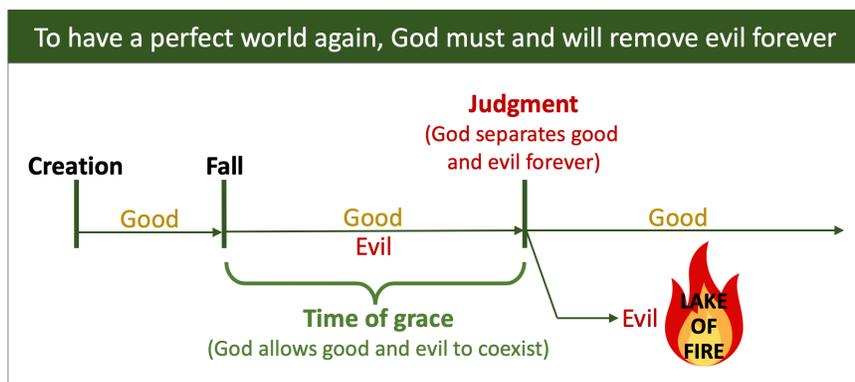


Lesson 18: Holy War Within Ourselves

Previously...

During the period of conquest and settlement, the holy war was a picture of the merciless, terrible and final judgment God would bring to separate good and evil forever. God's demand for holy war showed that real peace is only possible when evil is totally eliminated. Only then can people truly enjoy His blessings.



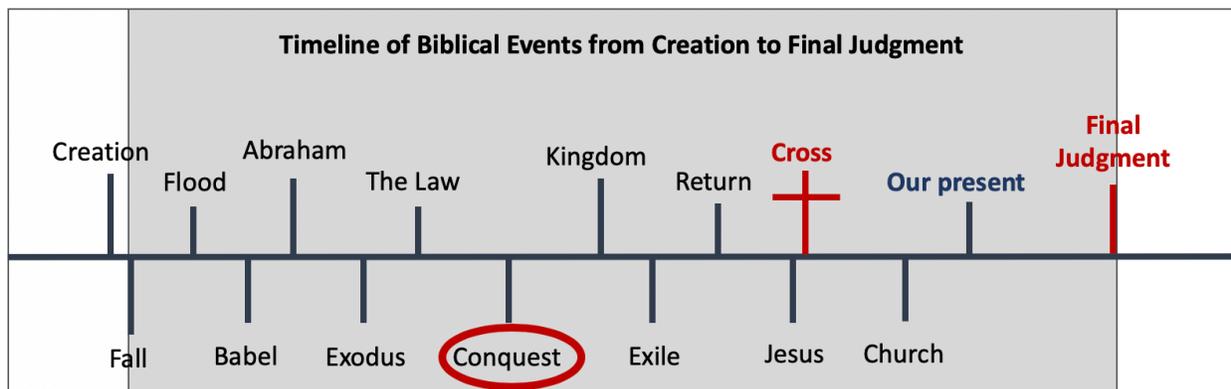
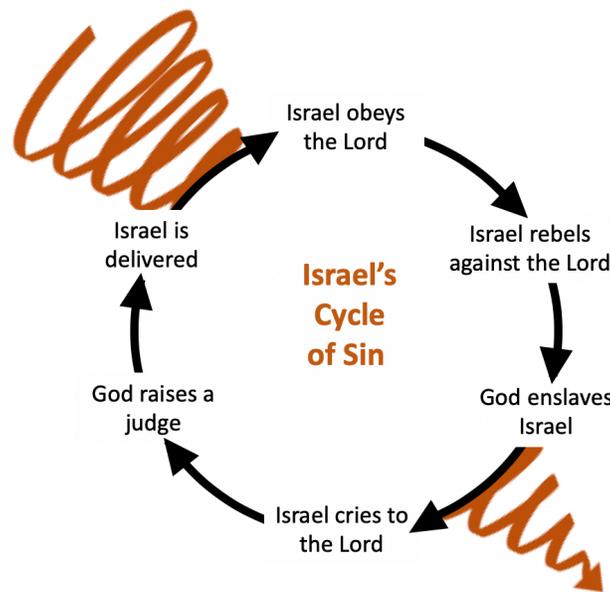
God also used the period of the conquest to teach the Israelites many spiritual lessons. Importantly, He wanted them to have a change of heart, one that is obedient and not rebellious towards Him. He wanted them to reject the evil ways of Babel, Egypt and Canaan, and put their faith in Him.

Pagan Kingdom of Man Based on WORKS Man would save himself through his own ideas	Kingdom of God Based on GRACE God would save man
 Babel	Election
 Egypt	 God chose Abraham
 Canaan	 God saved Israel
	 God built Israel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law ▪ National anthem ▪ Temple worship ▪ Feasts & festivals
	 God taught Israel about spiritual life: Period of the Conquest

Grey shows paganism

With Joshua as leader, the Israelites were overall obedient to God and enjoyed His blessings as they conquered and settled in the land.

However, the picture of the Israelites after Joshua's time, during the time of the Judges, was one of disobedience, idol worship and rebellion. So God disciplined them by letting them be defeated and enslaved by their enemies. He did this so that they would repent. However, instead of repenting, they became more and more wicked and paganised. They each did whatever was right in their own eyes. They ignored God and His Law.



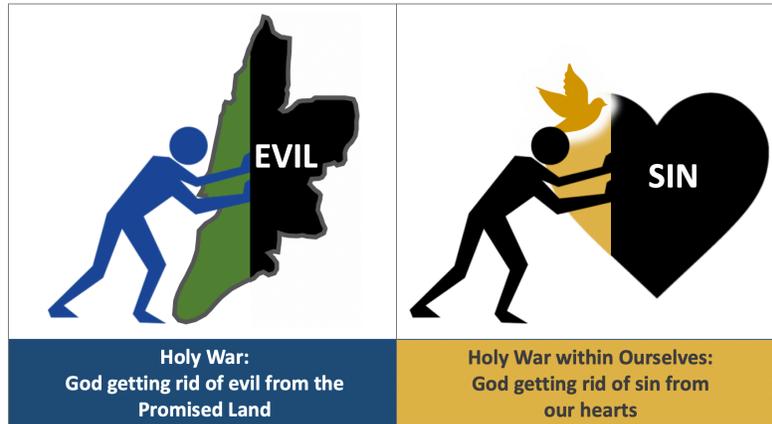
Sanctification: Holy War Within Ourselves

Through the period of the conquest and settlement, Yahweh showed that because He is all-holy, He detests the sin and evil in the world and will eliminate it forever.

