

God's Wonderful Plan for Your Life

1 Chronicles 29:1–19, 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

When I was in college there was a popular tract authored by Dr. Bill Bright and published by Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru) entitled “The Four Spiritual Laws.” It was a small booklet with a presentation of the Gospel (though not from a Calvinistic perspective). The first “spiritual law” was this: “God loves you and has *a wonderful plan for your life*.”

I thought of that phrase as I prepared this message. In our text this morning, as the apostle Paul begins to draw his first letter to the Thessalonians to a close, he writes: “may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Note the triumphant tone. Paul is telling the church that they have a great future ahead of them. These saints have come to Christ and become his worshipers. They have confessed the faith with Christ’s church. Their lives have been transformed by the gospel. They had become followers of Christ. They had received the Word in spite of great personal affliction. These Thessalonian Christians had an exemplary faith and a compelling testimony throughout the ancient world. But God is not finished with them. He is going to continue to perform his work in their lives. He has a wonderful plan for them. It is his intention to fully *sanctify* them—ultimately to conform them in every respect to the perfect image of Christ. And when the Lord would return, it was God’s promise that they would be preserved unto his heavenly kingdom. The gospel would be victorious.

Brothers and sisters, this is not just ancient history. If you belong to Christ, let me assure you on the basis of Holy Scripture that God has a wonderful plan for *your* life as well. I have three points this morning: (1) the Actor, (2) the acted upon, and (3) the outcome. First,

1. The Actor

Consider Paul’s words, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “may the God of peace Himself *sanctify* you completely.” This is a divinely-inspired prayer, and thus perfectly in accord with the divine will. There is no doubt but that this prayer will be perfectly accomplished in God’s elect. This is God’s wonderful plan for your life.

The main request of this prayer is embodied in the word “sanctify.” *Sanctify* means “set apart to a sacred purpose or to religious use, *consecrate*; purify.”¹ *Consecrate* means “to make or declare sacred, especially: to devote irrevocably to the worship of God.” What Paul is saying is that it is God’s will that his church, and all its members, be set apart, purified, consecrated and totally and unreservedly devoted to God and his service. No church on earth has attained this completely.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sanctify>

This work is extensive and all-encompassing, far beyond the ability of mere man to achieve.

Wayne Grudem states the definition concisely: sanctification is “growth in likeness to Christ.”² And while that definition is a lot simpler, it describes a process that is definitely *not* simple: becoming Christlike!

Think of who Christ is. He is the second Person of the Holy Trinity, God in human flesh. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, Christ alone among all the members of the human race is entirely without sin. On the other hand, you and I and all other people inherited a sin nature from Adam. Along with David we can truthfully say, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” “In Adam’s fall we sinned all.” We were born with a sin nature, and we have sinned, either intentionally or unintentionally, every day of our lives. We have failed to worship God as we should; and we have failed to love our neighbor as did Christ, who loved his enemies, was kind those who hated him, and went about doing good, his whole life long.

What is sanctification? The Shorter Catechism gives a helpful definition: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

Sanctification differs from justification, which has to do with our legal standing before God. Justification is the “act of God’s free grace whereby he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight.” In justification, the righteousness of Christ is “imputed” to us. That is our legal standing. Our sins are washed away, and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us, as if it were our own.

Sanctification begins the moment we are born again by the Holy Spirit. He gives us a heart to know God and desire to do his will. He takes away our love of sinning and gives us a longing to please him. Every one who is truly born again is in the process of being sanctified. Sanctification has three stages: it has a definite beginning at regeneration, it increases throughout life, and it is completed at death (or at Christ’s return, whichever comes first). This last stage is referred to by the writer to the Hebrews when he refers to “the spirits of just men *made perfect*” (Heb. 12:23). How encouraging to know that at death we are set free from from indwelling sin and made perfect in the sight of a holy God! When we join in worship with the saints of all the ages around the throne of the Lamb, our sanctification will be complete.

So in our 1 Thessalonians text Paul says, “may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.” The Greek word that Paul uses is a combination of the words *whole* and *perfect* and means *complete in all respects*.³ This is God’s goal

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 746

³ *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*, ὁλοτελής (Logos Bible Software)

for every Christian—a sanctification so thoroughgoing and all-inclusive that it will meet God’s perfect standard, exemplified in Christ. This, dear brother or sister, is God’s wonderful plan for your life!

