

## **BIG WORDS series: Sanctification**

Have you ever prayed for God to change something about your circumstances ... and nothing ever seemed to change? There are things we want in life that seem to us to be “no-brainers” - good things that would make us better, happier people, with more to offer the world around us. But even though we pray for them persistently over a long time, we don’t get the thing we’re asking for. What’s wrong? It may be, sometimes (I’m not saying all the time or even most of the time, but sometimes), God may be trying to teach us something, to help us to learn something from the struggle of waiting, of enduring, of keeping the faith when circumstances are challenging. I actually think that happens a lot.

In the Narnia Chronicle called *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis introduces us to a character named Eustace Scrubb. Eustace is a whiny, opinionated and quite uncooperative young fellow who, once he arrives on board the Dawn Treader, does nothing to build relationships with others, but instead complains about everything and demands to be put ashore at the nearest British Embassy. Finally, on one of the islands that the crew stops to visit, Eustace sneaks away from the rest and climbs into the hills, eventually stumbling on a great treasure in the cave of a dying dragon. He puts one of the gold bracelets on his arm and falls to sleep, only to awaken some time later having been changed into a dragon. He has no way out of his misery, which includes a very tight bracelet on his dragon leg and the huge embarrassment of having to return to his companions on the voyage in the form of a fearful dragon. Finally, on a different island, he encounters a huge lion who tells Eustace to follow him to a mountain well. Once there the lion tells the boy that before he can bathe, he has to get undressed. Eustace begins to peel off first one layer of scales, then another, then another, until the lion tells him, “You will have to let me undress you.” The lion’s cut is deep and painful, but it is also successful.

Soon Eustace has his own skin again and is soaking in the cool water. If he had been a boy who prayed, I think I know what his prayer would have been: “Get me out of here!” But he was a boy with a deep need, a disability that had to be corrected, an attitude that had to be changed, if he was going to get on in the world, have friends, earn the respect and trust of others and on it goes. The important thing to remember is that he wasn’t going to get there on his own, holding tight to his prejudices and self-centred character traits. He needed the help of someone who had the ability to help him change, to tear away the worst of his flaws and breathe new life where the old had been removed. Aslan, who represents Jesus, was the one who could do that. For Eustace, this represented a life-changing, sanctifying experience, and, although there would be more change and more learning to come, this was a huge step forward.

Last week we ended with a look at the process, rather than the ‘event’ of regeneration. We saw that the new life in the Spirit is something that happens “more and more”, which means that there is no such thing as a quick path to perfection. Today we’ll look at the ultimate in process words, “sanctification”.

The root word for “sanctify” is the Hebrew *quadash* and the Greek word *hagios*. They are the same words that are translated in both Old and New Testaments as “holy”. “Holy” describes something that is “consecrated” or “set apart” to God. This holiness is not achieved by the thing or person -- it’s not something we have in ourselves -- it is something that God does that allows us to be in His holy presence. For example, the altar on which the sacrifices were offered was not, in and of itself, a holy object, but had to be made holy in the way that God set out for it to be sanctified. In the same way, people are not, by ourselves, holy, but are made holy through God’s action. But, God’s action requires our reaction. Let’s look at two verses out of Leviticus that raise both aspects of holiness:

*Set yourselves apart to be holy, for I, Yahweh, am your God. Keep all My laws and obey them, for I am Yahweh, who makes you holy. (Leviticus 20:7,8)*

God is the One who makes Israel holy, and because of that they are to set themselves apart to Him, to live in a way that honors Him. In other words, because of who God is, there is a call on His people to, not just go through the religious motions, but to live differently from the nations around them. And that became a huge issue for Israel throughout the generations that followed. They would repeatedly become enamored with the culture of the people who lived near them, and would worship their gods and follow their religious practices, to the dishonor of Yahweh who had saved them out of slavery in Egypt.

