

SANCTIFICATION: AN EYE ON THE COMING GLORY

(PART 1)

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Historically there has been much debate about what sanctification means for the Christian, and how it is experienced. Is being 'holy' a subjective internal state, or a declared pronouncement by God, or both?

In Roman Catholicism a Christian can be infused with holiness, much like when a liquid is poured into a vessel. Such inherent holiness can bring the individual to the point of divinization where the Pope can declare such a person a "saint".

Some Protestants see sanctification as something that comes by a once-and-for-all experience --- you get "zapped" by the power of "the Holy Ghost" as though (metaphorically speaking at least) you get your finger of faith plugged into the heavenly power socket for an endless supply of supernatural power. The result of such a 'baptism of the Holy Ghost' is a powerful testimony all one's days. Some of the earlier Protestants called this a "second work of grace" being seen as subsequent to conversion.

Others see sanctification as a steady process of slow transformational change. Little by little we become conformed to the likeness of Jesus as we daily walk with him. A good text for this view would be Paul's statement that, "we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory ...(2 Cor. 3: 18). Thus, sanctification is transformation into the image of Jesus happening one day at a time, almost imperceptibly.

Yes, there has been a lot of air expelled and expended for decades, even centuries, over a subject that should be a great joy and energising power in our Christian walk. I for one, do not want to add to the endless debate. As you will now see, my approach is not one that is usually prioritised, but I am prepared to suggest it is very Biblical and very practical and will revolutionise the way we live your Christian lives.

DEFINITION

Sanctification means to be "set apart" for God, to become like God --- godly;

But as He who has called you is holy, so be holy yourselves in all your behaviour; because it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy (1 Peter 1:15-16).

This is a little daunting, to say the least. For when the Bible says God is holy, it means He is not like His creation at all. God is "other", which is to say, different. He is not to be confused with or likened to His creation. So, if I am to become holy as He is holy, does this mean that others are going to view me as "strange", "angular", a bit odd and not really related to life 'in the real world'?

Remember Isaiah's vision of the celestial Seraphim covering their own resplendent faces at the awe-inspiring sight of the Almighty on His Throne? They called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). And the universal response of every mortal who has had an encounter with God has been the same as Isaiah's, "Woe is me, for I am ruined" (Isaiah 6:5)!

Even the reflected glory of God in the person of one of his emissaries (an angel) invariably evoked trembling and fear. Everybody in the Bible visited by an angel experienced emotions that were ineffable; they felt overwhelmed by the numinous. Fear gripped them.

So if God wants me to be holy as He is holy, will it mean I will walk around with a heavy conscience, overwhelmed with my own sinfulness and inadequacies? Perhaps it might be better to agree with Isaiah and say, "Then count me out. Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinner! This gig is too high and hard for me."

EYES ON THE COMING NEW AGE

So, how does sanctification work and what does a sanctified person look like? How do we spot a “holy” person, or somebody in the process of being sanctified? Here’s Paul’s answer:

God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit (literally, “in sanctification of spirit”) and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:13-14).

So, God has chosen us “for salvation”. But what is “salvation”? The popular idea seems to be that I am saved by believing in Jesus, having my sins forgiven, discovering God’s will for my life so that I can eventually ‘go to heaven’ for the rest of eternity. There is a grain of truth in that. For observe that “salvation” is defined as something we have not yet gained. Salvation is still future ... “that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

But this answer pushes us back one step further; what exactly is “the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”? Why, the whole context of this verse, indeed of the entire book of Thessalonians (in conformity with the entire NT witness) is that “the glory” is the Kingdom stored up for us in God’s promised future. This universal reign of God arrives at the Second Coming of Jesus, when “he is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” bringing God’s glorious salvation into this world at the last (2 Thess. 1:7).

The Second Coming of Jesus --- the *Parousia* or *Presence* of the Lord --- is the great hope of the Christian whose all-consuming ambition is to be “considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed we are suffering” (2 Thess. 1:5).

