

# How *Does* Sanctification Work? (Part 2)



by DAVID POWLISON

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At the close of John's Gospel, he stands back and considers all that he has witnessed over a lifetime:

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)

I love the juxtaposition of those two sentences. The fact that John left out innumerable stories prompts a cosmic leap of imagination. He had just finished a 16,000 word document (only thirty pages in this journal's format). But the whole earth... could not hold... all the other books... that might be written!

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. We do not witness Jesus' life story as a theological abstraction or in social isolation. 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 50 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, sifting, 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 sizes people up. He finds a point of engagement. He reacts, helps, rattles, invites, irritates, teaches, argues, clarifies, perplexes, saves, warns, encourages. As Jesus crosses paths with people, he 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. Good theology can track the big themes and keep us oriented—but the variety and freshness are what make Scripture, life, people, and ministry so interesting. The details are what make your life interesting.

As John's Gospel recreates different interactions between Jesus and his contemporaries, we learn a great deal about the kinds of interactions that recur throughout our lives, too. Jesus aims to catch your ear and sanctify you. He goes about the work of initial sanctification—life-giving faith. He also goes about the work of progressive sanctification—a lifetime of growing up in both faith and love. To help us understand the quality of eternal life (and the characteristics of death), John repeatedly zooms in on interpersonal moments. And Jesus not only reveals himself in these moments of engagement, he also reveals the person he is engaging. These are conversations, so we learn what *both* parties are facing, saying, and doing. Truth comes to life at the intersection of Jesus' life and your life.

It is noteworthy that Jesus never ministers by rote—because people and circumstances never clone. There is no boilerplate in his counseling or preaching. No distilled formula. No abstract generalizations. No “Just \_\_\_\_” sorts of advice. Because situations and persons come unscripted, fluid, and unpredictable, 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 series of articles on sanctification. Part 1 looked at how ministry connects various bite-sized truths to life-lived. It critiqued attempts to distill sanctification down to a single truth. Part 2 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 re-scripting 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. I think

you will find both the idiosyncrasy and the commonality helpful. It is freeing to realize that your life, like mine, does not happen in boilerplate. You and I are not clones of anyone else. Every particular of your story will be different from mine—yet at the thematic level there are deep continuities between us. The kinds of things that I struggle with are analogous to the kinds of things that you struggle with. 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. You cannot live someone else's story.

I will tell four stories, touchpoints from my Christian experience. Each has a somewhat different quality. Different situational variables come into play. Different personal issues are at stake. 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 25 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 entirely estranged from the nominal, mainline version of church-going in which I had been raised. I never heard that Jesus Christ was anything more than a moral example of a man who did a lot of good. 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: e.g., a target of bullying, the murder of a classmate, suicidal friends, exposure to pornography, people self-immolating on drugs. I was a passenger in a car that killed a man as he walked down a dark country road. I can still see his face—he turned toward our headlights in the last few seconds, and I looked into his eyes as we hit him. And I sat at my grandfather's bedside after he had a serious stroke. He was rummaging through his achievements, relationships, aspirations, and travels. He was searching for something that retained meaning, something he could hold on to, something that he could tell me about what mattered in life. But everything he mentioned seemed to crumble before his eyes as he spoke. In the end, all he could say was that life is more than money, and all he could do was break down and weep. After saying goodbye, I sat on the steps outside the hospital and wept too. 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. Close relationships failed. A foray into drug use almost unhinged me. Awareness of my own egocentrism was slowly dawning. We're always the last to know the person in the mirror.

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. The hard sciences scratch the fringe of big questions. The social sciences dig deeper into human affairs, but though they describe some of what goes on, they can never say what it all means. The arts and humanities take a deeper look at the questions that really matter: life and death, love and hate, truth and falsity, desire and loss, good and evil. Through reading Dostoevsky and T. S. Eliot, awareness slowly dawned that Christianity directly addressed these things.