So sanctification has to do with behavior, with attitudes, with the way we conduct ourselves in the world ... AND, it has to do with God’s actions, both in what He did for us through Jesus on the cross and what He continues to do for us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Also, despite what I said earlier about the overall process of sanctification being one that is completed over time, a gradual process, there are also times when a person is faced with a decision, a need to respond to the Holy Spirit, and their response can result in immediate change and a huge leap forward. That was the situation Eustace faced in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Would he allow Aslan to cut deep in order to remove the dragon scales that had made his life even more miserable than before? Would he trust Aslan to make his life better, to bring him into freedom and to heal his brokenness. That’s the kind of decision that we face at various points in our lives and one in which we are given an opportunity to show our faith in God. When we choose His call to holiness, when we embrace this path of sanctification, we say, “Not my will, but yours be done.” And we set ourselves apart as being holy, as being sanctified to God.

Let’s take a look at some New Testament passages that deal with this word, with this theme. The one place where *hagios* is translated “sanctify” the most is in Jesus’ prayer in John 17. After saying that His disciples didn’t belong to the world system, just as Jesus didn’t belong to it, this:

*Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify Myself, that they too may be*

*truly sanctified. (17:17-19)*

The New Living doesn't use the word 'sanctify' in their translation of this passage, but notice how they convey the idea of separation, of setting apart:

*Make them pure and holy by teaching them Your words of truth. As You sent Me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give Myself entirely to You so they also might be entirely Yours.*

That's the idea that's contained in the phrase, "making holy". God sets us apart from the world, makes us holy to Himself, and then asks us to see ourselves that way and to act according to this new nature that He's given us. He asks us to be responsive to His words of truth so that we can be fully His.

Let's go to another passage. This comes from Acts 26, where Paul is describing his conversion experience on the road to Damascus to King Agrippa. He recounts the words he heard from Jesus just outside the city:

*I am sending you to (the Gentiles) to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God; so they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*  
(26:18)

Again, let's look at the New Living Translation:

*I am going to send you to the Gentiles, to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people who are set apart by faith in Me.*

Here is the heart of how sanctification begins, by an act of God in response to faith. Because we believe, He sets us apart and calls us His own children.

Most of the references to "sanctify" that came up in my study refer to something that has taken place, an action of God, by His Holy Spirit, that sets us apart. Some examples:

*Paul ... to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor.1:2)*

Notice that both past and present elements are here in this verse: believers have been sanctified (past tense) and called to *be holy* (anticipating present and future actions).

Here's a longer passage from 1 Corinthians in which Paul lists the characteristic behaviors of people who will not inherit the Kingdom of God, then says this:

*And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11)*

In this passage, Paul is referring to things that have already taken place -- you were washed (referring to regeneration, the new life in the Spirit that we talked about last

week), you were sanctified (set apart for God) and you were justified. But the context of these verses is that Paul is telling them that they should be able to resolve their differences face to face, not by going to court. And in the verses that follow, he urges them to abstain from all forms of sexual immorality. He is saying, "Because of who you are, a people of the Spirit, this is how you should act. Because you have been given new life, set apart for God and forgiven for all your sin, you should walk in a new way, different from the world around you."

Some other verses that suggest that God sets us apart and then we respond, would include 2 Thess. 2:13:

*From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.*

Another would be Paul's discussion of marriage when one spouse comes to faith. He says, in 1 Cor. 7:14:

*The unbelieving husband has been sanctified (set apart to God) through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.*

There is a grace that works through a marriage when one partner is a believer. It's not always clear to that partner or to the unbelieving spouse, but there is something going on in the spiritual world where the unbelieving wife or husband is "set apart", is, in some sense, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit by virtue of the person they are married to.

The ongoing nature of sanctification is emphasized in Paul's closing comments in 1 Thessalonians 5:

*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. (5:23)*

The key word phrase is "be kept blameless", describing a "keeping" that goes on through the challenges of daily life. The sanctification that takes place goes "through and through" the individual, as they are made to be like Jesus.