“The glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” is thus the fulfilment of the Kingdom promise when he is universally recognised as God’s messianic king. It’s the day when God’s righteousness and peace finally covers the earth. It’s the day when “the meek shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5: 5) and when “the pure in heart” (the sanctified) “see God” (Matt. 5: 8). It’s the day when creation is renewed, when all nature returns to perfect harmony, when the lion and the lamb can lie down together because he who is the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah reigns as the servant-king.

In 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.1) is also called “the Day of the Lord” (v.2). The theme concerning “the appearance of His coming” continues in verse 8. This will be the day of judgment of all hostile enemies because “they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (v. 10).

According to the NT, salvation *primarily* concerns the future “glory” that will be revealed when Jesus comes back bringing God’s glory to planet earth. Sanctification is the process by which we are being made ready for that Day. ¹ Everyone “having this hope in Him purifies his soul” in anticipation of that glorious Day of the Lord. ² So it is “through sanctification of spirit and faith in the truth (of the gospel)” that our souls are made holy for that Day.

We now have an understanding of how we may know if we are being sanctified. *A sanctified person is a Christian who is always thinking about gaining the future glory of Christ.* You can always tell a “saint” by the fact they have one eye on the future horizon of God’s coming Kingdom.

The day we pin our hope on the person and teaching of Jesus Christ is the day we start thinking God’s way about His promised future. From that day onwards, we are being prepared, that is being sanctified, because the end of this age looms large in our thinking. Our emotional and mental attachment now are united to Christ and his destiny.

Since we are now “raised up with Christ, [we] keep seeking the things above” and our minds are “set on the things above, not the things that are on the earth”. We now know that “when Christ who is our life is revealed [i.e.universally manifested at His coming], then we also will be revealed with him in glory” (Colossians 3:1-3).

¹ Many Scriptures show the connection between sanctification and living in the hope of salvation arriving in the coming Kingdom-glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Another classic example is 1 Peter 1: 3-7, where “the sanctifying of the Spirit” is associated with the new birth “to a living hope” for an inheritance that never fades” which is soon to be revealed at “the revelation of Jesus Christ”, whom we do not now see.

² First John 3:3 is another clear Scripture connecting the work of sanctification with our hope in the Second Coming.

Please observe again the apostle's consistent theme that sanctification is inextricably tied up with our anticipating with all our beings the day when hope will become sight and we actually "gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ"!

JESUS' OWN EXPLANATION

Come to think of it, this is exactly what Jesus Himself announced (surprise, surprise!). Did he not tell us that when we hear and obey his gospel-word of the Kingdom that the life-giving seed of God is planted in our souls? When we intelligently grasp and align our lives to Jesus' message we are "born again", "born from above", and are thus qualified by his grace to "enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 13:10f; John 3: 5f).

At this moment it's worth stopping and reflecting. I ask myself, I ask you, what thing(s) occupy your mind the most? Paul said "we have the mind of Christ". So what was the mind of Jesus all about? The answer surely is the future kingdom of God. His manifesto was, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:14-15; Matt. 4:17). How many times did Jesus say, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..."? Jesus' mind and affections were all consumed by God's promised future Age to Come.

So, if Jesus is anyone to go by, the NT standard that qualifies as "sanctified" is the life that is oriented towards, indeed dominated by, the hope of entering the Kingdom Jesus promised. If to be sanctified is to be holy like Jesus, then the sanctified person is the Christian who is always thinking about and being controlled by the horizon of God's promised future.

ANATOLEE ... THE RISING

Remember the *magi*, the so-called wise men from the East who came seeking the newborn king of the Jews? They said to the megalomaniac King Herod, "We have seen his star in the east (*en anatolee*, "in the rising"), and have come to worship him" (Matt. 2:2). They saw "his star at the rising".

Anatolee is one of the names given to Messiah.³ Its derivation probably comes from the Hebrew, being a reference to the Davidic "Branch" which shoots up. The idea is that the expected king was to arise from the House of David, so was an appropriate description of the birth of Jesus which was seen as the rising of the New Age. When the father of John the Baptist could finally speak again after his son was named, he prophesied;

Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise (*anatolee*) from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death (NASB Luke 1:78-79).