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Fourth, a college friend, Bob Kramer, became a Christian when we were 20. 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 could follow the plausible logic of Christian faith. But every train of thought came to the same dead end. I did not want someone to rescue me. I did not want someone to tell me what to do. I wanted to do life on my own and 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 I know... 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, unacceptability before Christ. It was a my-whole-life-passing-before-my-eyes moment. 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)

He invited me to ask God for mercy. I beseeched God for mercy. God was merciful. Promises from eons ago proved true—God willingly saves, forgives sins, creates a new life, gives his own Spirit, promises great help to obey. He did all this. He found me and led me home.

When I began to read Romans a few days later, the words leapt from the page. I am one of those people that Romans 10:20 describes: the Lord showed himself to a man who was not asking for him. Though I could not follow every step of Paul's logic (a persisting phenomenon!), the gist made perfect sense:

- Sinfulness is universal and deadly—and describes me perfectly.
- Jesus Christ bore our sins and our death in his own body. He died for me.
- All lasting good depends on God's decisive initiative in showing mercy. He chose to rescue me.
- God freely pardons and justifies his enemies through faith in the Messiah. By nature, nurture, choice, and habit, I am the kind of person Romans 5 describes: weak, ungodly, sinful, his enemy. By mercy, I am the kind of person God reconciles to himself and floods with kindnesses.
- The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts. He enables me to say, "Father." He goes about the business of faith, hope, love, humility, joy, and peace.

This I believe. Here I stand. Make it so. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

*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 five or six year season of life rather than a single moment of illumination. I faced my version of the common human struggle with anxiety. During my early-30s, responsibilities multiplied rapidly. I was now married to Nan and had finished seminary. I was in the first years of vocational ministry. Counseling is hard. Teaching is hard. Writing is hard. I was working on a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. Graduate study is hard. I was serving as an active elder in a church with great pastoral needs. Being an elder is hard. We were welcoming the arrival of our children and living communally with another young family with whom we shared home-ownership. I needn't say more about what life is like! This cumulation of outward pressures correlated to inward stressing.

*How did God work?* God spoke and acted 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. "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. I vividly remember a moment when my pastor recognized my fretfulness. He said, “Grace means courage,” and he prayed for me. He cast my cares upon the one who cares, and I’ve never forgotten his words.

- “When anxious thoughts multiply within me, your consolations delight my soul” (Ps 94:19). That first clause nails what stress, 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.” It is a huge help to get specific. It is a huge help to talk out loud. I learned to take all this to heart thirty years ago. I am helped right now by taking it to heart today.
- “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 to identify specific situational triggers for my anxiety. I learned how anxiety presumes a great distance between God and my present concerns. I learned how anxiety puts distance between me and others—it is the opposite of loving people. I learned to identify deviant motives: self-trust, over-concern for the opinions of others, desire to control outcomes, love of ease—all these erase God and make this *my* universe, not his. I learned to know, need, and trust God’s defining attitudes and consistent ways of loving his children. I learned a fruitful wisdom that thoughtfully ponders on both Scripture and life, a wisdom that prays honestly, that relies on friends, that takes small constructive actions.

These were also years when I was learning to counsel others. There is a reason

that “Fear not” (in all its variants) is the most common command in all of Scripture. God’s children struggle to live well in an unwell, unstable world. In part, this is because we ourselves drift into the unwellness and instability of living anxiously. He meets you, stabilizes you, walks with you, and makes it well with your soul. You become able to help others with the help you are receiving for yourself.

*How did I change?* I was changed because God intervened personally, repeatedly, patiently. I was changed because Scripture’s words of care and consolation invited me to my Father. I was changed because many friends were faithful. I was changed because of struggling with the pressures of life and uneasy feelings. 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 50s, the front-and-center lesson significantly changed. I am a slow learner, like the rest of us. It seems to take years to advance from one grade level to the next—and we often have to double back for remedial lessons!

