

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

Affliction, Discipline and Sanctification

by Bob DeWaay

“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” (2Corinthians 4:17)

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” (1Thessalonians 4:3a)

“For they [our fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.” (Hebrews 12:10)

God's will for our lives as Christians is sanctification. Sanctification does not happen through good intentions, but through the sovereign intervention of our Heavenly Father. Our responsibility is to agree to and cooperate with this process through undisturbed faith and trusting obedience.

Sanctification is the process of practically being changed into the people God intended us to be. The Greek word for sanctification is a form of the word “holy.” To be sanctified is to be made holy - that is to be set apart for God and changed into the moral and spiritual condition God has purposed. The legal change of status from lost sinner to justified “saint” initiates a lifelong process of change that culminates in the resurrection. Perfection is not attained before the resurrection, but the process of change is a characteristic of everyone who has been justified. It is this process that we are concerned with in discussing the need for sanctification in the life of the believer.

It is no overstatement to say that the contemporary, evangelical church has often neglected this crucial matter. This neglect, I think, has caused many to mistake the disciplinary action of God

(often coming as trials and difficulties) for misfortune, personal injustice, or the deterministic result of the past. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the writer of Hebrews, saw fit to put a warning against bitterness (**Hebrews 12:15**) immediately after the extended section about the discipline of the Lord, holiness and sanctification (**Hebrews 12:3-14**). How often we become angry or discouraged, not knowing that the object of our distress is an unrecognized agent of sanctification. We are warned, “do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord . . . nor faint” (from **Hebrews 12:5**).

Recently a pastor attending our monthly pastor's meeting remarked about how different things are today compared to decades ago when people would travel around the world in steam ships to attend conferences on holiness. Conferences on how to be “successful” in various temporal matters now dominate the convention circuit. However distant the desire for holiness may become from our conscious minds, it is “job one” on God's agenda for His people. He is committed to our spiritual welfare even if we do not see how the trials of this life contribute to that end.

Afflictions and Sanctification

In our church we have been studying Hebrews verse by verse for some time. One commentary used as a reference is written by Arthur Pink. While his commentaries sometimes make excessive use of imaginative typology in handling the Old Testament, his perspective on the Christian life, heavily influenced by 17th century Puritanism (he quotes much from John Owen and calls his era, “the palmy days of the Puritans”¹), is refreshing and convicting. In his comments on Hebrews chapters 10 - 12, he cogently explicates how Christian perseverance and warnings against apostasy coexist.² He also provides many sound admonitions about the need for progress in sanctification. For example, Pink writes about the path

of tribulation and its value in the sanctification of the believer,

God has not promised His people a smooth path through this world; instead, He has ordained that “we must through much tribulation” enter His kingdom (Acts 14:22). Why should it be otherwise, seeing we are now in a territory which is under His curse. And what has brought down that curse, but *sin*. Seeing then that there still is a world of sin both without and within each one of us, why should it be thought strange if we are made to taste the bitterness of its products! Suppose it were otherwise, what would be the effect? Suppose this present life were free from sorrows, sufferings, separations; ah, would we not be content with our present portion? . . . By means of sore disappointments, thwarted plans, inward fightings, painful afflictions, does He “take forth the precious from the vile” (Jer. 15:19), and remove the dross from the pure gold. It is by weaning us from the things of earth that He fits us for setting our affections on things above.³

Times of greatest difficulty and disappointment often lead to repentance and change. These changes may not have happened in times of comfort and “success.” Fleshly attitudes and actions seem not to be so bad until divinely ordained circumstances force owning up to their seriousness.

Personally, I spent many years angry too much of the time. A couple of years ago circumstances beyond my control brought sorrow and disappointment. God used these to bring changes that were embarrassingly over due. Even now I dare not claim complete victory, but rejoice in the substantial changes God has graciously brought. Truly I cannot understand why I was so angry and upset about so many things I could not change. But for God's heavy hand of discipline I would be getting worse instead of better and wondering why I was being treated so badly.

