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HOW DOES SANCTIFICATION WORK? (PART TWO)

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At the close of John's Gospel, he stands back and considers all that he has witnessed: "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25; all Scripture citations ESV).

What would all those unwritten books say? We know with certainty that they would contain the same *kinds* of things as the book that John did write. His Gospel largely consists of scenes selected from Jesus' encounters and conversations with various followers, foes, inquirers, and undecideds. The books that could be written would tell of innumerable further interactions. They would tell all that John left out from before Jesus ascended, and all that John witnessed during the subsequent fifty years of his life as the Spirit carried on Jesus' work. No doubt they would also tell all that the Lord has been doing throughout the centuries since John died. Those unwritten books to which John refers cannot be numbered because every person and circumstance displays never-to-be-repeated elements.

There are commonalities, of course. The common denominator is Jesus and His saving, sanctifying purposes. But the variety of personal details is as significant as the common themes. So in his Gospel, John takes time to zoom in, slowing everything down, lingering on a snippet of conversation or a situational detail. Watch Jesus interact, person by person, situation by situation. Notice how *He* notices things. Listen to the questions He asks and how He answers questioners. He rattles, invites, irritates, teaches, argues, clarifies, perplexes, saves, warns, encourages. Jesus reveals people for

who they are. He precipitates decisive choices. In response to Him, people change, either making a turn for the better or taking a turn for the worse.

It is noteworthy that Jesus never ministers by rote—because people and circumstances never clone. Jesus engages each person and situation in a personalized way. It is no truism to say that Jesus really does meet you where you are. Always.

This is an article about the *variety* in how lives change.

It is the second in a two-part series on sanctification. Part One looked at how ministry connects various bite-sized truths to life lived. It critiqued attempts to distill sanctification down to a single truth. Part Two will do two things. First, I will be anecdotal and autobiographical, giving a sense for the variety of ways that God goes about the lifelong rescripting of our lives. Second, I will give a simple model for staying oriented to the multiple factors at work.

A FEW OF THE BOOKS THAT COULD BE WRITTEN

I will bear witness. Of all the possible books telling what Jesus does, the book I know best is the one I am living. What I will say is necessarily and intentionally idiosyncratic—yet there are common themes that I have no doubt will resonate with readers. Every particular of your story will be different from mine—yet at the thematic level, there are deep continuities between us. The ways that Jesus meets me are analogous to the ways He meets you. Analogous, but not identical. God seems to love variety. You and I do not reduce to a category. Our Father is raising children, and every child I've ever known is unique.

I will tell four stories—touchpoints from my Christian experience. In each, different situational variables come into play. God intervenes in different ways. Different truths prove salient. Different people help in a variety of ways.

Story 1. August 31, 1975. I came to Christian faith when I was twenty-five years old. My conversion was dramatic. In high school I had become preoccupied with existential questions: “What lasts? What matters? What is meaningful? Who are we?” Four lines of development gave force and shape to the questions and answers.

First, in my teens, I became estranged from the nominal version of church-going in which I had been raised. I never heard that Jesus Christ was anything more than a moral example. Christianity, as I experienced it, seemed like a polite veneer for people who didn't want to face hard realities.

Second, during those same years, I was immediately confronted with death and depravity: a target of bullying, the murder of a classmate, suicidal friends, exposure to pornography, people self-immolating on drugs. And then there were the normal disillusionments in the years during and after college. Neither academics, nor athletics, nor career could bear the weight of identity and meaning.

Third, I matriculated into Harvard as a math and science major, but I soon migrated to psychology and social sciences, and then moved on to literature and the arts. Through reading Dostoevsky and T. S. Eliot, awareness slowly dawned that Christianity directly addressed the deepest matters of humanity.

Fourth, a college friend, Bob Kramer, became a Christian when we were twenty. He thought about the same kinds of questions I thought about. For the next five years, we discussed, disagreed, and debated whenever we got together. I was stubborn. I did not want someone to rescue me. I wanted to do life on my own terms. But God had other ideas about how to do my life.