These were the hardest years of my life. The recovery from open-heart surgery

## These were the hardest years of my life.

had agonizing moments. But the long-term sequelae were worse than the short-term pain. For the next 5½ years I inhabited a body that was breaking down. I lost all resilience and had no bounce back from normal fatigue. I was on a downward spiral of shattering fatigue and increasing disability. I could not sustain normal social life and ministry life. 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. I had to count the cost of every social interaction. Teaching was an ordeal—I could just make it through a semester. I love counseling, but it was too wearing—and I had to stop.

And God met me, and changed me for the good.

In the long run, after 5½ dark years, I was surprisingly restored to health by the discovery and treatment of a sleep disorder. But this is not a story of medical cure (joyous as that was). It is a story about the ongoing cure of a soul.

*How did God work?* First came the suffering itself. Amid cascading losses and troubles, all familiar habits and assumptions are thrown up in the air. Life had changed, with no apparent explanation and no apparent solution. 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 (dying of cancer, or disabled by chronic fatigue).

They understood. Their compassion and insight were not retrospective. It was not, “Been there, done that.” We were in it together: “Am here, doing this.” Other friends knew me well enough to translate their sympathy into helping me to take realistic action. They helped me to plan and to act within marked limitations. I needed both the tenderness and the realism. Both are aspects of practical wisdom. Both incarnate Jesus Christ.

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” gives honest voice to her anguish and bafflement. She also gives honest voice to her hope and joy. And she gives honest voice to her reasons for hope amid grief. The Lord is on your side, even in this. He is your best, your heavenly friend, who will not bereave you. He rules this storm, too. He soothes these dark emotions. He will restore to you love’s purest joys. Katarina von Schlegel gives all these gifts to us. I look forward to meeting her, and I will thank her for helping me.

Fourth, I cannot express how often 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 in the brook, a field of white dogwoods in bloom, a thunderstorm rising in the west, maple leaves like fire in the fall. I was repeatedly drawn out onto a bigger stage than my troubles. I would pray my need and my gratitude out loud while walking.

Fifth, the God who speaks and acts animates all these means of grace. 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 reflecting on Scripture. I heard God’s voice of truth, and sought him, and found him. As familiar words engaged current experience, they took on meanings and resonances I could not have imagined. I needed God’s grace in new ways. My faith needed to find expression in new ways. Obedience had to take new forms. It was like hearing God’s promises and commands speaking a new language—different, yet familiar, long believed, but now coming at life from an unexpected angle. Here are some of the passages that repeatedly met me. These are elemental revelations. They link my weakness and need to God’s mercies, protection, and strength.

- *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. Holy Spirit, make me into these things.

- *Psalm 103*. I can't begin to say how often and how profoundly this psalm befriended and renewed me. It mapped onto my life. 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. Psalm 103 is a rough charcoal sketch anticipating Ephesians 1–3. “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. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget.
- *Psalm 119*. The way I had been taught about this psalm, it was a treatise on the nature of Scripture and an exhortation to Bible study. The way I came to learn and live this psalm, it shows how to talk with God and what to talk about. It expresses how personal honesty is redeemed from the odor of self-centeredness. Scripture, prayer, and suffering meet. I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me! (Ps 119:8).
- *2 Corinthians 1:4 and Hebrews 5:2–3*. My first-hand experience does not terminate in me. It is transmuted so that I become able to deal gently and helpfully with others in their struggles. This is a most curious and wonderful dynamic. 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 and grace to help in time of need—equip me to minister well even to “the ignorant and wayward.” Jesus, teach me to counsel others the way you counsel me.

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

In suffering, I learned to need mercy. From suffering, I learned to give mercy. The living faith that embraces Christ is formed in the crucible of weakness. The strong love that cares well for others is formed in the crucible of struggle.

