sin to those who love Jesus. He saw it all and despite seeing it all chose freely to come to you to forgive you. That's just how He rolls, man. How gracious is God? We can never repay Him for His love, but we can thank Him. If we understand this reality then we'll have courage to come boldly to God *in* sanctification. He is not burdened by us coming. He delights in our coming.

While we were yet sinners Christ died for us; while we're still sinners Christ lives for us.

So, why does He choose to bear with weak, double-minded people (Christians) in their lives? Why is life like it is? Why the struggling in sanctification? Why not take us all like Enoch the moment we walk with God? Why doesn't He just "Fix it all" if He's so powerful? On some level I guess we'll all ask this question. One day God will fix it all, Romans 8:20-21, but until then we wait. We're on His time schedule, baby. Ultimately of course we don't know every reason why He does things, but we can know some things. We know for instance that God is shown strong in our weaknesses, 2 Corinthians 12:9. We know that God is glorified in causing all things (including failure) to work together for good to His children, Romans 8:28. We know many things, but if you're like me you've asked yourself questions like this before. I think I have the answer. You'll have to wait till after you die to see it, but that doesn't mean I can't share my thoughts on it now. I'd like to give you great comfort, my fellow disciple. Nothing is random with you. If you're in Jesus then God is having a perfect work done in you. You are being perfected. Of this, we should have no doubt. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined

to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified,” Romans 8:29-30. Sanctification goes right between justification and glorification. Notice the certainty of the work in this passage. Scripture reminds Christians that though they were born in Adam (in sin) the end of their lives brings a sure conformity to Christ. “And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man,” 1 Corinthians 15:49. Christ is not just a carpenter from Nazareth; He is the carpenter from heaven. He is a molder, a shaper and a finisher. Knowing this is very important. Jesus is: “...the author and finisher of our faith...” Hebrews 12:2. This is not only true in the universal, global sense, but individually in our hearts as well. Worship is a product no less tangible than sunlight, and God is about producing it from this planet.

So why the wait? Why the long road of sanctification? Why design this life the way it is? I’m getting there...brevity is not my gift. In Luke 14:28-30 Jesus says, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’?” Both this teaching and the one immediately after it are talking about our commitment to Christ. I’m using a bit of liberty with the text admittedly, but I think of the faith of each Christian as a project undertaken *by* God for the joy and happiness *of* God. We are like tower projects undertaken by God. I think of this in both its universal and personal scope. God is happy in this work! What a master builder He is! He delights in the perfection and fruitfulness of His children, John 15:8. From before the first day of earth He considered the redemption of the seed and knew He was able to accomplish it. God would not begin to build this “tower” called salvation without being certain He was able to finish it. He started after Adam’s fall and built a faith that we run into and are safe, Proverbs 18:10. Men sinned; He will finish the work. He is most able. God makes good on His word and will never be mocked. This is true whether we’re speaking of the people of Israel after the Exodus (Exodus 32:12) or the salvation of all of God’s elect. Paul speaks sweepingly of this massively disclosed hope to Titus in Titus 1:1-3. Regarding the accomplishment of God’s masterful work in Christians, Paul elsewhere says that he’s, “Confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ,” Philippians

1:6. He doesn't start building us to abandon the project. All this is to say that God will certainly finish what He starts, both on earth as a whole and in you and me. In this I want to give you great courage. If He saves you it is with full power, resources and determination to perfect you. That perfecting is sanctification. It requires your sweat, blood and tears. It calls for your discipline. If you know you're a sinner without hope in yourself. If you've come to a living Jesus and been forgiven in accordance with the Scriptures and you love Him dearly today then I pray that you would take heart...God is having His way. Yes, even now.

The problem with this is all the sin and suffering we endure on our way to heaven. Bunyan understood this and wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* many years ago. God promised suffering. Suffering churches received the New Testament's letters. It is frustrating to love God and therefore to be at war with sin sometimes. The true Christian hates sin and grows more and more to despise it as time goes on and he becomes more like Jesus. The problem then is our immaturity. Immaturity in this letter, in case you haven't noticed, is a synonym for sin. We fight, swear, lie, steal, and blow it all the time. Why did He not just perfect us?

The answer is that I believe it is for an eternal weight of glory. Rest gets sweeter in proportion to fatigue...perhaps this is why the greatest in heaven are the servants among us. I pray you work to at last eternally enter His rest. Gaining an eternal perspective, as with any relationship, is I suppose a key to faithful endurance. Think of your life not just in light of itself, but in light of all of eternity. Looking past this fleeting life is key. I believe that this is what Paul means when he writes: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal," 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Look where he looked, my friend. Doing this brings you heart health.