How did God work? He was merciful. One evening Bob spoke with unexpected candor, "I respect you as much as anyone...but what you believe...and how you are living...you are destroying yourself." I knew he was right. The Holy Spirit used his words as an armor-piercing shell. I came under comprehensive and specific conviction of my sinfulness, uncleanness, unbelief, and unacceptability before Christ. When I responded (one minute later? ten minutes?), I asked, "How do I become a Christian?" Bob shared a promise from the God of hope:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27)

Bob invited me to ask God for mercy. I beseeched God for mercy. God was merciful.

How on earth did I change? I was changed because God intervened personally. I was changed because words of Scripture invited me into Christ. I was changed because a friend was faithful and honest. I was changed because of failure, guilt, suffering, and disillusionment. I changed because I turned from sin to Christ.

Story 2. The late-1970s to mid-1980s. This next story characterizes a six-year season rather than a single moment of illumination. I faced my version of the common human struggle with anxiety. During my early thirties, responsibilities multiplied rapidly. I was now married to Nan and in the first years of vocational ministry. Counseling is hard. Teaching is hard. Writing is hard. I was working on a PhD at the University of Pennsylvania. Graduate study is hard. I was an elder in a church with great pastoral needs. Being an elder is hard. We were welcoming our children and living communally with another young family. This cumulation of outward pressures correlated to inward stressing.

How did God work? God spoke into my harried, anxious experience. He addressed me pointedly, repeatedly, and patiently over days, months, and years. A suite of complementary truths slowly took root, blossomed, and bore fruit.

- “Cast all your cares upon him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). Stressed people need simple truths. “You matter to Him” is simple. But it took time to take that to heart. “Offload what concerns you” is simple. But it took time to learn how to do that.
- “When anxious thoughts multiply within me, your consolations delight my soul” (Ps. 94:19). That first clause nails what preoccupation and anxiety feel like. The second clause invites me to look out in a different direction. The rest of Psalm 94 emphatically promises consolations. If the Lord will make right the very worst wrongs, then how much more my small troubles and pressures? This was not cognitive restructuring by changing my self-talk; instead, it meant seeking and finding the person who actively looks out for my well-being.
- “The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:5–6). It is a huge help to remember that the One who cares and makes a difference is near. Name your troubles. Ask for help. Voice your thanks. Prayer means “Ask.” Supplication means “Really ask—and mean what you say.”
- “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34). Your Father knows and will give what you need, so put first things first. Focus on today’s concerns and calling. During a particularly harried season, a friend helped me to rephrase it, “Sufficient for this five minutes are the troubles and concerns of this five minutes!”

God Himself met me through many complementary insights, messages, and messengers.

That season of life was the most conscious, intentional season of change I've known. I learned a fruitful wisdom that thoughtfully ponders on both Scripture and life; a wisdom that prays honestly, relies on friends, and takes small constructive actions.

How did I change? I was changed because God intervened personally, repeatedly, and patiently. I was changed because Scripture's words of consolation invited me into my Father's presence. I was changed because friends were faithful. I was changed because of struggling with the pressures of life. I changed because I turned away from living as though I walked alone in a difficult universe, and I turned to the Lord who is near.

Story 3. From 2000 to 2006. In my fifties, the front-and-center lesson significantly changed. For over five years, I inhabited a body that was breaking down. I had open-heart surgery. The recovery from surgery had agonizing moments, but the long-term ramifications of major health issues were worse than the short-term pain. I liken those years of cumulative losses to living through a slow-motion building collapse. Only family, a handful of friendships, and writing remained fruitful. These were the hardest years of my life.

And God met me and changed me for the good.

How did God work? First came the suffering itself. God works in and through suffering. My faith and love had to grow up—again, as I always have to grow up.

Second, a handful of wise, godly friends played a significant role. Some were going through analogous experiences. They understood. We were in it together. Other friends helped me to plan and to act within marked limitations. I needed both the tenderness and the realism.

Third, the wisdom of saints whose race finished long ago played a significant role in how public worship sustained and instructed me. I have always loved wise, well-crafted hymns that invite me to think as well as sing. But I had never realized how many hymns (like the psalms) inhabit suffering. They seek and find our Savior in the midst of hurt and perplexity. For example, Katarina von Schlegel's "Be Still, My Soul" is honest about her anguish and bafflement. She simultaneously gives voice to her reasons for hope amid grief. The Lord is on your side, even in this. He is your best friend, your heavenly friend, who will not bereave you. He soothes these dark emotions. He will restore to you love's purest joys. Katarina von Schlegel gives all these gifts to us.

