

What Does God Want of Us?

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I was one of those children blessed by having Christian parents. I grew up knowing that Jesus loved me and that one day I would go to be with Him in heaven. I knew He didn't want me to swear, lie, steal, and so on. But beyond these simple rules, what God really wanted of me and my life was a mystery.

As I matured I began to have many questions surrounding the things of God. Why was the devil allowed to tempt Eve? Why was Adam allowed to sin? What was God's master plan? What was His long-term goal for mankind? More specifically, what did He want for my life?

The Bible truly does contain the answers to all of life's questions but often they are somewhat obscure. For example, the Bible clearly teaches that we are *fellow workers* with Christ. (See 1 Cor 3:9 and 2 Cor 6:1.) We all know how difficult it is to work as a craftsman with someone if you don't understand what the two of you are building! In fact, workmen who don't understand the goal often make mistakes and do things that are counter productive simply because they don't know any better. The same can be true of us. Often we workers in the kingdom of God have this same lack of understanding of our goals, so we too make mistakes.

In the Beginning

In order to understand what God wants of each of us as we live out our lives and ministries, it is necessary to begin our study by examining what God did before sin entered mankind. God came to the garden in the cool of the day to walk and talk with Adam. A careful reading of Genesis 2 and 3 reveals that God's desire was to *have fellowship with Adam*. Since God is all sufficient, all knowing, all powerful and complete within Himself, we might ask, "Why did God want to have fellowship with Adam?"

Scripture speaks of a splendid relationship between Jesus and the Father before the world began. In Jesus' high priestly prayer He prayed, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." (Jn 17:5 NIV) The intimate relationship between the Father and the Son revealed in this verse is essential to our understanding of the very reason God created man.

Since God so enjoyed fellowship with Jesus, His perfect, mature Son, He wanted to multiply that wonderful fellowship millions of times. Thus, God created mankind to have fellowship with Him! We see in Revelation, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and *for thy pleasure they were and are created*." (Rev 4:11 KJV, emphasis added.)

So God created Adam to have fellowship with him, to literally take pleasure in their intimate relationship. Now Adam was created sinless, but he was not created with full spiritual maturity. In order for Adam to have intimate fellowship with God he would have to become mature, like Jesus. I believe that God's plan was to be in fellowship with Adam, walking and talking with him, maturing him so he would become like His beloved son, Jesus. In that way, as mankind multiplied, God would have a family of millions of sons and daughters *just like Jesus!*

Why Did God Allow Sin?

God wants His children to love Him. All of us who have children strongly desire that they love us. But there are children in today's world who do not love their parents. Obviously love is a choice. The Bible tells us that the principal way love is expressed is through obedience. Jesus told His disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (Jn 15:14 NIV)

In order for God to determine who among mankind loves Him, it became necessary to give man the option to choose. He therefore gave man free will -- *the right to choose between right and wrong -- obedience or disobedience*.

Yes, God could have created mankind without free will. Then all of us would have to obey and love Him. But that would be dishonest, or less than the impeccable integrity in which God moves. In order to have a family of children like Jesus, each one must *demonstrate* that love of God through the choice of obedience. Sadly, Adam choose disobedience thereby setting the stage on which we find ourselves today.

Spirit, Soul, and Body

God created man, like Himself, as a triune being. Man is first a spirit being, he has a soul, and he lives in a body. By spirit, I mean that inner being in each of us which allows us to communicate with the spirit world in which God resides. John tells us that, "God is spirit. . ." (Jn 4:24 NIV) Our human spirit includes, among other things, our conscience, our discernment, and our ability to have fellowship with other believers. It is the place where the Holy Spirit resides. It was God's plan that His Holy Spirit indwell man's spirit to eventually bringing him to full maturity, like Jesus.

We also have a soul and a body. The soul encompasses our will, our intellect, and our emotions. We reside in our bodies which gives us the ability to be in contact with the physical world through our five senses.

In God's plan, His Holy Spirit was to indwell man's spirit, to train and instruct him. Man's spirit, in turn, was to control his soul, which in turn was to control his body. Here we have God's plan to perfect and mature man.

The Consequences of Sin

1. Spiritual Death

The day Adam chose to eat the forbidden fruit, he disobeyed God, he sinned, and his *spirit* died. (Gen 2:17) Spiritual death occurred when man was separated from the source of life, the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden. The Tree of Life symbolizes Jesus Who said, "I am the way and the truth and *the life*." (Jn 14:6 NIV, emphasis added.)

What happened to man at this point? When the human spirit died, then *the soul took over and became the dominant force in man's life*. As a result, the *self* of will, emotion, and intellect became the center of man's existence, replacing his spirit, thereby replacing God Himself.

How tragic that this sin and consequent spiritual death has formed a barrier between God and man.

2. Life Apart from God

Man then became self-willed, imbalanced emotionally, improperly motivated intellectually, and largely dominated by his body. God is no longer in the picture. Man is all in all. He now lives his life for his own pleasure, not God's.

