

### 3:1 SANCTIFYING WORK

**We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.** *2 Thessalonians 2:13*

**May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.** *1 Thessalonians 3:13*

What is a saint? Is it, as the child said, thinking of church stained-glass windows, 'someone the light shines through'? Maybe – but the recipients of these early letters of Paul are flesh-and-blood characters with all kinds of flaws and foibles, walking the streets of this world. What makes them distinct from others around them?

Something is going on in them, collectively and individually, which means they have a radically different nature and destiny from the rest of the human race. Why? Because they belong to Jesus Christ. They are being redesigned by the Holy Spirit for a permanent life in God's presence. Paul calls them 'firstfruits' because they are like the initial sheaves of a worldwide harvest which, if he had known, will include women and men two thousand years into the future.

In the area of bodily self-improvement, treatments are available for getting a complete makeover, with hair, skin, eyebrows, figure all made more attractive. We can even get a mental or psychological workover. Then we can face society as new people. So how can any human being get a spiritual makeover which will endue them with 'the beauty of holiness' for meeting the eternal God face to face?

The Spirit of Christ, the word of truth and the faith-commitment of the believer work together, says Paul, so to permeate our hearts with the love of God and the likeness of Jesus, that we really can emerge at that climactic moment of Christ's return, not as stained-glass figures, but indeed as 'people the light shines through.'

*Do I want this? Am I up for it? In that case, Lord, you will have to 'strengthen my heart', because there's a lot of work to be done.*

### 3:2 GOD'S LOVE

**Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.** *Romans 5:5*

**Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.** *John 14:23*

Being a confessed follower of Jesus Christ isn't going to earn you many medals in this life. It is more likely to bring you disapproval and even social ostracism. This happened to the apostle Paul; but what kept him going, he says, was an inner reservoir of hope continually topped up to overflowing by God's love. This love wasn't a moral ideal or a fluctuating emotion, it was none other than the Spirit of Jesus in him, keeping him going, telling him he was precious to God, whispering 'I'm on your side.'

Jesus taught the same thing using words appropriate to the situation: he is on the way to the cross and resurrection, the Spirit hasn't been poured out yet, but the promise is identical. Anyone who is prepared to stay a disciple through thick and thin will find within themselves a Divine fellowship of love, Father and Son (and therefore Holy Spirit as well) taking up residence, not just a bed and breakfast visit but moving in for keeps.

Because this is a gift from the Father's side, no way dependent on my moral qualities, it releases a triple dynamic: I realise God's love for me, I can express an answering love for him, and I become a channel of his love for others. I might even, perish the thought, find myself praying for those who treat me like dirt!

*How did Jesus manage to think about the welfare of his torturers, the criminal next door to him, and his own desperate mother, while going through the agonies of the cross? If it was through the same Spirit that he's given me, then perhaps I can respond to the lesser demands of my own daily situation in a more Christlike way.*

### 3:3 PEACE IN EVERY WAY

**The fruit of the Spirit is peace.**

*Galatians 5:22*

**Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.**

*2 Thessalonians 3:16*

The little Greek port below my hotel window was already humming with purposeful activity. Boats were releasing their hawsers; people were walking their dogs; cars were buzzing along the shore road. The sea was completely calm in the pre-dawn stillness. It was the peace not of absence of sound or movement or tension, but of the ordered dynamic of a world comfortable with itself.

I am rarely comfortable with myself or my situation. I fret that things aren't right as they should be. Is there a secret somewhere I am missing? Or is it given only to a few great and radiant souls to possess 'peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin'?

Paul was writing to the newly formed and struggling church in Thessalonica. Added to the normal tensions of their daily lives, the Christian believers were now up against misunderstanding, cynicism and active opposition. How could they possibly find peace 'at all times and in every way'?

They couldn't produce it by their own striving, nor even by ancient or modern methods of thought control. The secret of their serenity was then, as now, the presence of their Lord. Through being reborn in the Holy Spirit, they had someone who lived with them and within them through every possible permutation of human life, circumstance and challenge. He could shoulder all the responsibility for their needs and experiences. He is the Prince of Peace, and time and eternity are in his hands.

*'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6). What an incredible promise from the Spirit! Have I asked 'the Lord himself' for his peace today?*

### 3:4 FORBEARANCE

**The fruit of the Spirit is forbearance.**

*Galatians 5:22*

**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.**

*Philippians 2:5*

They couldn't stand each other. One was always getting at the other, carping, criticising, dissing. No love lost between them. So Paul names and shames: 'I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord' (Philippians 4:2). It wasn't a simple matter of temperamental incompatibility or differing viewpoints, it had deeper spiritual roots in 'selfish ambition and vain conceit' (Philippians 2:3).