But notice: who is the Sanctifier? It is God! God is the Actor. Unless God regenerates us, unless he continues the good work of sanctification begun in us, then there is no hope for us. Our Shorter Catechism captures this perfectly when it says that “sanctification is the work of God’s free grace.” Note: sanctification is the work of “God,” and it is a work of “grace”—not man’s deserving. Oh, how we wish we had the ability to regenerate a man or woman dead in trespasses and sins, to change a hater of God into a lover of God! There are people that we deeply love and care about who are lost, with no desire to submit to the lordship of Christ. They wander aimlessly through life, living for pleasure, with no desire for the things of the Lord, no desire to attend worship, no desire to give up their sinful habits. We who believe the Gospel pray for them, witness to them and warn them to “flee from the wrath to come.” We share with them the gospel: that a God of love sent his only begotten Son to die for unworthy sinners, that the Lord of glory came from heaven and went to the cross to pay in full the penalty for his people’s sins, that salvation is the greatest gift that anyone could ever have, and that if they commit their lives to him, they will never regret it—and they still will not accept it! They love their sin too much. They have a plan for their own life, and they don’t want any goody-two-shoes ruining it. For them, the church is full of hypocrites and busybodies. Religion might be good for some people—but not for them. They don’t want to hear any more. We pour out our heart in prayer, begging God to change their heart and have mercy upon them, but they are hard-hearted. Christ is their only hope, but they won’t have anything to do with him. Their mind is made up.

If you love the Lord it is because he had mercy on you when you wanted nothing to do with him. He changed your heart and drew you to himself. If you belong to Christ, then you love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Christ is the most precious thing to you. Your soul longs—yea, even faints—for the courts of the Lord. Your heart and flesh cry out for the living God.

God is the Actor in sanctification. He must act in order for you to be sanctified. This is not to say that you have no part to play in sanctification. The Bible tells us to “submit to God” (Jas. 4:7). Though sanctification is ultimately God’s work, and it cannot happen without him, he wants us to submit to him. That’s something that *we* do. To refuse to submit to him is sin. In Philippians 2 we are instructed: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (vv. 12–13 ESV). This does not mean that we save ourselves. We are saved “by grace . . . through faith . . . unto good works.” Working out our salvation is a good work that follows salvation; it is

the fruit of saving faith: living in obedience to God, not to *merit* salvation, but to live it out.

So God is the Actor in salvation. Second, consider

2. The acted upon

Return to the first part of our text: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.” Who are “the acted upon”? They are the “you” in the phrase “sanctify *you* completely.” This is consistent New Testament language. The “you” is plural, expressing the prayer that all the members of the church in Thessalonica would be sanctified.

What does it look like to be sanctified? Let us return to Grudem’s pithy definition: sanctification is “growth in likeness to Christ.” This is God’s will for every born-again child of God.

Sanctification involves growth. In 1 John the apostle addresses the saints in various stages of maturity: “I write to you, *little children*, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I write to you, *fathers*, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, *young men*, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, *little children*, because you have known the Father. I have written to you, *fathers*, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, *young men*, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.” This passage is poetic. It describes stages of growth. The word translated “little children” was used by Jesus in familiar, loving address to his disciples, and by the apostle John to his spiritual children.⁴ Jesus said, “Little children, yet a little while I am with you” (John 13:33). In his first epistle John says, “and now, *little children*, abide in him . . . *little children*, let no man deceive you . . . my *little children*, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth . . . ye are of God, *little children* . . . *little children*, keep yourselves from idols.” Such language is an acknowledgment that we do not become fully formed spiritual adults when we are born again. We need to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In context, “young men” refers to men of marriageable age, ready to take a wife. “Fathers”—unsurprisingly—are those who have fathered children. Such was the apostle Paul, who referred to Timothy as his “son in the faith,” a man whom he had begotten through the gospel. These references, though masculine, apply to girls and women too. God wants all his spiritual children to grow in grace and become more useful in service to him.

So the “acted upon” are those who are born again, whom the Spirit of God is slowly but surely equipping for special service in the church of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, τεκνίον (Logos Bible Software)

It is a great blessing to be “acted upon” by the Spirit of God. After Communion today we will sing the hymn “O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts.” One of the stanzas has these words: “Our restless spirits yearn for thee, where’er our changeful lot is cast, glad that thy gracious smile we see, blest that our faith can hold thee fast.” Consider those words “blest that our faith can hold thee fast.” In a world of constant change, where so much talk is empty chatter and where promises mean nothing, it is an incredible blessing that God is so reliable, so trustworthy, so unwavering, that our faith can hold him fast. In the words of our text, “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”

Church of Jesus Christ, your God will never betray you! He will never give you up to the Devil. He will never leave you nor forsake you. He will absolutely—without fail—safeguard you to his heavenly kingdom. If he were to break his promise he would cease to be God. You may experience disappointment and sorrow in this vale of tears. But whatever adversity God in his infinite wisdom brings into your life is for his own glory and your ultimate good—guaranteed! He designs it that you might learn to trust him more, and say with the Psalmist, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Ps. 119:71).

