

Progressive Sanctification: A Matter of Eternal Life or Death

‘A bit OTT isn’t it? Progressive sanctification a matter of eternal life or death? Some believers argue there is no such thing as progressive sanctification – and yet you say that it is a matter of eternal life or death?’

No! *I* don’t say it. Well, I do. But the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says it, and says it bluntly, with no possibility of mistaking his meaning. Listen to him:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14, ESV).
Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14, NASB).

As the writer declares, there is a holiness or sanctification which is essential – a matter of eternal life or death. Without it, no one – NO ONE – will see the Lord. Bearing in mind John 3:3-8, it means there is a holiness or sanctification without which no one will be saved.

That much is as plain as the nose on your face. If you don’t have this holiness, you will never be saved. You may be religious, sincere, respectable, Bible-learned, church member, theologian, and all the rest, but if you don’t have this holiness or sanctification you will damned for ever.

So, if I can demonstrate that the sanctification in question is progressive sanctification, my title – Progressive Sanctification: A Matter of Eternal Life or Death – is far from being OTT. It is the unvarnished truth!

The question is, of course, does Hebrews 12:14 speak of progressive sanctification? There are those who deny it. They say it speaks of positional sanctification.

Let me explain the terms. Since I want to keep this article brief, I will not set out the underlying scriptural arguments for positional and progressive sanctification, having done so in two

previous works: *Fivefold Sanctification* and *Positional Sanctification: Two Consequences*. But briefly...

Sanctification. The root meaning of the word is ‘separation’ leading to ‘holiness’. The New Testament teaches us that in eternity, God decreed to sanctify his elect in Christ. It also teaches us that Christ accomplished the sanctification of the elect in his death. It further teaches us that the moment the elect sinner trusts Christ he is perfectly sanctified. It further teaches us that the converted sinner (the believer) must live a sanctified life. Finally, it teaches us that at the return of Christ the believer will be absolutely sanctified. Moreover, according to the New Testament, the believer’s appreciation of all this plays a vital role in his assurance and his practical godliness, and thus leads to his absolute sanctification or glorification.

Bible translators have had some difficulty over the words ‘sanctification’ and ‘holiness’. To put it simply, while ‘sanctification’ is probably best reserved for those places where the New Testament speaks of God’s activity in producing the status of sanctification within the believer, the effect of that sanctification in the ongoing life of the believer is probably best captured by the word ‘holiness’. If this scheme had been adopted by the translators, not only would the final version have been more faithful to the Greek, but it would have set out more clearly the doctrine of sanctification in the new covenant, and much of the present confusion over this topic would have been prevented. The fact is, believers are sanctified (they are perfect in Christ before God), they must be sanctified (they must be holy in life, they must live out their standing before God), they will be sanctified (they will, absolutely, at the return of Christ, be made absolutely perfect).¹

Taking full account of this resolves the seeming contradiction between certain biblical statements. Just one example must suffice. The writer to the Hebrews declared: ‘By a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are

¹ Having registered my complaint against the unfortunate translators (whom I admire immensely), even so it is true to say that we have to get used to words taking different meanings and nuances. The context is king.

being sanctified' (Heb. 10:14), and yet Paul could say: 'Not that I... am already perfect' (Phil. 3:12). Yet again, the writer to the Hebrews said, and said just before the statement just quoted: 'We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb. 10:10)! And all three are right! Indeed, the believer can say that when Christ comes he will be made perfect! The fact is, the believer can say: 'I am perfect; I am not yet perfect, but I am being perfected; and one day I will be perfect', which is the same as saying: 'I am sanctified; I am being sanctified; and I will be sanctified'. How can this be? Once we grasp the doctrine of the believer's fivefold sanctification, these statements become perfectly² consistent and comprehensible. More! Our hearts are warmed and our spirits are stirred as we think about one of the glorious works of the triune God in the new covenant, and especially once we realise that all this is true of all who are in Christ. We shall be more strongly assured and more dedicated to live a life of holiness to the glory of God, shining more brightly as lights in this dark world which constitutes Satan's realm.