It is at this point, in the midst of this self-centered chaos man has made, that God chose to reveal Himself to fallen man. But how could God reveal Himself? How could He get man back to a life dominated by his spirit?

You Must be Born Again

This was (and is) the reason Jesus was born as a man. God sent His Son into the world not only to redeem man but also to reveal Himself to man. Those who saw Jesus saw the Father for He said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (Jn 14:9 NIV) Thousands of years had passed since man fell in the garden, and by the time of Jesus, man's sinfulness was fully developed. Jesus was the way to remove that sin barrier. We see this truth clearly in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. When Jesus encountered Nicodemus, He declared,

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" (Jn 3:3-7 NIV)

The self-sacrifice of Jesus' life paid the sin debt of mankind and opened the door for those who love God to become reconciled to Him. In short, those who accept Jesus as his or her personal savior are *spiritually* born again. That person's spirit is now reestablished, or reconnected with the source of life, Jesus.

By an act of that free will God gave man, He now knows those who choose to love Him and those who don't. To sacrifice His beloved son was an awful price, so very costly to God. As the Apostle Paul said, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. . . ." (1 Co 6:19,20 NIV) But it was paid to separate out from mankind a family of children who love God and His Son, Jesus.

Now That Man is Born-Again, What Happens Next?

Remember, God's desire is to have fellowship with those who love Him, His sons and daughters. But we have already established that once man's spirit died, his soul began to dominate with all the ugly, sinful aspects of the fallen soul and body life. Are we now to imagine that simply because one's spirit has come alive again that his soul is going to lay down and play dead, giving up all its self-serving power to willingly become subjugated to the newly born-again spirit? No way! Most who have been born-again a month or longer will testify that their soul is very much alive and striving to maintain control!

In order for two people to have true fellowship, they must be compatible with one another. The same is true between each of us and God. Our old, sinful soul is very incompatible with God and His holiness. When we become born-again, it's as if our spirit is a tiny 2 kilogram baby and our soul is a big, powerful 100 kilogram bully! How is our tiny, newly born-again spirit ever going to take its rightful place of dominion over our fully developed, powerful soul and body? Obviously, the newly born-again spirit is going to need help. It's going to need God's help.

Justification and Sanctification

God, in His wonderful plan of redemption of mankind, foresaw this problem. In His marvelous grace He provided justification and sanctification for us. Let's briefly look at these two incredible truths.

1. Justification

Here's what the Bible tells us about justification.

"Through him (Jesus) everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." (Act 13:39 NIV)

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified freely by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished--he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and *the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*" (Rom 3:21-26 NIV, emphasis added.)

Justification then is the process by which God declares the believer sinless. It is how God the Father chooses to view us in our *finished* state, rather than our *factual* state, that of being born again, but still struggling with sin. Christ's death and God's subsequent view of us as fully holy is what we refer to as the doctrine of justification.

2. Sanctification

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus entered the Holy of Holies in heaven and presented His own blood as a ransom for our sins. Therefore those who receive His salvation are set apart, separated from the rest of mankind and sanctified from sin by the blood of Jesus. (Heb 9:11,12) Thus, in one sense the blood of Jesus sanctifies or sets us apart as holy. But there is still that life long process of personal sanctification that each of us has to go through.

The Process of Sanctification

Soon after one's born-again experience, he or she finds that he continues to sin, just like before. The old habits are still present,

dragging the new believer back into the slimy pit of sin. So even though this new believer has been fully justified by Jesus, he is only now beginning to enter into the process of sanctification. It is by this process that we begin to be conformed to the image of Jesus. It is a life long work. The Holy Spirit is the agent in this process. It starts the moment Jesus saves us and continues until He calls us home. Every choice in life we make that pleases God is part of the process. Every act of turning away sinful thoughts and behavior is part of the process.

My favorite image of this process is that soon after the salvation experience, the Holy Spirit comes along with a bucket of soapy water in one hand and a big brush in the other and says, "Come here, boy, we're going to do a little scrubbing. There are some areas in your life that I want to get clean."

In general we can expect the first things the Holy Spirit is going to deal with are our overt sins, that is, those things others can easily see. Then, after He has cleansed the overt down to a minimum, He is going to start with the covert sin, things that are a little harder to see like jealousy, envy, selfishness, bitterness, and all such foul things inside the heart. Sanctification is an ongoing cleansing, purging, rebuilding, renewing process that ultimately molds us into the image of Jesus.

Now let's look at the vessels the Holy Spirit uses in this process.

a. Scripture

God uses Scriptures to sanctify us. In Jesus' high priestly prayer he prayed, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*" (Jn 17:17 NIV, emphasis added.)

The Apostle Paul tells us,

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." (Col 3:5-10 NIV)

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the *washing with water through the word*, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." (Eph 5:25-27 NIV, emphasis added.)