Thus Zechariah calls the Messiah "The Sunrise" because he brings in the New Order of God's promised future.

Significantly, at the very close of the NT, Jesus is called "the bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16). Why? Because when he returns, the New Age will have dawned. And the apostle Peter encourages his readers to pay attention to the prophetic Scriptures "until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). Although "the morning star" is a different Greek word here, the idea is exactly the same: When Jesus brings in the dawn of the New Day, it will be to our hearts as the rising of a light-bringing star.

THE TENSION OF THE TWO AGES

In classic Jewish thinking, there are two ages. There is the present age in which we are now living, the age of sin and suffering and hostility to God and His government. Then there is the Age to come, called "the Day of the LORD" when God will mightily intervene in human history and re-establish a universal reign of righteousness and everlasting peace for mankind, with Israel being the centre of that theocracy. This will be the messianic age, when God's agent and king will rule on God's behalf forevermore, and the "saints", God's faithful, will inherit that Kingdom to rule with him over the nations (see e.g. Daniel 7: 13-27).

³ The appellation "The Sunrise" (NASB), "the Dayspring" (KJV), "the rising sun" (NIV), "the day shall dawn" (RSV), "God's Sunrise" (The Message), "the dawn" (ESV), "heaven's dawn" (The One God, the Father, One Man Messiah Translation), probably derived from Jewish midrashic reflection upon texts like Num 24:17; Is. 9:2; 42:6-7, etc. The LXX gives *Anatolee* as one of Messiah's names.

Into this very Jewish worldview, the Christian gospel announced that God has now burst onto the scene and the New Age has already arrived in embryo. The proof the new Age has arrived is that Jesus is Lord. God has openly demonstrated this fact by raising him from the dead (Rom. 1: 4). That Jesus is the king of this new world order can be seen by the fact that the Spirit of God has been poured out. God's people through the Spirit of Christ can right now enjoy a real foretaste of the powers and the glory of the New Age. ⁴

So we currently have this tension where the two ages overlap. The present evil age is still very much with us, but its days are numbered. The Age to Come is already begun, but has not fully and finally come. It will be birthed when Jesus comes back in glory. ⁵

As many commentators put it we are in the "now, but not yet." The kingdom of God is present, but still future. It has come, but is still coming. So the wise person is one who is not being conformed to this present evil world, but is "being transformed by the renewing of the mind" and letting that future Age shape one's present living (Rom. 12:2).

The overlap of the two ages is a "mystery" once hidden in prophecy. The prophets did not see the "mystery" that the two ages would overlap for a while, and in the interlude, how God would be gathering out of all nations both Jews and Gentiles to be a holy people for Himself, before the great and mighty Day of the LORD.

The NT unveils this "mystery" not foreseen or understood until Christ. But now God declares it for all the world to see --- including the unseen spirit-world of Satan's cosmic powers --- for God has vindicated His Son by resurrecting him as the first immortalised man, thus guaranteeing a future judgment with eternal consequences for every human being (Acts 17:30-31).

The tragedy is that Satan and his demonic powers know the reality of God's New Age, but still hold this world in the dark, ignorant of the new reality. Accordingly, unbelievers live as though only this present world matters. Their minds are darkened to the dawning of the New Age, and they walk according to the spirit of this age, "the spirit that now energises the children of disobedience" (see Eph. 2: 1-3).