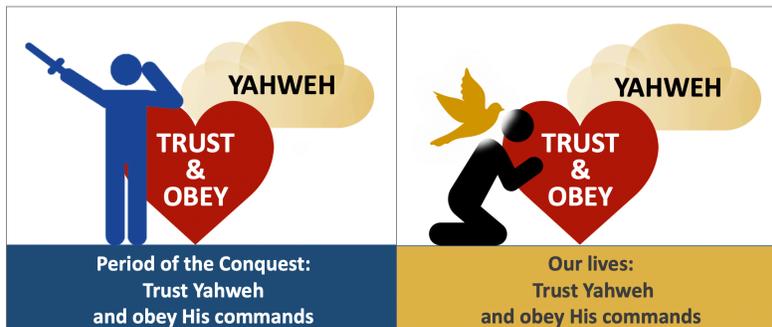
However, He also detests the sin and evil within believers and wants to eliminate them. He intends for believers to become holy and reflect His righteous character. So God calls all believers to wage "holy war" within ourselves.

What does this mean? Specifically:

- A. Just as Yahweh commanded the Israelites to **get rid of evil** in the Promised Land, He commands us as believers to get rid of sin within ourselves.



- B. Just as God commanded the Israelites to **trust and obey Him** during the time of the conquest and settlement, He commands us as believers to trust and obey Him in our lives.



This process of getting rid of evil and growing in trust and obedience to Yahweh is known as sanctification. It is also often called “spiritual growth”.





A. God wants to get rid of sin in us.

Because of the Fall, we all have the same sin nature that was in the Israelites. However, once we put our faith in God, He starts to get rid of this evil in us. Why? God loves us so much that He does not want us to live with sin-damage and the power of sin in our lives. He knows that the cancerous evil within us will destroy us and all our relationships. We will live in misery.

The holy war fought over the Promised Land is a picture of the holy war that God also wants to wage within us. The holy war is a picture of what sanctification looks like in a fallen world. Evil and good cannot co-exist in peace. If we don't hate the evil within us, it will overpower us. Only when we triumph over the sin in us will we have peace.



The Holy War
in the Promised Land...

...is a picture of...



...the Holy War
God wants to wage in us

We saw in the Conquest how Yahweh treated evil in the world: mercilessly. Similarly, **He wants us to have the same mental attitude of hating and fighting the sin in us.**

How do we know this? There are several disturbingly violent and fierce passages in the Psalms that show God's attitude towards evil and wickedness.

These two examples below were written by King David.

Psalm 58:6–11

- ⁶ Break off their fangs, O God!
 Smash the jaws of these lions, O LORD!
- ⁷ May they disappear like water into thirsty ground.
 Make their weapons useless in their hands.
- ⁸ May they be like snails that dissolve into slime,
 like a stillborn child who will never see the sun.
- ⁹ God will sweep them away, both young and old,
 faster than a pot heats over burning thorns.
- ¹⁰ The godly will rejoice when they see injustice avenged.
 They will wash their feet in the blood of the wicked.
- ¹¹ Then at last everyone will say,
 "There truly is a reward for those who live for God;
 surely there is a God who judges justly here on earth."

Psalm 109:6–13

- ⁶ They say, "Get an evil person to turn against him.
 Send an accuser to bring him to trial.
- ⁷ When his case comes up for judgment,

let him be pronounced guilty.

Count his prayers as sins.

⁸ Let his years be few;

let someone else take his position.

⁹ May his children become fatherless,
and his wife a widow.

¹⁰ May his children wander as beggars
and be driven from their ruined homes.

¹¹ May creditors seize his entire estate,
and strangers take all he has earned.

¹² Let no one be kind to him;
let no one pity his fatherless children.

¹³ May all his offspring die.
May his family name be blotted out in the next generation.

There are about ten of these “scolding psalms” in the Bible (Psalm 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 and 139). They are also called “imprecatory” or “cursing” psalms.

Many believers have problems with them because in their minds, these passages sound so “unchristian”, cruel and evil! Some avoid such psalms totally and pretend they do not exist.

But here are some thoughts on how we should understand them:

- These psalms emphasise **God’s hatred towards evil**. This is the attitude that God had during the physical holy war of the Conquest. This will also be God’s attitude at the final judgment. It shows us the level of His disgust and contempt towards evil.
- Importantly, **God wants us to have this mindset towards the sin in our lives**. He wants us to hate our own sins, treat it like the enemy, and destroy it. He does not want us to avoid such confrontations with evil or tolerate sin in ourselves. God wants us to pray these cursing prayers against our own sins: “Take this sin away from me God, so that your name may be glorified!”
- These psalms **glorify God and declare His sovereignty, justice and righteousness**. King David wrote most of these “cursing” psalms. His prayer was that because God is holy, righteous and just, He will ultimately judge the wicked for all their evil thoughts and deeds and get rid of all evil. In the end, God will get all the glory.
- Some of the psalms are also **prophetic** in nature; they were fulfilled later in history.

It is important for us to understand that these psalms were not David’s angry, vengeful rantings that should be ignored or set aside as unholy and unchristian.

How do we know this? Because both Jesus and the apostle Paul quoted from them.

For example:

Paul wrote:	Paul quoted from:
<p>Romans 11:9–10 ⁹ Likewise, David said, “Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well. Let their blessings cause them to stumble, and let them get what they deserve. ¹⁰ Let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and let their backs be bent forever.”</p>	<p>Psalms 69:22–23 ²² Let the bountiful table set before them become a snare and their prosperity become a trap. ²³ Let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and make their bodies shake continually.</p>

Another example: in John 15:25, Jesus quoted from Psalm 35:19 and Psalm 69:4.

By quoting these “cursing psalms”, both Jesus and Paul validated them. So we must not ignore them.

However, it is important that we do not misuse these psalms. While they show God’s wrath against evil and He does want us to pray for Him to remove it, **He is the One who will wipe it out.**

- Holy war and the elimination of evil in the world is God’s work.
- Getting rid of sin in us will also be done by God with our cooperation.