I am convinced that God will do everything necessary to make us partakers of His holiness and useful in His service. The flesh (what we are apart from God's grace) is a very ugly thing. Yet we per-

ceive ourselves quite beautiful when viewed through eyes prejudiced by pride. Without sanctification, there would be no change, no walking in the Spirit, and no hope of living a life that is pleasing to God.

Sanctification is the process of God changing beliefs, attitudes and actions in Christians so that they reflect His image as He intended. This process is based on the work of the cross where the “old man” was crucified. It is a progressive working out of the ramifications of the once for all work of Christ on the cross. “*Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him*” (**Colossians 3:9,10**).

Very few of us change anything during times of ease and prosperity. Americans like to say, “if it works, don't fix it.” I like that saying, but sadly what I think “works” may be miserably inadequate from God's eternal perspective. Divine discipline forces us to attend to things we would rather ignore. The matter of our own sanctification is often far from the present focus. Consider **Hebrews 12:11**, “*All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*” Who looks for “sorrow”? Given the choice between the sorrowful or the joyful, we choose the joyful. Yet discipline is necessary for us to be partakers of holiness. Therefore, discipline is **administered** by the Heavenly Father. What would David have done about that matter concerning Bathsheba had God not sent Nathan to confront him?

If God removed His hand of discipline and allowed us to feel comfortable with, suffer no consequences from, and prosper in sin, what would be the outcome? We dare not deceive ourselves into thinking that we would progress in holiness out of the goodness of our own hearts, even as redeemed people. That would be like a Junior High teacher giving no tests, assuming that the students will do all of their reading and study out of a noble desire for learning.

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are

without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

(Hebrews 12:7,8)

Discipline seems “sorrowful,” must be “endured,” and is experienced by “every son He receives” (**Hebrews 12:6**). The only issue is how we respond to it. Are we “trained by it” (verse 11) or do we come short of God's grace and have a poisonous, “bitter root” spring up and bring defilement (verse 12)? Arthur Pink wrote, “Since then our sufferings are one of the means which God has appointed for the Christian's sanctification, preparing us for usefulness here, and for Heaven hereafter, let us glory in them.”⁴

Taking our understanding of discipline from the Biblical analogy of a Father disciplining his son, we can see that negative or unpleasant circumstances understood to be direct consequences of wrong attitudes or actions motivate change. If no privilege is withheld, no corporal punishment administered, no stern rebuke spoken, what would prompt a wayward child to alter his ways? The popular, misguided, current answer is the goodness of his own heart. As **Hebrews 12:6** shows, God does not believe this for he “scourges every son he receives,” thus showing His Fatherly love.

Faith and Sanctification

The chapter on faith that precedes Hebrews 12 shows that we must believe and trust God even when His leading does not fit with personal comfort or what is often perceived as “common sense.” For example, “*By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin*” (**Hebrews 11:24,25**). This does not mean that the disciplinary hand of God was not heavy upon Moses to prepare him for this choice. We know that there was a forty year banishment to the wilderness and many intervening problems before Moses made the choice described in these verses. However, the disappointments and difficulties that attended the process of Moses making the right choice do not invalidate the choice. As with Moses, the right choice (choosing to suffer with

God's people rather than to party with the lost) may lead to yet other difficulties and afflictions.

Though dying in the wilderness with an ungrateful and rebellious people, Moses became one of the most influential people in history. Moses appeared on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus. He missed entering the earthly promised land, but not the heavenly one (see **Hebrews 11:16**). By faith Moses chose “to endure ill-treatment.” It is only by faith that we can see the ultimate value of afflictions that sanctify. Unbelief leads to seeking temporal comfort and avoiding every costly and unpleasant choice. The only way to avoid being disciplined is to avoid being a child of God.

God is so committed to our sanctification that He will do what is necessary to change us into His image. By faith we put all of our hope in the Lord. Because of a faith commitment of love and trust we know that He is doing exactly what is best for us. Temporal situations from which God chooses not to deliver us and that seem incompatible with our best interest should not be allowed to incite doubt in our hearts. Job said, “*Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him*” (**Job 13:15**). When Job got his chance to argue his ways, he declined (see **Job 40:1-5**). Job was right to keep trusting God even when God's ways did not **seem** compatible with His loving character.