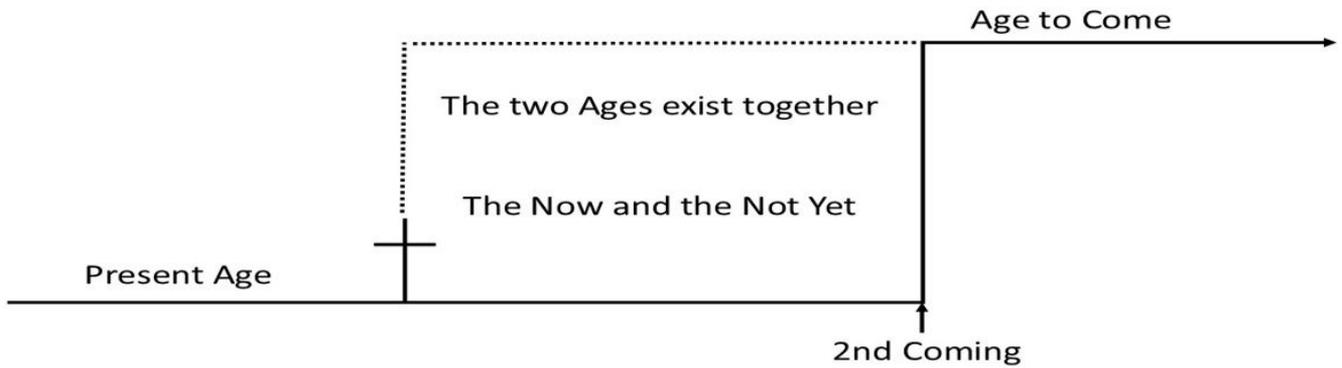
In contrast, all who believe this Gospel announcement of the Kingdom that Jesus and his apostles preached, are called to live by faith in this promised future. To grasp and to obey this Gospel-word, is to be implanted with heavenly seed. This gospel-word imparts new life, "eternal life" (the Greek reads, *zoeen aionion* which is literally, "the life of the age to come").

All of which is to say, that the man or woman who re-orient their life to the Lord Jesus Christ and his teaching of the coming Kingdom of God, will be preparing to be citizens in that future Age. Practically, it will determine the way I use my money, the way I spend my time, the manner in which I treat people of all different ethnicities, statuses, political and religious convictions, the subjects that consume my conversations, the books I read, the programmes I watch, and so forth. Thus I am being sanctified to the degree that this end view (what theologians call eschatology) is dominating my outlook.

We may graphically represent the "mystery" of the overlap of the two ages, the "now, but not yet", this way:-

⁴ We have a "deposit" of the Spirit which seals us as belonging to God and guarantees "our inheritance" on that Day (Eph. 1:14). Indeed, we can now "taste" the glory of this "heavenly gift", having become "partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Heb. 6:4).

⁵ Jesus called the birth of the New Age *the palingenesia*, "the regeneration", that is, the "again-genesis". He also described it as *the resurrection*, or literally, the day when things "stand up again" (see Matt. 19:28; 22:28-31).



TENSION

Practically of course, it's not easy living between two ages. There is a real tension for those of us who know we are citizens of a world which does not yet appear, yet at the same time we must go on living in a world in which we have become as aliens and foreigners. We cannot totally withdraw from this present life, nor can we conform to its values and principles. Only by faith in God's promise can I 'see' and embrace the future. Along with the OT 'saints' who "did not receive what was promised" we greet the Hope "from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13, 39).

Repentance, which is essential to entering the life of the Age to Come, is thus the process of re-orienting my values and behaviours, in light of the character of God's new Age. When I consent to be baptized in obedience to Jesus' command, I am united to Christ and His death to this Age and to His life belonging to the New Age.

Sanctification then, is letting myself be shaped by the reality of the future coming Age of glory. To be sanctified is to let the end (or the goal) start to be formed in me now. It is letting Christ's mind and message control my todays because I know His Tomorrow is dawning.

To think with a renewed, that is, with a sanctified mind, is thus to think of reality in terms of the truth the gospel of Christ reveals about the goal of God's promised future. The opposite is a 'this world' mentality which views reality apart from what God has revealed about His promised future. It's to live as though Jesus is still dead in the grave, as though the Spirit has not come, as though God has not kept His word, as though death is still the winner, as though I am still in charge of my own destiny, as though God does not exist at all.

To sum up so far:



SALVATION IS TO "GAIN THE GLORY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST" (2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-14).

SANCTIFICATION HAPPENS WHEN I EMBRACE GOD'S PROMISED FUTURE GLORY IN CHRIST TODAY.

(To be continued ...)

