

The Good Life

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 23, 2022.

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:24b-28).¹

The Holy Spirit “helps us in our weakness” (8:26). The subject is the Holy Spirit, who as the “Helper” whom Christ promised and sent (John 14:16), helps us. The inspired implication is we need the help. But if “we have been justified by faith” and at “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1), and if there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and if we are children and “heirs of God” (Rom. 8:17), what help do we really need? Should we believe as we often act, or pray the cowboy prayer, “Give us rain and a little luck, God, and we’ll do the rest”?

The answer is found in this short prepositional phrase: “in our weakness.” While we are already children and “if children, then heirs” (Rom. 8:17), we still contend with our fallen, sinful flesh. New hearts? Indeed! Freed from our sinful flesh? Not yet.

This reality is sadly evident. We do not think as we ought, speak as we ought, live as we ought. As Paul explained to the Galatians, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). Spiritually speaking, we are weak, needing all the help we can get. Knowing this, thankfully, God provides precisely what we need, the Helper himself.

Why God would choose to dwell within us by his Spirit, remains a mystery. One wonders why God does not simply take us to heaven upon our conversion. Surely this would help with evangelism! But God does not; we are not removed but remain, that we might suffer with Christ, as Paul puts it, “in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). Suffering with Christ is then essential to our sanctification, leading ultimately to glory. The duration of our sanctification, whether short or long, is unknown, a mystery held in heaven. The purpose of our sanctification is not, nor the necessity of the Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit dwells in all who belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9), he enables us to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13), confirms our adoption as children of God (Rom. 8:16), conforms us to Christ (Rom. 8:29), and sustains us unto glory (Rom. 8:30). He is not a passive spectator but an active participant in your life, using your individual sufferings and your personal struggles, your trials and temptations, preparing you for eternity. And it is in this sanctification,

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

as the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, that we do not despair but “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2).

God-sustaining Hope

As our standing with God *stands* not on our weakness but upon God’s grace, we may rejoice with a God-glorifying and sustaining hope (Rom. 5:2). And because it is a hope not in ourselves but in God, it is a secure hope, knowing that our adoption will be complete upon the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23) at the end of the age and our Lord’s return. On that day, we “shall all be changed,” Paul told the Corinthians, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:52-53). This certainty of the completion of our adoption and the redemption of our bodies, also known as our glorification, results in our final and complete immortal perfection, and hoping in this yet to be revealed certainty, gives us hope.

So also our journey to glory: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). It’s not just that we hope in what we will be in glory but also in seeing God’s work in preparing us for it. For this reason James counsels the unthinkable: “consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2-3 NET), which Paul says leads to hope. In other words, the endurance gained reveals God’s work in us, our sanctification, which James goes on to say leads to “its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything” (James 1:4 NET), meaning our glorification. Though we are not yet perfect and complete, our hope grows as our endurance does, knowing what we will be is certain. Or as John puts it, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Yes, hope is an essential part of our sanctification.

This is why Paul could say that “hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom. 8:24). You and I do not know tangibly what it is to be glorified. We can imagine, but even our imaginations are limited to our experience. The “glory that is to be revealed” (Rom. 8:18) has not yet been revealed to us. We have not seen it, but “if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom. 8:25), a God-sustaining hope encouraged by a Spirit-interceding strength.

For while we “hope for what we do not see,” we *do see* evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in us. For this reason, Paul says that the hope that we have does not “disappoint” us (Rom. 5:5a NET). Why? Because, as he puts it, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5b NET), and it is in his strength that we live.

Spirit-interceding Strength

“Likewise,” or “In the same way” (NET), Paul concludes, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” (8:26). The same as what? Like what? Like the God-sustaining hope that we have in what God has promised we will be, so also the Holy Spirit helps us toward it. Rather than mustering up the

will power or motivational self-talk, we confess the reality of our condition: our weakness. God is glorified in us as we are dependent upon him. And so, in our weakness he sends the Helper, revealing to us our condition and his perfect provision.