So Paul paints an unforgettable portrait of Christ Jesus, the God who gave up his privileges not just to become an ordinary man but to suffer the supreme indignity and torture of crucifixion, if only we could have the right to eternal life. Are we prepared to look to the interests of others to the same extent? Or are we trying to further our own personal status and self-importance?

A Samaritan village hadn't welcomed Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, so James and John quote a story about Elijah the prophet calling fire down from heaven and suggest he does the same. Jesus replied (it's not in most texts, but it's just what he would have said): 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man did not come to destroy people's lives but to save them' (Luke 9:55, ESV footnote). The commentator Matthew Henry notes:

They were ignorant of the prevailing motives of their own hearts, which were pride and carnal ambition. It is easy for us to say, Come, see our zeal for the Lord! and to think we are very faithful in his cause, when we are seeking our own objects, and even doing harm instead of good to others.

*Is there someone I find it difficult to get on with? I may not know their agenda, but what's mine, deep down? What manner of spirit am I of? Am I really being faithful to Christ in my attitude?*

### 3:5 GOODNESS

**The fruit of the Spirit is ... goodness.**

*Galatians 5:22*

**We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

*Ephesians 2:10*

The young lad came for his first music lesson. He put down his bag, took out his father's violin and began to play. The teacher put his hands over his ears and groaned, 'You need to tune it first!' The boy retorted, 'It won't never tune properly. It's too far gone.'

In his book *Made For Goodness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, 'We are tuned to the key of goodness.' We are constructed in the image of a God who is totally good, with the result that we instinctively know when we are out of tune with him.

This is undoubtedly true, but there is another side to the problem. Human nature has lost touch with its Creator, sin has entered the world, and its tendency is in the opposite direction to goodness. Our default position is to be anti-God (Ephesians 2:1-3). The instrument is too far gone to produce pure music. We need to be returned to the Maker and radically reconstructed.

When we join ourselves to Christ, his Spirit refashions us from within. The word translated 'handiwork' is *poiēma*, as if we are God's 'poem', fresh from the hand of the author. Not only has the old script been sent to the shredder, but the new script has a beauty and a depth that can only be the product of the Lord himself.

So in what sense has God 'prepared our good works in advance'? Do we have any say in the person we are to become? Indeed we do. We are not just passive instruments waiting to be played; we fully cooperate in the process. We are all variations of the love-theme the Master-musician is playing, infinitely wonderful modulations of the original story of Calvary, Easter and Pentecost.

*'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' (Jeremiah 29:11). Help me to keep in tune with you today.*

### 3:6 PRIDE AND ITS OPPOSITE

**The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness.**

*Galatians 5:23*

**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.**

*Matthew 11:29*

There are two Greek words in Jesus' self-description which are very close in meaning: 'gentle' (*praūs*) and 'humble' (*tapeinos*). The first applies to how you treat others; the second, to how you think of yourself. It's the same with their opposites: 'arrogant' is how I behave in relation to others, while 'proud' is what I am in my heart.

This is an area where we need the help of the Holy Spirit perhaps more than anywhere else. When I was wrestling, over the course of several months, with the implications of asking Christ to come into my life, I realised with blinding clarity that my biggest problem was my own pride. I acknowledged the right of my Saviour who had died for me to claim me for his own, yet there were elements of the package, such as getting along with certain other of his followers, about which I was quite rebellious.

How could I possibly become humble enough to let Christ take over my life comprehensively? It was as though, when I came to open the door from my side, there were two great bolts I found very hard to shift: pride and self-will. If these bolts were going to be drawn, it must be Christ who did it from the inside by his Spirit; but he was still on the other side of the door! Catch-22.

Eventually I gave up the struggle and asked him to come in anyway (Revelation 3:20). There was no blinding light or rush of emotion – yet I knew a change had taken place. The Spirit of Christ had quietly entered my life, though he had surely been working away at me for years to bring me to this point.

*From then on his word was 'Remain in me, as I also remain in you' (John 15:4). This didn't mean striving to better myself morally, nor did it involve a mystical search for God. It meant accepting his presence and letting him work out his own character in me. If he was prepared to stay around with me, then I wasn't going to give up on him.*