*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, a woman who does not mince words, 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 post-operative haze of stupor, pain, thirst, and the exceedingly slow march of time. That much was predictable. But something far more unsettling was also occurring: a sense of depersonalization, unreality, emotional disconnect, internal disorientation. Everything seemed to be happening at a distance. It was as if “I” had become detached from the sense of myself as an experiencing, choosing, thinking person. You do not want this to happen to you.

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## Your life, too, is lived (and re-scripted) in the details

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*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 did not ask me questions. He did not try to counsel me. He did not pray for me. Instead 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.

### **Pastoral Commentary**

Again, why do I tell these stories? Why this degree of personal detail? Because your life, too, is lived (and re-scripted) in the details—just like all the people in John’s Gospel and the rest of Scripture. Because your Savior and Shepherd meets you in the particulars of your actual needs for saving and shepherding. Because he saves and sanctifies in specifics, not in theological generalities. Because every person’s life is a little bit or even a whole lot different from other people. Because life has an awkward, discomforting, challenging, improvisational quality, and no idealized image of the Christian life is true. Because no one truth or Bible passage covers all situations and persons. Because no one aspect of public worship or of private spiritual discipline does all that needs doing. Because no one accountability relationship can solve all your problems. Because no one kind of emotion or experience can resolve all that

needs resolving. Because Christ will triumph only through a long, hard fight, and so will you.

Our life stories involve innumerable encounters with God. God is man's environment. We are continually dependent, continually colliding with him, continually under observation, continually needing and receiving mercies, continually disciplined. He interrupts us, protects us, leads us, afflicts us, encourages us.

Much of change is a matter of slow-forming habits—the accretion of new habits of thinking, habits of attitude, habits of 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. Like any skill, wisdom includes definable, explicit things learned. I can describe what happened in stories like the ones I have just told. But here are two caveats. First, like any skill, wisdom also involves tacit, implicit, caught-not-taught learning. There are ways that I have grown that I could never quantify, that I do not even see. God always retains the right to work in ways beyond our comprehension. And, second, because learning how to live is the most complex skill imaginable, the struggle will not cease until I have faced the last enemy and see the face of God. John Newton put it well:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;

'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Psalm 23 makes it clear that the whole way home will be through further dangers, toils, and snares.

### **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. No single factor, no one truth, no protocol can capture how and why a person grows into Christ's image. Multiple factors always co-operate in progressive sanctification. But how do we keep our bearings amid a multitude of variables? This closing section of the article will give a simple framework to encompass the variables.

Human beings do well with simple. We do poorly with complicated. We do poorly with simplistic. True wisdom has a delightful simplicity. Foolishness either over-complicates or over-simplifies. Two of my favorite modern proverbs comment

on the relationship between simplistic, complex, and simple.

- I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.
- On the near side of complexity is simplistic; on the far side of complexity is simple.<sup>1</sup>

The truly simple accounts for all complexities.

For example, consider Jesus' words, "You either serve God or money." That is simple. What do you live for? Whether you inherited millions, or work hard to make a decent living, or live on the edge in poverty, Jesus' words search you out. Do your money-sins cluster around conspicuous consumption? Coveting? Anxiety? Theft? Presumptuous confidence? Jesus' simple truth accounts for you, no matter what your economic status, cultural background, or personal quirks. His simple words probe every complexity.

How do we understand the simple and complex in sanctification? Though our lives involve innumerable variables, change occurs through the interplay of five factors. In each of the personal stories that you just read, all five factors were present and operating to bring change for the good.

**The Five Factors.** Figure 1 is a simple picture that captures five elements that co-operate in our sanctification.

The way a life unfolds is non-formulaic, yet variants on these five elements intertwine