But to get back to Hebrews 12:14.

Hebrews 12:14 is a vital text. It is located in a letter in which, with majestic cogency, its inspired writer establishes the believer's positional sanctification (the climax coming in Hebrews 10:14), and his absolute sanctification (Heb. 11:40; 12:23) in Christ. It is in light of these two sanctifications that the writer calls so definitely for the believer to live out his status in Christ and show it by his progressive sanctification or holiness (Heb. 12:10,14; see also, for instance, Heb. 13:15-25).

The New Testament declares that every believer, following conversion, is obliged to live out his positional sanctification, make spiritual progress, and grow in practical godliness.³ In this way he shows his positional sanctification to others. Indeed, under the provisions of the new covenant, the believer will be

² Pun intended.

³ Take the last three chapters of Ephesians, for instance.

moved to show, by his life, his sanctified status in Christ.⁴ In other words, the believer will be moved to demonstrate his positional sanctification – which cannot be seen by men – by his progressive sanctification – which must be seen by men – as evidence of his change of status before God.

The question is: Does Hebrews 12:14 speak of positional or progressive sanctification?

Take the context. No! Don't skip it! The context:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives'. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like

⁴ See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears (Heb. 12:1-17).

The passage from first to last is all about the believer's life after conversion, about his running the Christian race, fighting the spiritual fight, enduring trouble, difficulty and hardship under God his Father's discipline, being encouraged in such trials, striving to live out the life of Christ, watching himself, learning from scriptural records of those who have stumbled, and so on. It is in that context that the writer to the Hebrews urges, exhorts, insists, demands that his believing readers live a sanctified, godly, spiritual life, warning them in no uncertain terms of the consequences if they do not.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

By the way, if you go on with the chapter, you will see that the writer is urging and warning like this in the context of the glorious liberty of the new covenant. Don't think that because believers are in the new covenant and have liberty that this exempts them from such exhortations and such warnings! That's a myth! Worse, it is a delusion of Satan. No, those who are most definite about new-covenant theology will the more earnestly press the need – the writer to the Hebrews says it is essential – for the believer to give practical, day by day, definite and determined obedience to Christ in his law and so live a life of progressive sanctification.

In all this I am not denying the glorious provisions of the new covenant – the new heart and the indwelling Spirit to motivate and empower the believer to do this work, to live his life to the glory of God, and so on, but I am stressing the other side of the biblical coin. As Paul told the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who

works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).⁵

Just one more word. There are those who say that Hebrews 12:14 is all about positional sanctification and not progressive sanctification.⁶ Let me point out the redundancy in their argument.

No believer has to strive to be positionally sanctified! Every elect sinner, at the point of trusting Christ, is, by God's grace, by God's Spirit, positionally sanctified – at once and for ever. He does not have to strive for it! But he does have to strive to be progressively sanctified.

And while it is true that if a man is not positionally sanctified he will never be saved – of course that is true! – at this stage in the letter to the Hebrews, to think that the writer – getting near to the punch line, tells his readers that unless they are converted they will never be saved, seems, to put it mildly, a bit of an anti-climax. It is a truth, of course. It is more than that! It is a truism! I cannot accept such a weak position. No, the context of the chapter (before and after), the context of the entire book (see, especially, Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:1-12; 10:19-39; 11:1-40; 12:12-29; 13:1-25), all cry out that Hebrews 12:14 says what it means, and means what it says: Unless a professing believer lives a life of holiness, growing in grace and the knowledge of Christ (progressive sanctification), he may profess all he wants, but he is not saved!

And look how the writer closes his letter:

Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act

⁵ Once again, for the arguments behind all this, I respectfully ask that you consult my two books already noted.

⁶ As I have observed, some of them say that progressive sanctification does not exist!

honourably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you (Heb. 13:15-25).

It is all about progressive sanctification. The fact is, as I said – more important, as the writer to the Hebrews said – progressive sanctification *is* a matter of eternal life or death.