“*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (**Hebrews 11:6**). Having faith in God must involve believing that He rewards seekers. There is usually an intervening period, often very lengthy, between the reception of the promise and its fulfillment. This time factor can be seen in the lives of the exemplary people of faith described in Hebrews 11. Unbelief would not have motivated Noah to continue building the ark in the absence of rain or a flood. This period between promise and consummation is the period of testing and affliction that produces sanctification. God promises us that the ultimate result for those who persevere is glorification (notice the progression in **Romans 8:30** culminating in glorifica-

tion).

Contrary to common opinion, we are not justified on one basis (faith) and sanctified on another (works). Paul asks rhetorically, *“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”* (**Galatians 3:2,3**). The implied answer is “no.” We begin, progress, and end with faith. The Holy Spirit who sanctifies us was received by faith and He is walked in by faith. No man-made process, however well intended, can sanctify anyone. The strictest canon of rules cannot sanctify a person who does not have a faith relationship of love and trust with the Lord. Justification by faith issues into progressive sanctification by faith.

The Bible provides the wilderness wanderings as an example for people of faith of all generations. The Israelites were brought into the wilderness for the stated purposes of bringing them to God (see **Exodus 19:3**) and fulfilling His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**Exodus 2:24; 6:8; 32:13; 33:1**). Many did not put their hope and trust in God and disobeyed, leading to death outside of the promise. *“And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief”* (**Hebrews 3:18,19**). Paul tells us, *“Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come”* (**1Corinthians 10:11**).

We have been given the promise of an inheritance in Christ that looks all the way back to the promise given to Abraham and forward to the resurrection. **1Corinthians 10:6-14** shows that we face the same temptations as those in the wilderness wanderings. If we proceed in faith, we shall find sanctification in the afflictions and temptations that attend the current “wilderness” pilgrimage. Faith sees the loving person of the heavenly Father and the sure testimony of His promise to be far more influential than the temporary sorrow of this present distress. Unbelief refuses to proceed until conditions change. Notice how **Hebrews 3:19,19** effectively makes disobedience

and unbelief synonymous. Disobedience comes from making immediate satisfaction of temporal urges more important than one's relationship of hope and trust in God (see **1Corinthians 10:6-10**). When Moses delayed, the golden calf filled the imagined “void.”

The Way of Escape

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (**1Corinthians 10:13**). Sanctification is halted when we fail to place our hope and trust fully in God, and seek temporal gratification. This passage promises us, “the way of escape.” In the Greek it reads *“the way out.”* The definite article signifies that there are not many ways out of temptation, but one. The next verse helps us understand what it is, *“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry”* (**1Corinthians 10:14**). Idolatry is putting ultimate faith in anything or anyone other than God. Whether the behavior involved is overtly sinful (such as immorality - **1Corinthians 10:8**) or something as necessary to humans as eating - **1Corinthians 10:7**), it is idolatry if it involves lack of faith in God's promise.

The way out of temptation is putting one's hope and trust fully in the Lord. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, each passage of Scripture He quoted in response (**Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13 & 6:16**) dealt directly with one's relationship to the Lord of hope and trust. The way of escape is dependency on the Lord -- worship God, live by His words, and do not put Him to the test. **Deuteronomy 6:16** is a reference to Massah where the people of Israel quarreled and grumbled about their lack of water. At issue? - *“And he named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us, or not?’”* (**Exodus 17:7**).

Conversely not doubting God's covenant keeping nature and commitment to His people when trials come is faith that Scripture commends. The way out of

temptation is the one Moses knew, *“So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, ‘What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me’”* (**Exodus 17:4**). God directed him to strike the rock at Horeb. The way out is to call upon the Lord in complete dependency, knowing that His way is the only way.

The way out of temptation entails not forgetting the lessons of the past, in which God had directed and blessed. After urging his readers to remember their previous experiences of faith and endurance, the author of Hebrews exhorts, *“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”* (**Hebrews 10:35,36**). Faith involves believing, *“. . . that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (**Hebrews 11:6b**). The children of Israel were led into the wilderness as a direct result of having sought the Lord. They cried out to Him in their oppression and He heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them out. God did many miracles to show His mighty power on their behalf. Yet they put God to the test by grumbling and doubting, even wanting to go back to the state of affairs before their deliverance.