In actual fact, the reading, teaching, and preaching of the word of God sanctifies us. This is why it is so important that Christians develop a life-style of Bible reading, attending Bible classes, and going to church services so that they are hearing God's word. Paul showed us what a powerful tool God's word is in the process of sanctification when he wrote, "I would not have known what coveting really was if the law [Scripture] had not said, 'Do not covet.'" (Rom 7:7, NIV)

b. Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Most of us don't like it when one of our brothers or sisters in Christ tells us we are wrong or involved in sin. But whether we

like it or not, Scripture is clear on this point. Paul wrote to the church in Colosse.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly *as you teach and admonish one another* with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Col 3:16 NIV, emphasis added.)

As unpleasant as it may be, we must be careful to prayerfully consider the words that our brothers and sisters speak to us in admonition and instruction. Clearly it is God's plan and one of the tools used by the Holy Spirit to sanctify us.

c. The Circumstances of Life

There are times in every believer's life when God uses hard circumstances to effect change in our lives. I want to make it clear that I don't believe God causes these circumstances. The Holy Spirit simply steps in and uses them as a tool when He sees an opportunity to correct or mature us.

I have heard many testimonies of people whose hardships of life drove them deeper into the Lord and His word. The wise will choose to turn to God in the midst of the problems of life. For example:

If a man has awful pride, there is nothing like a series of humbling events in his life to strip away that pride. God loves the humble.

If a man is afflicted with the love of money, losing it all is a golden opportunity to be set free.

A person who despises his neighbor may learn to love him if circumstances require him to reach for the supporting hand of that neighbor.

Adverse circumstances can work for us or against us, depending on how we react to them. If we turn to God at such times, the Holy Spirit can use the circumstance to mold us. But if we turn from God, even blaming Him as many often do, then we become angry and bitter. This reaction to our circumstances will harden us and actually drive us farther from God. But if we purpose to say, "God, use this hard circumstance in my life to draw me closer to you," rest assured He will!

How Far Have We Progressed?

Most of us tend to see ourselves more favorably than we actually are. That is human nature. But be assured, the Holy Spirit doesn't see us the same way! The problem with our rosy view of self is that it obscures the real view and thereby hides our need to change.

Over the years I have devised a test to check our progress in this journey of sanctification. Below are the four reactions we have when someone treats us unfairly or something hard comes into our life. I urge you to be honest and grade yourself based on the most recent unpleasantness of life you have experienced.

1. Anger

When someone mistreats you, lies about you, or cheats you, what is your reaction? Do you get angry and say, "They can't do this to

me! I have my rights! Just wait and see." If this is your general reaction when treated unfairly, then your sanctification process has stalled. You're still in the early stages. Get back into the Bible and ask God to help you overcome your soulish reaction. It is only then that you will have victory over unfair treatment.

2. "Why Me?"

When some misfortune comes your way, what is your reaction? Do you ask, "Why did this happen to me? I don't deserve this!" Oh, you may not have caused it, but by now you recognize that life isn't always fair. Remember, at present the devil is in control of this world and its system. (1 Jo 5:19) As Peter says, we are "aliens and strangers" in this world. (1Pet 2:11) So if your reaction is to ask, "Why me?" the Holy Spirit still has a lot of work to do.

3. Romans 8:28

Again, horrible circumstances surround you. But you've been reading your Bible. Good! One day you discovered Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (NIV) If we can respond to our hardships by truly proclaiming that God makes *all things* work for our good, then there is real spiritual growth taking place. Hallelujah! What a giant step beyond the "Why me" phase. But even in "Why me?" and "Romans 8:28," *me* is still the center of my universe! Why ME? All things work together for MY good . . . There is still some growing to do.

4. Philippians 1:21

Years have now passed and you are well on your way to Christian maturity. You've been through many trials, yet misfortune knocks at your door again. But this time your response is that of the Apostle Paul, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Phi 1:21 NIV) Glory to God! The sanctification process is very near completion! "Me" is no longer the center of your life, Jesus is! At this point you can also say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 NIV)

We shouldn't expect to arrive at the Philippians 1:21 stage in the early years of our Christian walk. It comes with decades of maturity in Christ. But these four steps are one of the most effective means I know to help us see where we are in our

Christian sanctification process and help us move on.

Conclusion

Remember the question we asked at the outset, "What does God want of us?" We now know that since God so enjoyed fellowship with Jesus, His perfect, mature Son, He wanted to multiply that wonderful fellowship millions of times with His children who are the image of Jesus. Paul tells us in his letter to Ephesus, ". . . just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her *holy*, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a *radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*. (Eph 5:25-27 NIV, emphasis added.) In other words, God's intent is to have a church in the image of Jesus.

Now that Jesus has justified us, and the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us, God, through His church, has a huge family of growing, maturing sons and daughters. Our Father's life goal for each of us, and for His church universal, is that we all reach ". . . unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Eph 4:13 NIV)

So this is God's plan for mankind in general and you and me in particular. As with Adam, He wants to walk and talk with us in the cool of the day. He wants us to use our free will to choose to love Him with our whole heart, mind, soul, and body. He wants us to live our lives so that we do truly become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. Oh, what pleasure and joy that gives the Father!

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