God does not want us to personally use these psalms against humans or pray for them to be cursed by Him. With people, Jesus tells us to love them and pray for them to be saved, even our enemies and those whom we think are evil.

Matthew 5:44–48

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

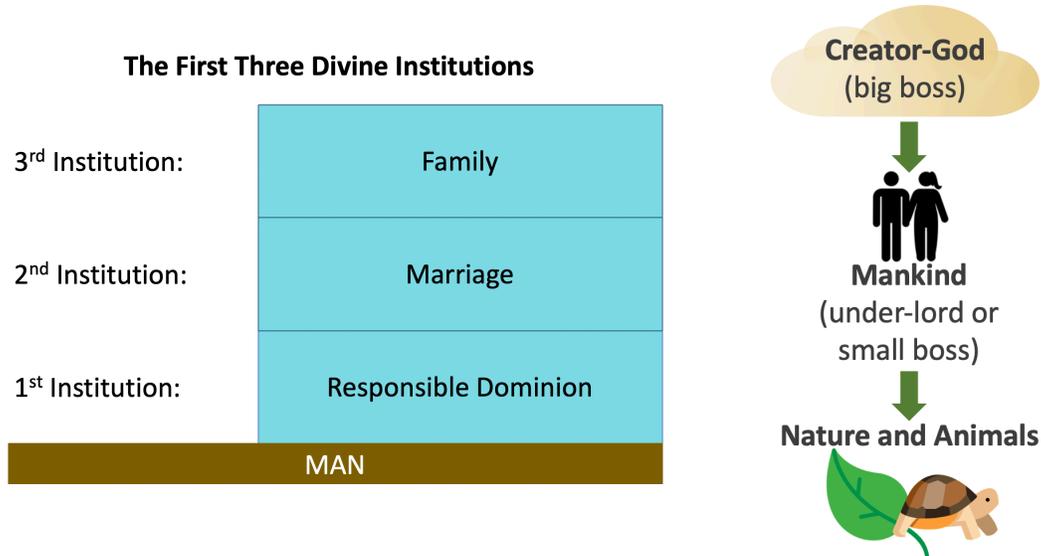
Therefore, as we read these psalms, they should spur us towards sharing God’s hatred for sin and being diligent in cooperating with Him to eliminate sin from our lives.

However, sanctification is not just about getting rid of evil in us. God also intends to deepen our relationship with Him.



B. God wants to build our trust and obedience towards Him.

When God first created mankind, He gave mankind the responsibility of taking care of the world as under-lords. This “responsible dominion” was the first divine institution (Genesis 1:26–30, 2:15).



Man was to trust Yahweh, listen to His instructions, learn from Him how to take care of the world and then carry it out obediently.

How God Communicated with Adam



However, God didn't pre-program man to be obedient. Man was given free will. This means that to do the job well, Adam and Eve had to learn how to be obedient even though they were innocent and unfallen. How do we know this? We know this because even perfect sinless Jesus had to learn obedience when He was a man.

Hebrews 5:8

Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.

Sometimes, we think that to learn something, we must have failed at it. For example, when we say, “She learnt to tell the truth”, we often mean that she had lied, experienced the bad consequences of her lie, and now has learnt to tell the truth.



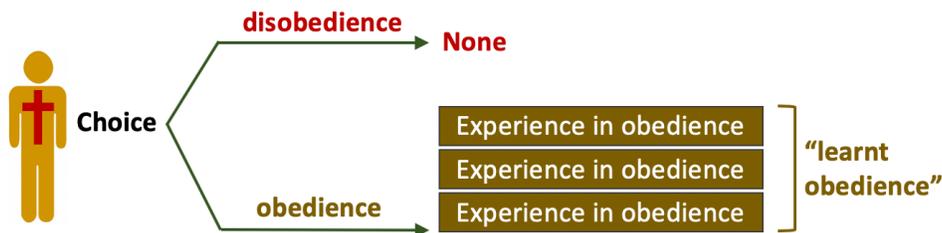
However, this is not what the Bible means by Jesus learning obedience. It does not mean Jesus was disobedient before.

What then does this mean? It is more like learning a skill. When we were young, we didn't know how to ride a bicycle. We had to learn. And the more we practised and the more experience we got, the better we became.



In the same way, the Bible tells us that through His suffering, Jesus as a man was able to **practise and experience being obedient to God**.

Each time He chose to be obedient, He built up more experience in being obedient. In this way, we can say that Jesus learnt obedience.

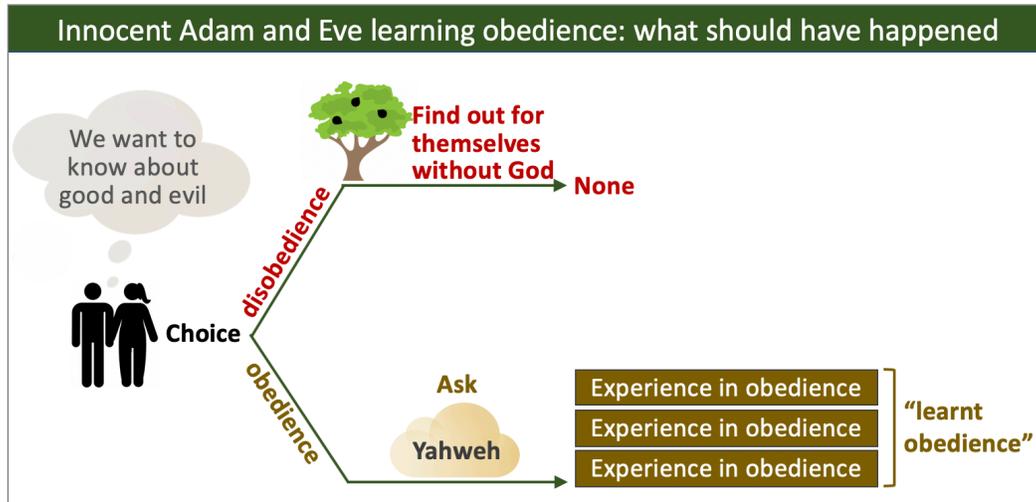


Learning obedience by experience doesn't involve sin. Jesus was the model of perfect loyalty to God. He obeyed God in everything, even to the point of death. (We will learn more about this in an upcoming lesson.)