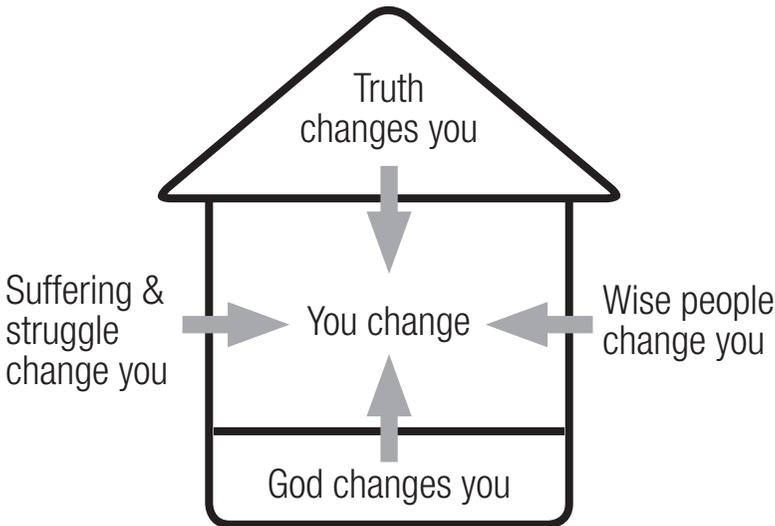


Figure 1. Five Factors in Sanctification

<sup>1</sup> These are attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and to Addison Leitch, respectively. But like many bits of proverbial wisdom the attribution is hard to verify.

within every story of our discipleship. You saw their interplay in each of the four stories I told. They appear everywhere in Scripture. The story of your life in Christ is also composed of these elements. Let's take a brief look at each one.

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). He is immediately and personally present, a life-creating voice, a strong and strengthening hand. 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 stories I told are not just about what happened to me and what I did. They are about what Jesus Christ does as he goes about saving and sanctifying me through all my days.

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. It is no accident that Scripture appears in each of the stories I told.

Of course Scripture and God work in harmony. In fact, all five dimensions are complementary—and all ultimately depend on the hand of God. One lovely expression of the interplay between the Word of God and the God of the Word occurs in Romans 15. Paul first points out how *Scripture* changes us:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom 15:3)

A few sentences later, Paul asks *God himself* to change us, to give us the very things that his Word calls for and calls forth:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom 15:13)

In Scripture, God comes in person. We participate by hearing and responding.<sup>2</sup>

Third, ***wise people change us***. Godly growth is most frequently mediated through the gifts and graces of brothers and sisters in Christ. At the most basic corporate level, you can't call on God unless you believe in him; you can't believe in him unless you hear of him; you can't hear of him unless someone proclaims

<sup>2</sup> The sacraments similarly express the dynamic interplay between God himself and the words and elements (bread, wine, and water) that are bearers of his promise, presence, and strength. We participate by receiving and responding.

him (Rom 10:14). Good worship, preaching, teaching, prayer, and sacraments have radiant, fruitful effects. At the most basic individual level, 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). It makes a huge difference to know people who deal gently with your ignorance and waywardness—because they know their own weakness and sinfulness, because they know the mercies of Christ (Heb 5:2–3). It makes a huge difference to know people who are able to comfort you whatever your afflictions—because they are finding God’s comfort in their particular afflictions (2 Cor 1:4).<sup>3</sup>

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## God works on us in the midst of trouble, because trouble catches our attention.

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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. Faith has to sink roots, as profession deepens into reality. Martin Luther called *tentatio*—trial, ordeal, affliction—the “touchstone” of Christian experience and his greatest teacher. Hardships make Scripture and prayer come alive. The difficulties that we experience necessitate grace and awaken a sense of weakness—where the Spirit is working. People change because something is hard—not because everything goes well. Something—including myself—is off. Ministry traffics in trouble, because Christ enters trouble, lives through trouble, is unafraid of trouble, speaks and acts into trouble. Struggles force us to need God. And we only learn to love the way Christ loves by experiencing the hard things that he experienced in loving us.<sup>4</sup>