Fourth, God's creation proved sustaining, refreshing, and sanctifying. In all seasons and weathers, I went outside and walked. I noticed...the flight of a goldfinch,

snow on the stones, a field of white dogwoods in bloom, a thunderstorm rising, maple leaves like fire in the fall. I was repeatedly drawn out onto a bigger stage than my troubles.

Fifth, God met me with His words and His Spirit—through preaching, through the Lord’s Supper, through the informal counsel of friends, through my own reflection on Scripture. I heard God’s voice of truth, sought Him, and found Him. As familiar words engaged current experience, they took on meanings and resonances I could not have imagined. Here are some of the passages that repeatedly met me.

- *Matthew 5:3–10* (the Beatitudes). The first four blessings bond to weakness as we depend on God: honest neediness, sorrow, submission, and longing. The second four blessings bond to strength as we move out into the world: active generosity, purity of purpose, constructive engagement, and courage. Jesus lived this unusual interplay of weakness and strength. This is what it looks like to be truly human.
- *Psalms 103*. This psalm befriended and renewed me. It drew forth my faith: to need, trust, and worship my Father. It enabled me to love others who share in the iniquity, frailty, and mortality of the human condition. “All the good things he does” (Ps. 103:2) is a prequel to “every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1:3) that we find in living color, specified, and fulfilled in Christ.
- *2 Corinthians 1:4 and Hebrews 5:2–3*. My firsthand experience does not terminate in me. It is transmuted so that I become able to deal gently and helpfully with others in their struggles. My particular troubles—mastered by the God of mercies and comfort—equip me “to comfort those who are in any affliction.” My sins and weaknesses—dealt with honestly before the Lord, who gives mercy—equip me to minister well even to “the ignorant and wayward.”

I’ll stop there. The bookshelves in my home could not contain all the books that could be written about those years.

How did I change? I was changed because God never let me go. I was changed because Scripture spoke many words of God’s mercy, protection, strength, and will. I was changed because many friends bore me up. I was changed because I had to walk through darkness, destruction, and the uncertainty of no explanations and no solutions. I changed because I repeatedly turned outward in faith and love, reversing my inward-turning tendency.

Story 4: January 14, 2009. My final example arose in a medical moment. I had come down with diverticulitis multiple times over the previous year. My doctor said, “You could die from one of these events. You need to get surgery—soon.” So I did.

I awakened from anesthesia in the usual postoperative haze. But something far more unsettling was also occurring: a sense of depersonalization, unreality, emotional disconnect, internal disorientation. It was as if “I” had become detached from the sense of myself as an experiencing, choosing, thinking person.

How did God work? I phoned a trusted friend and sketched what was going on. To this day he has not been able to explain why he did what he did next. He read the Psalms of Ascent, one after another, fifteen straight psalms without pause, without comment, from Psalm 120 through Psalm 134.

When he finished, I was reconnected to myself. And then he prayed for me. And I gave heartfelt thanks to God.

How did I change? I was changed because God found me when I could not even locate myself. I was changed because words of faith are words of sanity and reality. I was changed because for no apparent reason a friend did something unheard of. I was changed because a brutal side effect of anesthesia and major surgery made me need help. I changed because I believe, and know, and need, and trust the Lord who is everywhere present in the Psalms—so I could hear his voice.

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE DETAILS

Again, why do I tell these stories? Why this degree of personal detail? Because your life, too, is lived (and rescripted) in the details—just like all the people in John’s Gospel and the rest of Scripture. Our life stories involve innumerable encounters with God. God is our environment. We are continually dependent, continually colliding with Him, continually under observation, continually needing and receiving mercies, continually disciplined.

Much of change is a matter of slow-forming habits—the accretion of new habits of thinking, attitude, and response. Much of how we grow happens subliminally, just like how a child grows. We grow up in innumerable daily choice points between good and evil. We receive subtle influences from modeling. We accumulate consequences of blessing or curse. We slowly learn to handle both felicities and frustrations with grace. Hence, two of my stories told about years-long seasons of life.