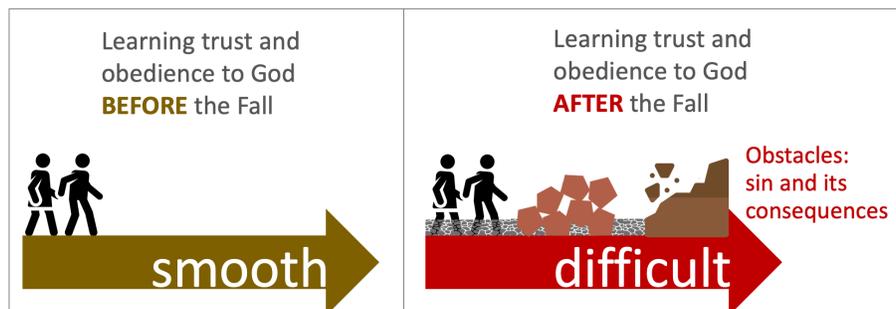
The first people, Adam and Eve, also had to learn to obey. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was there for them to practise and master obedience to God.

Choice #1 Ask God	Choice #2 Find out for themselves independent of God
 <p data-bbox="1008 1843 1118 1885">All-knowing Creator-God</p>	 <p data-bbox="1211 1843 1409 1885">Tree of the knowledge of good and evil</p>

Adam and Eve were to avoid making themselves their own final authority by eating the fruit. Instead, they were to trust God to teach them about good and evil. But they failed. When Satan talked them into eating the fruit, they did. They mistrusted and disobeyed God.



Despite the Fall, God didn't take away His purpose of training mankind in trust and obedience. But because man is no longer sinless, learning this would now be much harder. Sin would be a major obstacle.



To use a physical example, before the Fall, Adam was supposed to plant and produce food. It was easy work because nature was cooperative.

After the Fall, he still needed to grow food. However, there were now great obstacles: thorns and thistles, non-productive plants, plant diseases, pests and uncooperative nature. Adam would struggle and use much more effort and energy to produce the same amount of food.



Similarly, growing in trust and obedience to God would be much harder for fallen mankind. The apostle Paul describes this struggle very well:

Romans 7:14–15, 18–23

¹⁴ So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.

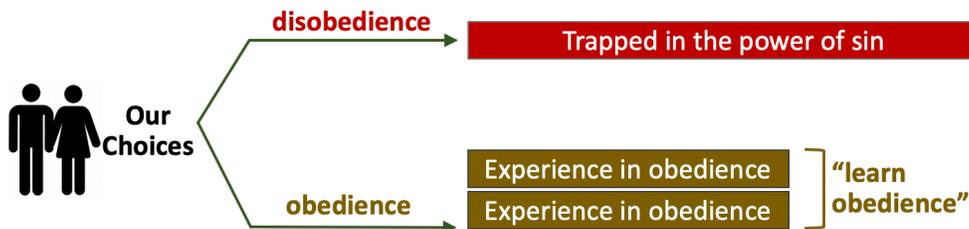
¹⁸ And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. ¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. ²⁰ But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²² I love God's law with all my heart. ²³ But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.

God views growing trust and obedience in Him as even more important than eliminating evil. We saw this in Joshua 7 where God caused Israel to lose the battle at Ai even though they were battling evil. This is because in the previous battle of Jericho, Achan was disobedient and took loot that he should never have. God's lesson there was that just fighting evil was not His plan. He Himself has the ability to eliminate all evil. What He really wants is man's trust, obedience and loyalty.

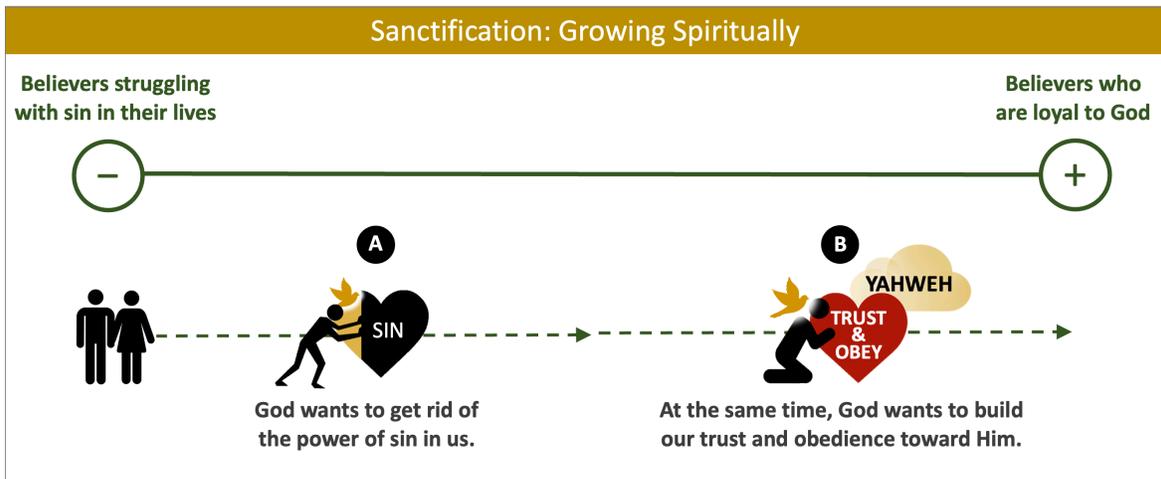
Israelites did not obey God fully



What does that mean for believers? Just as God wanted the Israelites to grow in faithfulness and loyalty to Him, He also wants us to grow in trust and obedience towards Him. But we would have to practise, experience and master this.



In summary, these two aspects make up our sanctification journey:



Justification and Sanctification in a believer’s life

Israel’s history reveals the different stages in their relationship with Yahweh. This helps us make sense of our own justification and sanctification.



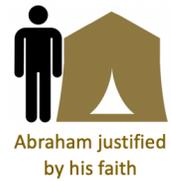
Israel’s history... **...is a picture of...** ...our relationship with God

In the explanation below, to prevent confusion, it’s helpful to think of the entire nation of Israel as if it were one person. Or think of Israel as a company. We are discussing Israel at a “company” level. (All workers within the company still have to respond individually to company contracts, events and decisions.)