And that's where the process part of sanctification takes us - to the point where we think like Jesus did, about the glory of His Father, about the awesome wonder of His purposes on the earth, about the beauty of His plan for each person and about the worthiness of His person to be praised and worshiped and obeyed. That's how Jesus lived His life. He was motivated by a passion for His Father's Kingdom and He was focused on doing what the Father had given Him to do.

There are two creatures on the Australian coat of arms - the emu and the kangaroo - and they have something in common that appeals to Australians. Both the emu and the kangaroo can only move forward - they can't back up. The emu is prevented by its three-toed foot which causes it to fall if it attempts to go backwards. For the kangaroo, the obstacle is its rather large tail. Our role in this process of sanctification, this

process that begins with being set apart by God through our faith in Christ, continues as we move forward under the leading and the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't do it on our own steam -- but we do continue to choose to obey, to follow Jesus' example, to give our lives for God's purpose and glory.

You've probably heard a version of the saying, "God loves us just the way we are and He loves us too much to leave us that way." That's why there is this sanctifying work, this making holy, this "setting apart". We need to be set apart from the values of this world in order to fix our eyes on the things that God values. There has to be a change in us before we can show the world what love is, what truth is, what the Spirit of Jesus can do in their lives, too. We can't show anybody what we don't have, and God wants to show off through us.

Here's a picture of sanctification: this is a scarab beetle grub or larva -- and it's not very attractive at first glance, or second. The scarab grubs look like this for about a year, as they grow up inside a rotting tree stump ... until the rainy season arrives and the adult scarab emerges soft bodied and pale. Within a few hours, their bodies harden and the colours they will display for the next three months are on display. Here are some samples ... they are sold for up to \$500, so if you see one, don't crush it.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of any person who submits to Him, is to transform us from ugly grub to something beautiful and valuable. There may be issues inside your heart that you would feel embarrassed to tell anyone about. Maybe it's some petty jealousy, or a secret rebellion or a deeply buried hurt and the anger that hurt nurtures. God knows about it, and He wants to heal it, to change it, so that you can shine in the world in a way that presents His image, His glory.

Paul talks about one aspect of this process of personal transformation that we call sanctification in his letter to the believers in Philippi. He says:

*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life ...(Phil. 2:14-16a)*

Our part in that exchange is to stop complaining about our circumstances and to stop arguing with others. God's part is to make us faultless and to cause us to shine like stars in the universe as we hold out, offer to others, this wonderful word of life that has taken hold of us. Now, whose part is harder? Is it harder to stop complaining and arguing or to produce in someone the brilliant glory of one of the stars in the night sky? Our part is so small, but it is also so essential. The Holy Spirit doesn't take over our bodies so that we go on auto pilot while He changes all the things in us that need to change. As we saw again last week from Galatians 5, He leads us in the dance and our job is to keep in step. We need to cooperate, need to be a willing dance partner, allowing the Spirit to work in us and through us for God's glory.

And He does. I appreciate this quote from John Newton, the former slave trader who

would take slaves from Africa on his ship and bring them to America for sale. He would later repent of this evil and give his life over to Jesus, and still later wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace". He said this:

*I am not what I might be, I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I wish to be, I am not what I hope to be. But I thank God I am not what I once was, and I can say with the great apostle, "By the grace of God I am what I am."*

Jerry Bridges tells the story of a Russian pilot who flew his fighter plane to Japan during the long years of the cold war between the Soviet Union and the West. He asked and was given asylum, was flown to the U.S., was given a new identity and, eventually became an American citizen. While his citizenship changed, he was still the same person. He was still influenced by his upbringing, his culture, the economic hardships he had endured, all the things that had shaped his identity. Through time, he would gradually learn to live without the same fears he had had before and would become accustomed to a new culture and greater freedom than he had known in the past.

His identity was once Soviet, but was now American. Our identity also changes when we come in faith to Jesus. We were once part of a world system hostile to God and we are now adopted as His child. And just as the Russian pilot had to learn the ways of a new culture, we need to wrap our minds around the values of the Kingdom of God. It's not just about what we do or don't do, but much more it's about loving the God who gave His Son for us and living in loving response to who this Jesus is.