Are you laying up treasure in heaven now, saint? Jesus' teaching on this treasure follows 18 verses worth of teaching on giving, praying and fasting, Matthew 6:1-21. In the next life, the work wrought in this one will have an eternal outcome. I'm not saying that we should do it for reward, but there is a seeking of that glory that is *not* self-seeking, Romans 2:6-10. I'm not saying heaven is about us, no not at all, but there will be a remembrance- a reward, 1 Corinthians

3:9-15. There will be a testimony to God's work on this earth. Isn't this why the nail scars remain in His hands? We have an eternal purpose called "An eternal weight of glory" emanating from this life that is only crafted by time spent. The glory is Christ's, but God has chosen to involve His church.

C.S. Lewis once wrote of the ability of one man to illuminate a special part of another. He wrote of how a certain one of his friends alone was able to cause another one to respond in certain ways like to a joke. That one friend, he said, alone had an ability to affect a certain part in the other. When one of those friends died, Lewis said he not only lost that friend, but also a part of the one still alive because his living friend would never again in this life be seen interacting with the one now dead. In this he said that friendship perhaps bears a wonderful nearness to heaven. Each person redeemed in grace will individually see and convey their praise to God in the way they have individually come to see Him. This is the work of the master. He is revealing Himself. The billions redeemed will praise God clearer together. Sanctification, which would be nothing without the struggles that endear us to God, is kind of like you bringing your one puzzle piece to heaven to fit with the other billions. Our praise will paint the picture for each other. We cannot see this now. I'm not saying God needs this as if He needed us to paint this self portrait. I'm only amazed that He'd involve us at all. Life is about preparing to see God, Matthew 5:8. How much of that "sight" then is formed in us in the drudgery of this life? Would the Psalmist's reflection of God as with covering feathers have been seen without the danger? Psalm 91:4. Would Job's confession carry as much weight if his clothes were not stained with ash, Job 42:1-6? Why did Peter's confession years later in Jesus' ministry elicit such a blessing while Nathanael's, which was basically the same years earlier, didn't? John 1:49; cf. Matthew 16:16. It involved time, sight and knowledge. Would the awesome imagery of God as a lion make sense without Israel's enemies? Hosea 11:10. How much of the grace of God do you bask in when persecuted? As you've grown, has this not been a wonderful assurance to your faith in Christ that you endure persecution and consider yourself privileged to have done so, Acts 5:41? Peter said it's when persecution hits you that the Spirit of God rests upon you, 1 Peter 4:14. How about: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you," Matthew 5:11-12? Notice where the reward is. There is reward in this life, Luke 18:29-30, but there is more in the next. John Piper once said

something like, “I never met anyone who told me they learned the deepest and most profound truths about God while they were on vacation.” Struggles are designed. God allows sin to persist and is sovereign over all of our lives, 1 Corinthians 10:13. One day, in His sovereignty, He’ll remove sin altogether, but, until then we must know that there’s a reason for this life exactly as it is post our justification. Sanctification takes time. This is a good thing.

How many hearts have been brought to explosive worship when considering the cross? Is the cross not the epitome of suffering? Yet it’s what we’re called to remember most, 1 Corinthians 11:26. A true and good emotion, like any I suppose, is only sweetened with time. How much more do I love my wife today than when we were first married? I love her much more now than seven years ago. I can’t wait till our 40th anniversary. In Christ I see my love growing more and more as well, but only with time. This is only possible after justification. I see it all the more against the increasing knowledge of my sin. This is only possible in my sanctification. He, the sinless, loves me, the sinner. God does not need me, but I need Him. There is a depth to my emotion in this that I truly cannot express in words. It is more profound today than the day I first believed. Love with Christ takes time to sweeten like fermentation in a wine. I see this in Scripture, I hear this from my elders in the church, and I profess it myself.