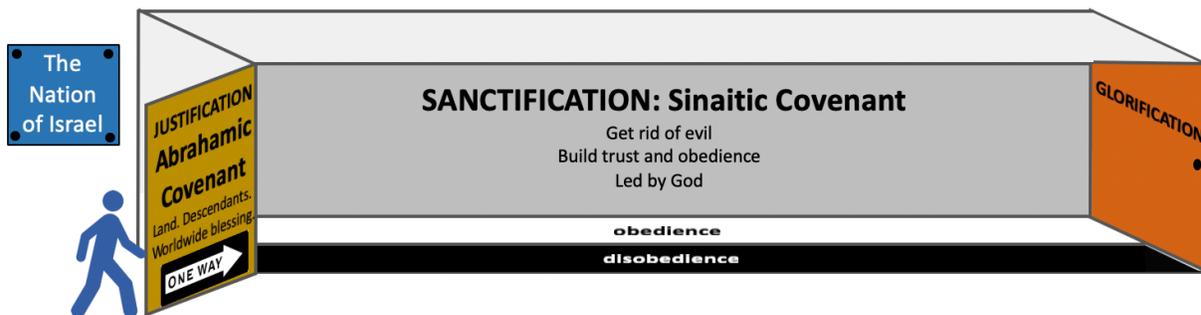
The following is a review of Israel’s relationship with God.

1. Justification (being declared righteous) first

- Abraham believed Yahweh and God **justified** him (Genesis 15:6). He was declared righteous in God’s sight through his faith. This declaration was in the legal sense, where God in His heavenly courtroom made it a binding and permanent declaration. Abraham did no “work” to earn or deserve his justification.
- After that, God made an official covenant or contract with Abraham (Genesis 15:7–20). God committed Himself unconditionally to these same promises. It was a “one-way” road which could not be reversed or changed. Israel would get all that God promised.
- **This Abrahamic Covenant defined Israel’s meaning and purpose in history.** God was going to preserve His history and truth through Israel and reach the world through a Jewish book (the Holy Bible) and the Jewish Messiah (Jesus).



- The Abrahamic Covenant tells us what Israel can expect of God: it is a picture of God’s gracious justification.



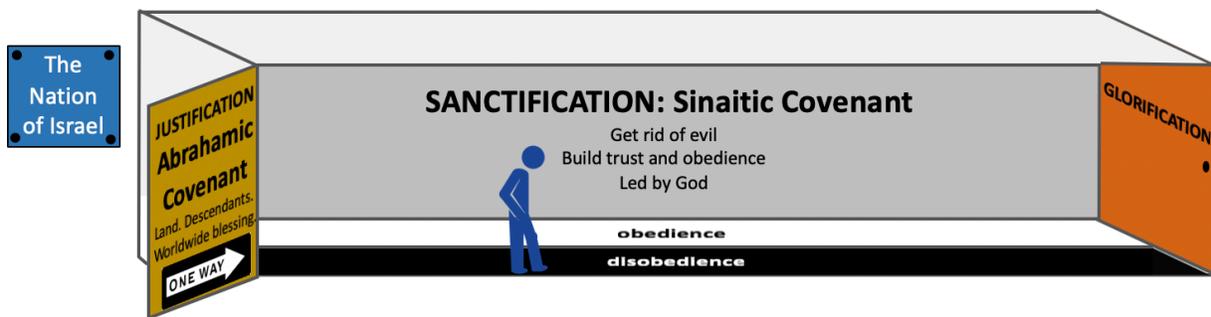
2. Then Sanctification (getting rid of sin and growing in obedience)

The Sinaitic Covenant is God’s expectations of man. God used the Sinaitic (or Mosaic) Covenant as a picture of sanctification or how God would get rid of sin and make Israel holy.

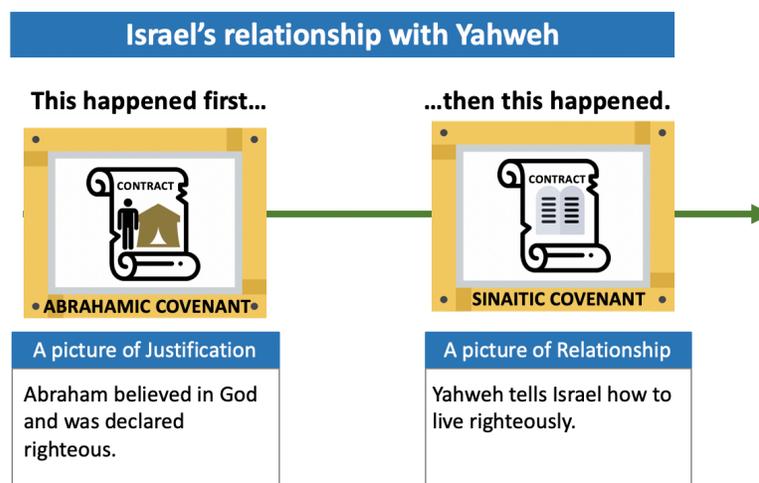


When God gave the Law, He told Israel the righteous ways to think, speak and act. God would bless Israel for obeying His Law and discipline them for disobeying (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28). Israel had a choice to walk in trust and obedience.

Studying the time of the desert wanderings, then the conquest and settlement, we see that very often, Israel went after sin and evil and did not practise trust and obedience to God. Israel showed a severe lack of “sanctification”: choosing to walk on the “road of disobedience” rather than on the “road of obedience”.



However, regardless of how much they failed at the sanctification journey, Yahweh guarantees that He will still fulfil His promise to them regarding land, descendants and worldwide blessing. This pictures the difference between justification and sanctification.



Everything that happens in the life of Israel is controlled by the Abrahamic Covenant. The nation is in the plan of God.

Even when Israel disobeyed God and was severely disciplined, God would nevertheless give Israel the land as He promised. God's overall promises for Israel do not change. Satan can't do anything to change it. Israel's sin can't do anything to change it.

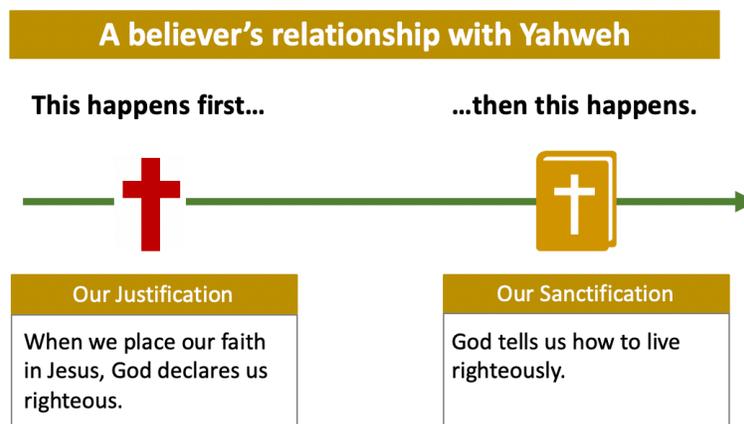
Individual Believers

Israel's justification and sanctification experience helps us understand how this works for individual believers too.