Consider what this teaches us. First, God knows you better than you know yourself. He searches the heart and tests the mind (Jer. 17:10). He knows *everything* about us, “knows our frame,” and is “mindful that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). If you think that you are the authority on your heart and mind, you’re wrong. God knows you better than you do.

Second, God knows you personally and intimately. The Spirit of God dwells in you individually if you belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). This means that our relationship with God is not superficial or general but personal. You and I have no earthly relationship closer than the one we have with God through his Spirit. He dwells within us, all the time.

Third, because the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of our one God, he is in perfect union with God the Father and God the Son as one God. The Holy Spirit is never in conflict with the Father or the Son but is always working on their behalf in full accord. Therefore, what the Holy Spirit does in us is always pleasing to God and according to his will.

Fourth, because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are in perfect union as God, and because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, he intercedes on our behalf with God according to God’s will for God’s glory and our good. For example, consider our prayers. While we are able to pray to our Father through the Son, we are plagued by the weakness of our sinful flesh. Not only do we often not know what to pray, we do not pray as we ought. But the Spirit knows. And as God knows “the mind of the Spirit” (8:27) and as the Spirit knows us, he “himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (8:26), or “inexpressible groanings” (NET), not mortal mumblings of our weakness but divine upspoken intercession on our behalf. Our paltry prayers are silently translated into perfect, praiseworthy petitions through him who knows us best.

And so, we trust God with our prayers, and everything else for that matter, because the Holy Spirit’s interceding is always perfecting. Perhaps with hyperbole yet with insight Martin Luther observed, “It is not a bad but a very good sign if the opposite of what we pray for appears to happen. Just as it is not a good sign if our prayers eventuate in the fulfillment of all we ask for. This is so because the counsel and will of God far excel our counsel and will.”² It has been said, “Be careful what you pray for; you just might get it.” But this is somewhat misguided. Certainly, we should take care to pray according to God’s Word, but there is also a trust in the Holy Spirit’s good work in us that encourages us to pray. Perhaps we should say, “Be consistent to pray according to God’s Word, submitting to God’s will for his glory and our good.” But it’s not just our prayers but “all things” that God is working for good.

² Martin Luther quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 526.

Christ-like Good

It is not a common good that Paul describes, but a specific “good” for “those who are called according to [God’s] purpose” (8:28). Who are those whom God calls? The following verses explain they are those whom God foreknew and “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). They are those whom he justified through faith, adopted as his children, indwelt and sanctifies by his Spirit, and will one day glorify at the consummation of their redemption. All by God’s grace through faith in Christ are “those.” And if the chief end of our being is to glorify God,³ then God’s purpose is his glory and includes our ultimate and final glory, the completion of our adoption, the redemption of our bodies in a new heaven and earth, reigning with Christ forever.

Therefore, we are those “who love God,” referring not to our degree of devotion but our state of salvation in Christ. All who are predestined, called, justified, and adopted, love God in this sense. For, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And because of this love, our sovereign God and heavenly Father is providentially orchestrating “all things” for our good, not a worldly good but the greatest good— “the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom. 8:29). Such goodness may differ widely from our momentary and fleeting perception, but to be Christlike unto glory is the greatest good we could ever know.

Think about it: Did the martyred apostles know this goodness of God? Or what about the others who “suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment,” those who “were stoned, . . . sawn in two, . . . killed with the sword,” those who “went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated,” those of whom the writer of Hebrews concludes, “the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:36-38). Did “all things work together for good” for them? The world shouts, no! But the world knows not what we know: “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:28-29).

This then is why our hope rests not on what we see but what we do not see. This is why the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf, even directing our prayers into pleas of Christlike provision. This is why Paul could not compare “the sufferings of this present time . . . with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). Yes, through the Spirit of Christ within us, God *is* conforming us to his image, and that is good today unto eternity.

And this truth should impact how we see the sufferings of this present time and the Holy Spirit’s work in us through them. This truth should impact how we pray and consider the trials of life, not with victimhood despair but with Spirit-filled joy, patiently persevering. Because the greatest good we could know is to be like Christ. Or, to put it another way, the good life is far different from what the world believes. The good life is Christ.

³ “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” “The Shorter Catechism Q. 1,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 355.