Sanctification only happens when we take the way out rather than the way back. The way of escape is to trust God when all seems hopeless and our previous faith seems a dim memory of better times. Sanctification involves learning to trust and believe God under sore temptation and many opportunities to follow the easy path of accommodation to the lusts of the world. It means taking the way of escape and not the way of death.

Recognizing the Way Out

The way of sanctification that includes discipline and perseverance under providentially arranged trial requires that we commit ourselves to finding God's wisdom. James speaks (**James 1:1-4**) of trials and the need for perseverance, directing us to ask God for wisdom:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any

doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8)

Endurance under trial requires wisdom that is given to the person of faith in answer to prayer. In the example of the wilderness wanderings, Moses asked God for wisdom and was provided water from a smitten rock. Others, though having seen the same miracles and experienced the same deliverances, turned against the Lord at Massah. They chose every opportunity to doubt that God had their best interest in mind. They turned to idols when their perceived needs seemed bigger than their faith in God. They were double-minded.

The double-minded person believes in God, but does not believe that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. The fact that they grumbled about the Lord showed that they knew who He was. We must believe that “He is **and** that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). The double minded person says, “I believe in God but he never answers my prayers, he does not give me what I need, and cares for other people but not me.” This “faith” could be called “religious unbelief.” What is doubted is God’s covenant keeping character, His love, His truthfulness, and His wisdom. Like those of the wilderness wanderings whom we are not to emulate (1Corinthians 10:6), those who doubt God’s character (thinking that He had bad intentions for them) do not receive the sanctifying benefit of the trials. Rather than count those trials as “joy” (James 1:2), they consider them an occasion of offense. “For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (Hebrews 4:2).

Wisdom from God will show us the benefits of endurance, the path to follow, and the consolation of our hope. Paul received such wisdom when he asked God to deliver him from his “thorn in the flesh.” Though not finding deliverance from the trial, he found deliverance in the trial. The wisdom that God gave him was that the thorn was ultimately for his benefit. “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses,

that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2Corinthians 12:9,10).

Paul was not double-minded because he asked in faith. The person of faith believes that all things that God allows and from which He does not deliver him or her when asked, are part of God’s beneficent, sanctifying purpose. They make us strong in ways that ease and comfort could never accomplish. Wisdom from God often includes understanding this and thereby changing for the better.

Too often Christians think the passage in James promising wisdom has only to do with knowing which stock to invest in, car to purchase, job to apply for, or person to marry. More often it has to do with the trials that attend working, marriage, driving, or investing. We sometimes think that if we make the right choice when entering the situation (like the Israelites in leaving Egypt) that things will go well from then on. Any older Christian experienced in the sanctifying trials of life will testify that much more wisdom is needed after becoming married, for example.

Sanctification and Satisfaction

Psalm 107:9 “For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.”

Matthew 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

The examples we have seen in Scripture show that those who trust in the Lord as the Heavenly Father who loves them and has their best interests in mind are willing to endure the discipline they need to partake of holiness. It is double-minded to name the name of Christ as Lord and Savior and to reject His wisdom concerning the path He chooses for us. It is like going to a wise and reputable doctor because of a severe physical ailment and then despising the doctor because the necessary cure he prescribes involves temporary pain and unpleasant procedures. Faith in God requires that we desire Him and His purposes. “If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the

things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1,2).

The Holy Spirit will cause God’s people to hunger to be like the One who called them. He will cause us to be discontent with sin, the flesh and this world. He will give us the hope of being like Jesus. “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1John 3:2,3). “Hope fixed on Him” will insure that the process of sanctification goes on until that day that He calls us home or until the day of His return, which ever happens first. We hope for His return and hope to be like Him.

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End Notes

1. Arthur W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) p. 600.
2. *ibid.* 595 - 624
3. *ibid.* 625.
4. *ibid.* 626.

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