- First, God **justifies** us through our trust in Jesus. It is a legally binding declaration in God's heavenly courtroom. God guarantees our salvation from eternal death when we put our trust in Him. It is a one-way street. We did not get justified through works and we will not be able to keep justification through works. No. Justification is through faith in God.

Romans 4:22–24

²² And because of Abraham's faith, God counted him as righteous. ²³ And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn't just for Abraham's benefit. It was recorded ²⁴ for our benefit, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.



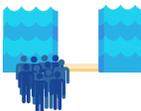
- After justification, God works to **sanctify** us. This work is led by God the Holy Spirit. We can walk in obedience and reap blessings or walk in disobedience and receive harsh discipline, punishment and sometimes even death (1 Corinthians 11:30).



However, once a believer is justified, their eternal security cannot be lost. Even if they show a lack of faith and obedience while on their sanctification journey, God will still fulfil His promise of saving them from the second death.

How do we know this?

In Hebrews 11, God commended people in the Old Testament who had faith in Him. Interestingly, however, some of these people didn't live very consistently sanctified lives! In fact, some also finished off their lives embarrassingly poorly. Here are several examples.

Person	Notes	Result
<p>Abraham Hebrews 11:8, 17</p> 	<p>God justified Abraham through his faith (Genesis 15:6). But there were times when Abraham showed little faith: he tried to have the “promised son” through Hagar (Genesis 16:1–4); he laughed when God said he would have a son through Sarah (Genesis 17:17); he lied to Abimelech about Sarah because he was afraid for his life (Genesis 20:1–18).</p>	<p>Still justified</p>
<p>Moses Hebrews 11:24, 27, 28</p> 	<p>Moses was a friend of God and they spoke face to face (Exodus 33:11). With God's leading, he brought the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 12:33–42) and gave them God's law (Exodus 20:18–21). However, Moses didn't “end well”. He did not get to enter the Promised Land.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 32:48–52 ⁴⁸ That same day the LORD said to Moses, ⁴⁹ “Go to Moab, to the mountains east of the river, and climb Mount Nebo, which is across from Jericho. Look out across the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to the people of Israel as their own special possession. ⁵⁰ Then you will die there on the mountain. You will join your ancestors, just as Aaron, your brother, died on Mount Hor and joined his ancestors. ⁵¹ For both of <u>you betrayed me</u> with the Israelites at the waters of Meribah at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. <u>You failed to demonstrate my holiness</u> to the people of Israel there. ⁵² So you will see the land from a distance, but you may not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.”</p>	<p>Still justified</p>
<p>The Exodus generation of Israelites Hebrews 11:29</p> 	<p>All Israel believed God during the Exodus. All families trusted Yahweh at the Passover (Exodus 12) and at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14). God alone saved them. However, this generation didn't end well. They showed no faith at Kadesh-Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:19–26, 9:23). God disciplined them with death.</p>	<p>Still justified</p>

Person	Notes	Result
<p>Gideon Hebrews 11:32</p> 	<p>God took effort to convince the frightened Gideon to have faith in Him (Judges 6:16–27, 36–40). After being used by God to defeat the enemies, he made an ephod which added to the people’s idol worship.</p> <p>Judges 8:27 Gideon made a sacred ephod from the gold and put it in Ophrah, his hometown. But soon <u>all the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping it</u>, and it became a trap for Gideon and his family.</p>	<p>Still justified</p>

It is clear from Hebrews 11 that these people (and the others mentioned in that chapter) had varying levels of success in pushing out sin and practising trust and obedience to God in their lives (their sanctification). In fact, the Bible does not hide their mistakes and sins. Yet, they never lost their justification because it cannot be lost. Instead, God commends all of them on their faith. He justified them through their faith.

As believers, our overall position is that we are justified by God through faith. When we understand this, we will have stability and assurance even as we experience the ups and downs of sanctification. This is important because unless we are sure of our position in God, we can never truly love Him. Our insecurity will make us self-focused and we won’t grow or thrive—we will always be worried about whether we will have eternal life or eternal death. But God wants us to know for sure! This is what the apostle John wrote:

1 John 5:13

I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.

The Bible doesn’t have any picture of this one-day-we’re-saved-next-day-we’re-not idea. In fact, the pictures we do have of justification only go one way. Noah and his family were not in the ark, out of the ark, again and again. However, what they believed while in the ark would make their sanctification journey comfortable if they trusted and obeyed Yahweh or miserable with doubt and panic if they didn’t trust and obey Yahweh while on the journey.



Areas of confusion

There is still much confusion among believers about justification and sanctification. And we will discuss these issues in greater detail as we move along in the lessons.

However, it is good to briefly understand some of the reasons for this confusion.

1. **When the Bible talks about “saved” or “salvation”, it does not always mean justification (saved from eternal death).**

There are three very important but very different uses of “saved” and “salvation” in the Bible.



If we are not clear on the difference in these meanings, we will end up with great misunderstandings when reading passages about “salvation”.

2. **We don’t know what to think when we hear someone say, “I used to be a believer, but I have since renounced my faith. I don’t believe in God anymore.”** Is this person saved or not? Here are some thoughts:

- i. **Israel as a nation, did not lose God’s promise.** God told us that Israel had faith.

Hebrews 11:29

It was by faith that the people of Israel went right through the Red Sea as though they were on dry ground. But when the Egyptians tried to follow, they were all drowned.

Yet, we know that Israel failed at Kadesh-Barnea, Ai, Bochim and even started worshipping idols! But these are all sanctification issues. Because of the Abrahamic Covenant (which is a picture of justification), God will still deliver on His Abrahamic promises to them!

- ii. **A person who is justified by God will not lose their justification.** Just as Israel did not lose the Abrahamic promises, justified people cannot remove themselves from being justified. Once a person believes, God locks down their decision. Everything else in their life is about sanctification. The apostle Paul reassured believers of their security.