The darkness of the human condition is characterized by two immense wrongs that create turmoil throughout our lives. A complex mix of moral evils arises from inside us; a complex mix of situational evils besets us. The Bible uses the word *evil* to describe both sin and suffering, just as we do in English. People believe, think, feel, want, and do bad things. Of course the obvious atrocities are evils. But the falsity, self-deception, and God-lessness of “normal” life and the misshapeness of “normal” desires also count as evil in God’s assessment. We are “off,” both in relation to God and to other people. And bad things happen to us. Other people wrong us. We face losses, sicknesses, and death. We swim in the falsehoods of our sociocultural milieu. A Liar

<sup>3</sup> It is also true that non-Christians can profoundly affect us for good because of God’s common grace. I have learned many things from non-Christians about hospitality, hard work, beauty, patience, language, courage, and scholarly integrity.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

and Murderer is out to deceive and kill us. In sum, we face troubles (externally); we are troublesome (interpersonally); and we are troubled (psychologically), struggling both with what we face and with who we are.

Fifth, *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 take refuge. You are honest. You remember, listen, obey, fear, hope, love, give thanks, weep, confess, praise, delight, 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. You are not a puppet or a robot. You are 100% responsible, and yet you are 100% dependent on outside help. Any other way of putting it makes you either far too independent or far too passive. Notice, too, that none of these active verbs is a one-and-done. These are a way of life.

***These Five Factors Work Together.*** Each one contributes to how we change. They are present in differing degrees as our lives are re-scripted. There is a rough theological order to how I have presented them, captured to some degree by the visual metaphor of a house (Figure 1). I began with God himself as foundational, and then with his overarching Word. Then I described the influence of other people. These three are the most obvious agencies of grace. I then located us within the stress of the hardships and failures that catch our attention. Finally, *you* are the one who lives in the house, the person who changes direction. Grace comes to fruition in a change of mind, in turning, hoping, taking refuge, trusting, loving, and obeying. But this logical order is not always the way life happens.

In ministry to others (as in your own life), we encounter the unpredictability of human experience. Any of these dimensions can arrive front and center in awareness. Often some suffering or personal failure initially catches a person's attention. Something troubles you. Perhaps you experience loss, betrayal, disappointment, futility—"any affliction" (1 Cor 1:4) or "various trials" (James 1:2). Perhaps you struggle with guilt over a past sin or a present pattern of sinning—ill temper, immoralities, lying, complaining, an eating disorder, an abortion, selfishness, gluttony, worry, willfulness, or any of a thousand other defections. Usually hardships and sins come tangled together.

Other people always matter. Often a friend—perhaps even a stranger—shows himself or herself to be significantly caring and admirably wise. Often some church community communicates in Word and worship, in actions and attitudes, something attractive and right. The more you grow, the more you realize how other people and the gathered church matter.

In some way or other, a biblical passage—something true—catches your attention as inescapably relevant. The more you grow, the more Scripture appears early in the process. You come to orient yourself by Scripture. By learning to listen,

you learn to identify sin and suffering more accurately. You learn the kinds of people to rely on. You learn Jesus.

And, by definition, a person who changes takes action. You do something. You believe something. You ask for help, from a friend, from God, from both. You make different choices. You change your mind, your attitudes, your feelings, your goal in life, the way you treat others, your habits, your goals.

And you find, sooner or later, that God himself was working all along—within the hardships, amid the sins, by the friendships, through his Word, in you. The farther you walk on this road, the more you realize that God is the decisive actor and foundational factor in the drama.

*This is how sanctification works.* Your entire Christian life is a series of variations and permutations of this 5-dimensional process. This is how you grow. This is how you live. This is how you minister to others, loving them well in their need. This is how you arrive in heaven, seeing Jesus face to face, and finding that you have been made like him.

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Part 3 of this article (in a future issue) will interact more thoroughly with the popular teaching that sanctification essentially proceeds by continually reminding oneself of justification by faith. I will also draw larger lessons about why it is important that we resist the temptation to make ministry reductionistic. Whenever one very good truth is exalted into the only truth that matters, ministry suffers. And when ministry suffers, it hinders the actual sanctification of the saints, sufferers, and sinners that we are.