The last time I cried in church was while singing a song the truth of which was overwhelming. Such moments rarely come, but I remember them vividly. It was a year or two ago. We were singing a song called, “Once Again” by Matt Redman. Part of the simple refrain goes, “Thank You for the cross, thank You for the cross, thank You for the cross, my friend.” The song speaks about looking at the work of God on the cross and just being appreciative. All that day I had been thinking deeply about my sin and sin’s overarching reality in this life. A sound faith comes from knowing God and knowing yourself. On this day the two collided. I was thinking about my wretchedness and the truth of the song hit me while we sang. God called me a friend of His because I’m in Him, John 15:15. I was so thankful. I literally bent over (trying to be all conservative about it) and just cried. I could not sing for a minute or two. It wasn’t an unmingled sadness. It was more like an overwhelming joy despite the knowledge of my sinful sadness. God knows me...yet He loves me. Truly, words can’t explain what that moment felt like. It was simply the truth of the cross. Though faith is *not* about feeling, I felt my love for God that day expressed inexpressibly. The richness of that emotion did not come overnight. It does

not come without time. It took years to be ready for it. That's sanctification. Without the falls, the trials and the striving, I just don't think that happens. There is eternal purpose in this. Perhaps in this we can take perspective on why He waits between our justification and our glorification. Oh, it is such a perfect work He's doing in us. In that moment I saw God. If I could have sung it I would have. I just kept singing (trying to) about God's grace. Thank You for the cross! Thank You, my friend. What a privilege. What an honor to be called His friend and one He loves, 1 John 3:1. In that moment I truly entered in to praise God. That was a sanctifying work God did in me. He will continue that work.

As far as we're concerned, it's a lot about us all growing in grace and being brought to fully love the same gloriously holy God from a truly unique standpoint. This perspective is most dramatically shaped through what we have suffered. Soldiers are trained in garrison, but what Soldier's life isn't most shaped by the battles he's fought? It's character that the Spirit creates in us. It is no less intricate and awesome than DNA, and God is a master at generating it. He could do it on day one, but this would be a lesser joy, from an eternal perspective, for you. Knowing His grace alone through all this then only adds to the character produced. Humility then grows with character, Philippians 3:9. Character is humility and vice versa. Follow Christ. The world is about the worship of its God. It will be a finished work one day. It'll be the result of a diverse, enduring, time tested, time honored, all nations gathering, perfected, longed for work of a God who gives eternal rest. That takes time even when you're a timeless God. We are the project. It will be seen in us. We then come together like so many different instruments to create a symphony of adoration. This world will not end until the very last instrument takes its place in the stands. He is not willing that any of these pieces be lost. In this life we see the mercy of a God more after the millionth pardon than the thousandth. In sin and suffering, we long for a better life. We could not see it as clearly at the first. There is no true saint whose love for Christ is less today than it was 60 years ago. This is true because he understands God and his sin more clearly. This is the everlasting principle of Luke 7:47. So, if God should grant it, take 50 years to see just how much He has forgiven you for. Grow closer to grace to see how far He's brought you from death. You'll see it more clearly on the other end. Let the world and its evils paint the backdrop for your first glance of pure light. Be at work against darkness as light while you're still here, Matthew 5:14. Sanctification always takes time because of who we are. God is shaping His instruments. It takes time. God's not short on it. If you bend a board or even a piece of metal

too fast it'll break. The most tempered steel is the strongest. His glory is worth the wait, so wait well. Live. Live to grow closer. One preacher said, "I don't think anyone is a Christian who is not willing to look past this fleeting life." Amen. Step back. What are you doing here *for eternity* in your job, your family, your music, your dance, your schooling?

So take heart. God is fashioning you an instrument for praise. It's not because you're awesome, it's because He is. The problem is not in the plan; it's in us. God's wisdom is so perfect. It isn't that He couldn't do it over night; He's letting His church taste of His glory now. There is an eternal work going on and this life is perfectly structured to optimize it. I pray we all come to trust that all the more in our lives. Why do you think He gave us a book recording so many of His works? Why do you think God called the Israelites to remembrance so often? When we take a look at all His works we are all the more to be created a people of praise. You and I are at the tail end of a lot of work! We are at the end of the coming of Jesus who is and was God with us, Matthew 1:23; cf. Isaiah 7:14. Beloved, God can't fail. So trust in Christ. Trust in Christ forever. His glory is mixed in with your sanctification, Philippians 1:11, and His Resurrection bought your justification, Romans 4:25.

If there was no struggle, sure, it would be easier. But if there were no struggle then we could not now partake in so great a victory. We would not have an eternity to remember His works in our lives. So struggle more against your sin and that victory will only be sweeter. God is fine tuning your praise. Ultimately, as I said, we don't know why God does all that He does. His reasons are His own, and I'm sure we will come to understand much more when we see Him for the first time. If we take a proper perspective though, I pray it helps us all endure what God has brought to our lives. Be strong in the Lord.

"May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you," 1 Peter 5:10.

Thank you for your attention to this letter.