Romans 8:38–39

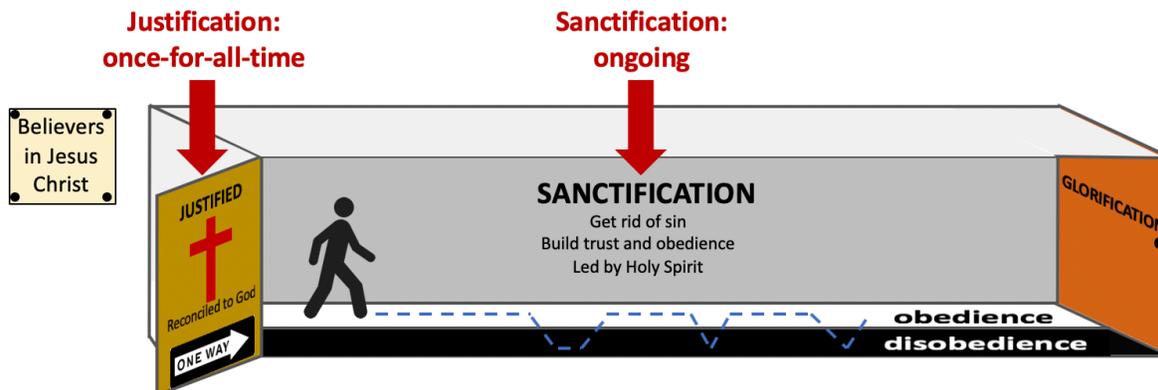
³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This means that we ourselves, because we are part of creation, cannot separate ourselves from God’s grip.

iii. **We do not know if this person was ever justified.** We cannot look into a person’s heart and know for sure. The only reason we know that some people in the Bible are justified is because God tells us that. The reality is that we can only know this for ourselves. So as to whether this person who has renounced their faith is saved or not, we do not know. But this is what we know:

- If they were justified, even if they now “worship idols” like Israel, their justification is secure. (There are consequences in this life and in the eternal state for those who make this choice, but losing one’s justification is not one of them.)

3. **Some believers add to the misunderstanding by confusing the ongoing nature of sanctification with the “once-for-all-time” nature of justification.** It is true that the ideal situation is that after a person is justified, they show great growth in their sanctification. However, the history of Israel and the Israelites show that this does not always happen. The reality is that there is a wide spectrum of behaviour among those who are justified: some behave in a more Christ-like manner than others because they are often at totally different points in their maturity and journey with God.

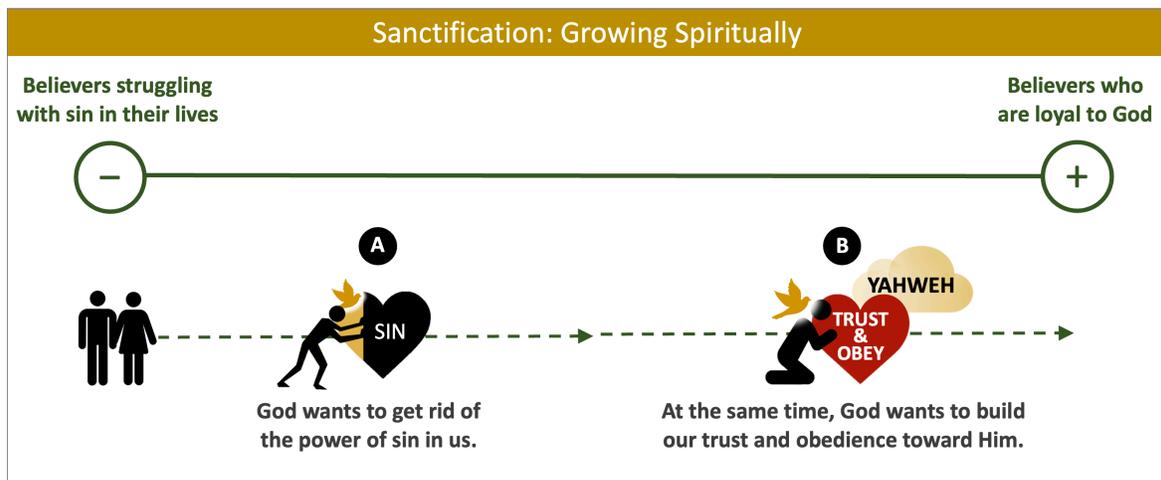


Nevertheless, some believers dangle this over others saying, “If you show no ‘fruit’ of belief (that I can see and judge based on my own opinion), then you must not be justified.” Some people, in an effort to prove they have been justified, will force themselves to do good works when justification has not occurred. They are doing works but have not trusted in Jesus for salvation. Or they manipulate the behaviour of others, urging them to prove their justification through good works. This all comes from a confusion between justification and sanctification.

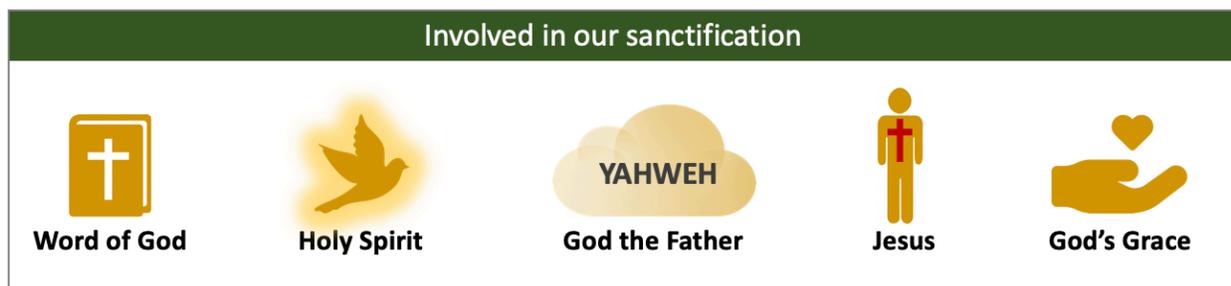
We will be addressing these in far greater detail in future lessons. However, these are some thoughts to remember for now:

- Our faith and assurance will be built if we clearly understand justification and sanctification for ourselves.
- Whether we think a person is saved or not should not change the way we live. If we take the opportunities God gives to speak about our faith, unbelievers will get to hear the gospel and believers will be encouraged in the Word. We can do this with care even without knowing for certain a person's position with regards to God.