Child of God, it is your loving Heavenly Father who “acts upon” you in sanctification, that you might live in supreme happiness and joy forever. Thirdly, consider

3. The outcome

The apostolic blessing continues: “may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Spirit” and “soul” are two aspects of the immaterial part of the human person. When God created man, he formed a body out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life, so man became a living soul. Man therefore consists of two parts: material (the part we see, the part that was formed by God in the garden) and immaterial (the part we can’t see). The immaterial part of man is variously called the spirit, soul, mind, heart, will, conscience, etc.

Paul is praying for the church, the company of the redeemed. The thrust of his prayer is that the whole person be ultimately conformed to the perfect character of our Lord Jesus Christ. This will indeed happen at the second coming, when we see the Savior face to face. John writes, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” At the second coming the church’s sanctification will be complete in every respect. There is *no doubt* that Paul’s prayer will be fulfilled perfectly, for he prays according to the will of God.

The Christian prays, “How long, O Lord?” earnestly desiring to see the work of sanctification in his life complete in every respect. But in the meantime it is our duty to put sin to death, and yield ourselves to God, meditating on Scripture,

devoting ourselves to prayer, endeavoring to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” In our personal lives we should pursue those activities and pastimes that promote godliness, discarding whatever exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.⁵ If an activity draws us closer to God, we should pursue it. If it moves us away from God, or causes us to forget God, we should avoid it. If we would be embarrassed, were the Lord Jesus Christ to walk in on us when we were pursuing a questionable activity, then we should surely give it up, right then and there. God must be glorified in *everything* we do. Are we truly willing to give up activities that do *not* glorify God? If not, then are we really disciples of Christ, or are we just kidding ourselves?

Our Old Testament text this morning uses the words “sanctify” or “sanctified” six times. (Some translations use “consecrate” and “consecrated,” which have a similar meaning.) The chapter records the beginning of the reign of good King Hezekiah. He was the son of wicked King Ahaz, an idolator who worshipped Baal and followed the abominations of the nations that the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. Toward the end of his reign, Ahaz decided to worship the gods of the kings of Syria—shameful idolatry! He gathered up the articles of the house of God, cut them in pieces, shut up the doors of the temple, and brought the worship of the true God to a definitive end. He erected altars in every corner of Jerusalem. He made high places to burn incense to other gods, and provoked the LORD God to anger. It was a very dark time for faithful worshippers of the Lord. There was no public worship for a time. Perhaps they could gather in synagogues, but the sacrificial system ground to a halt. There was no other place on earth where the pure worship of God was being carried out. The temple in Jerusalem was the only place. It might as well have had a sign nailed to the door, “Closed permanently.”

After Ahaz died, his son Hezekiah became king. Hezekiah was a young man of only twenty-five years, but he was very mature for his age. He had a sense of mission. He resolved to revive the temple worship that had ground to a halt. His father had been buried only the day before—but *on the very first day of his reign* he opened the temple doors and repaired them. Then he gathered the priests and Levites in the East Square—the front yard of the temple—and announced: “Hear me, Levites! Now *sanctify* yourselves, *sanctify* the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry out the rubbish from the holy place.”

The word translated “sanctify” or “consecrate” comes from a root meaning *holy*. God himself is called “the Holy One of Israel.” That which is holy is that which is devoted irrevocably to God. God says, “Be holy, for I am holy.”⁶ Now,

⁵ 2 Cor. 10:5

⁶ Lev. 11:44, 1 Pet. 1:16

Hezekiah, in his very first executive order, directs the priests and Levites to do two things: sanctify themselves, and sanctify the temple. There would be no more idolatry in Jerusalem. The priests and Levites would serve the Lord exclusively. They would live lives of holiness. They would cast all the idols out of their houses and all the remnants of idolatry out of the temple. It would be carried down to the brook Kidron and swept out to the sea—symbolic of the putting away of sin. They would purge the debris and filth out of the temple and restore the divinely-ordained furnishings, so that the regular worship of the Lord could recommence.

This is a picture of what God wants his people to do. He wants us to confess our sins and devote ourselves unreservedly to the Lord. In the words of an old gospel song, “break down every idol, cast out every foe—now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”⁷

This is the ongoing work of sanctification. Is this something you are interested in? Do you want your mind and body to be a temple to the Lord, dedicated to him exclusively? If you belong to Christ, then you should worship him exclusively. Christianity was never meant to be a part-time avocation—something you do only when the mood strikes you. The duty of every Christian is to “seek first the kingdom of God.” Jesus must be Lord of all. Amen!

⁷ https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/I_Shall_Be_Whiter_than_Snow/