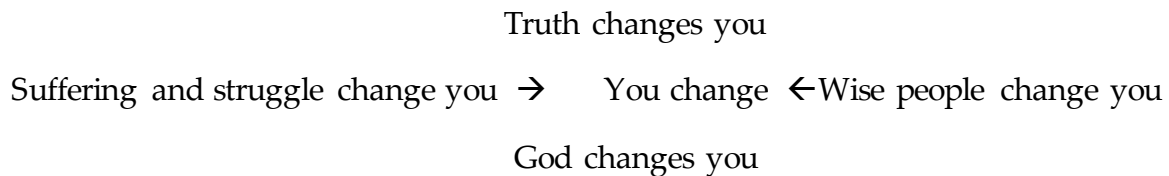
And, of course, change sometimes occurs in a decisive moment. Hence my other two stories involved a dramatic turn.

In either case, our lives in Christ take a lifetime of “formation” —of learning, unlearning, and relearning.

FIVE FACTORS AT WORK IN SANCTIFICATION

As I mentioned at the outset, this article is about variety. God’s ways with us do not work according to a formula. Multiple factors always cooperate in progressive sanctification. But how do we keep our bearings amid a multitude of variables? This closing section will give a simple framework to encompass the variables.

Figure 1 is a simple picture that captures the five elements that cooperate in our sanctification. Though our lives involve innumerable variables, change occurs through the interplay of these five factors.



[Figure 1. Above: Five Factors in Sanctification]

God Changes Us

First, and foundational to all, *God Himself changes us*. He intervenes in your life, turning you from suicidal self-will to the kingdom of life. He raises you in Christ when you are dead in trespasses and sins. He restores hearing when you are deaf (you could not hear Him otherwise). He gives sight when you are blind (you could not see Him otherwise). All good fruit in our lives comes by the Holy Spirit’s working on scene. Jesus said it was better if He went away, because the Holy Spirit would come. The Holy Spirit continues to do the things that Jesus does—continually adding to the number of books that could be written.

The Word of Truth Changes Us

Second, *the Word of truth changes us*. God communicates messages to us—many messages. Scripture speaks with a true voice into a world churning with false voices. Scripture reveals innumerable features of God’s person, purposes, will, promises, and

actions. Scripture clarifies every facet of human experience. I come to know myself truly as I live before the eyes of the One whose opinion matters.

Of course Scripture and God work in harmony. In fact, all five dimensions are complementary—and all ultimately depend on the hand of God.

Wise People Change Us

Third, *God uses wise people to change us*. Godly growth is most frequently mediated through the gifts and graces of brothers and sisters in Christ. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise (Prov. 13:20). The honesty and graciousness, humility and clarity, good sense and convictions of others have radiant, fruitful effects (James 3:17–18).

Suffering Changes Us

Fourth, *suffering, struggle, and troubles change us*. God works on us in the midst of trouble, because trouble catches our attention. Difficulties make us need Him. Hardships make Scripture and prayer come alive. People change because something is hard—not because everything goes well. Something—including myself—is off. Ministry traffics in trouble, because Christ enters, lives through, is unafraid of, and speaks into trouble. And we only learn to love the way Christ loves by experiencing the hard things that He experienced in loving us.¹

We Change

The fifth and final factor is that *we change*. You turn from darkness to light, from false gods to the only true God. You ask for help because you need help. You repent. You believe and trust. You seek. You remember, listen, obey, fear, hope, love, give thanks, weep, confess, praise, delight, and walk. Notice all these active verbs. They are the fruitful characteristics of a flourishing life. No one does any of this for you. You are not passive. Notice, too, that none of these active verbs is a one-and-done. These are a way of life.

This is how sanctification works. These five factors work together. Each one contributes to how we change. They are present in differing degrees as our lives are rescripted. Your entire Christian life is a series of variations and permutations of this five-dimensional process. This is how you live. This is how you minister to others, loving them well in their need. This is how you grow, until you arrive in heaven where you will see Jesus face to face and find that you have been made like him.

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NOTES

- 1 It is a less-developed theme in Scripture, but blessings can also change us for the good—when we have learned to see God’s hand in them, and are grateful. One of the stories I told earlier pointedly mentioned the beauty and power of God’s creation.