How will God Sanctify us or Grow us Spiritually?



There is a whole team working for our sanctification!



A. Word of God

God uses His Word, the Bible, to grow us spiritually. When we read Scripture, it:

- teaches us the truth and the right way to think
- rebukes and convinces us about what is wrong in our lives
- corrects us in areas which we need to change
- instructs us in righteous ways to live.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

**B. Holy Spirit**

When we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit helps us understand its truths.

1 John 2:27

But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true—it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ.



The Spirit is called “the Holy Spirit” 94 times in the New Testament. This is no accident because His task is to make us holy! If He controls a believer's life, He will lead the person to push out evil and to think, talk, behave and live in ways that are obedient to God.

Galatians 5:16–17

¹⁶ So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. ¹⁷ The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.



YAHWEH

C. God the Father

To reinforce the work of the Bible and the Holy Spirit, God the Father disciplines us. The purpose of discipline is to encourage us to grow spiritually. We do not grow spiritually just by reading a book or contemplating life. We grow by living, making daily choices and allowing God to teach us lessons through His discipline.

Hebrews 12:5–7, 10–11

⁵ And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, “My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you.” ⁶ For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.” ⁷ As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father?

¹⁰ For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.





D. Jesus

While we are being sanctified, Jesus sits at the right side of the Father and continually intercedes for us. Jesus died as a substitute in our place and gave us His righteousness, so now He defends us when Satan accuses us of sins.

1 John 2:1–2

¹ My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. ² He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

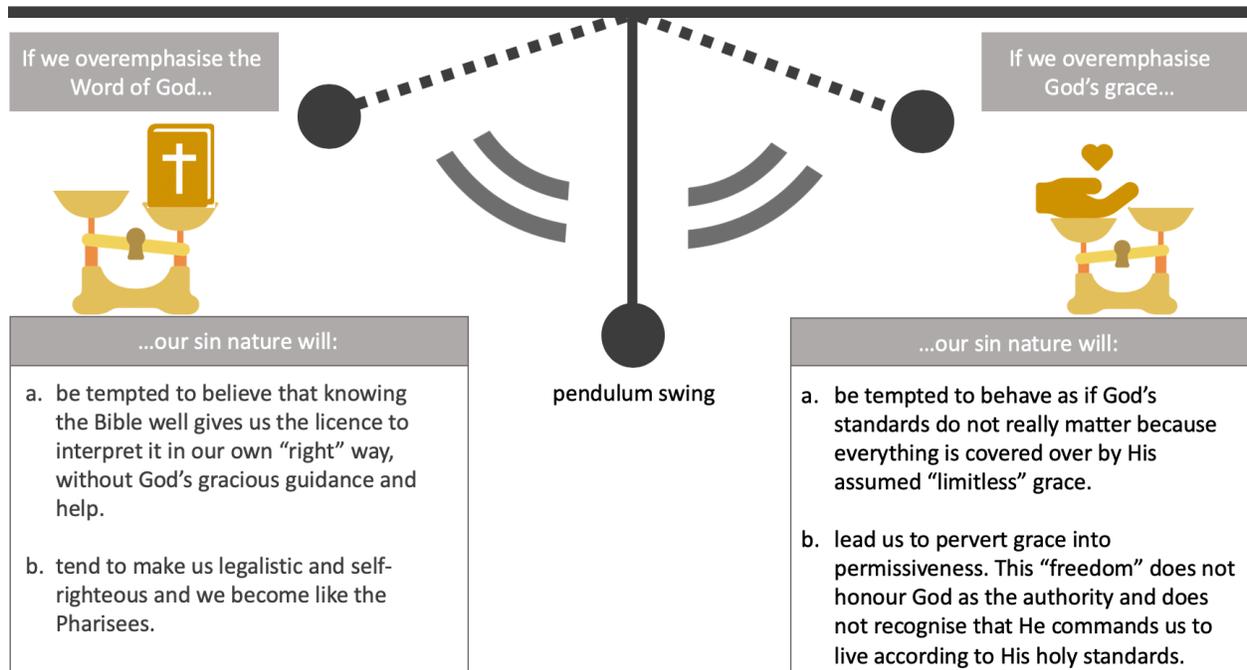


E. God's Grace

It is by God's grace alone that believers are justified (Ephesians 2:8). However, we continue to depend on God's grace for our sanctification. In fact, it is His grace alone that sustains us while we are growing spiritually, falling and making mistakes. It is His grace alone that continues to pursue us and not ignore us.

So much is involved in our sanctification! This is how seriously God treats it! He really wants us to be holy!

However, it is important that we understand that we need both God's Word and His grace in equal measure. As fallen man, we are so inclined to over-emphasise one over the other. But we need to guard ourselves against this because it is very dangerous.



Isn't the aim of sanctification to live a moral life, have wonderful spiritual experiences, a good reputation or achieve great self-improvement?

Sanctification is not measured by how “moral” we are. There are pagans who live a morally upright life but they are not being sanctified. Satan did not commit acts of immorality, but he sinned against God. Neither the pagans nor Satan trust and obey God. Likewise, a believer's sanctification is not measured by their morality, but by their level of trust and obedience to God. Greater trust and obedience does often come with a higher standard of morality, but living a moral life is not the aim.



Sanctification is not measured by our morality

Sanctification is not measured by wonderful spiritual experiences. Sanctification is sometimes accompanied by a deep sense of peace, feeling of fellowship with God or great joy. However, it would be wrong to think that these feelings are a measure of sanctification. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He was alone: his friends fell asleep and left Him to pray by Himself. Then the soldiers came to arrest Him. Jesus was not having a good day. But Jesus was indeed fully trusting and obeying God. His sanctification was advancing even though He was having a “bad day”. Having “good days” is not a measure of our sanctification. Rather, like Jesus, we should determine if we are trusting and obeying God. If we are, we can be sure we are being sanctified even during “bad” days.



Sanctification is not measured by spiritual experiences

Sanctification is not measured by our good reputation. Jesus did not have a good reputation among His own people, the Jews. The Bible said that “even his brothers didn't believe in him” (John 7:5). However, it wasn't because Jesus was living an ungodly life. We must not measure sanctification by reputation.



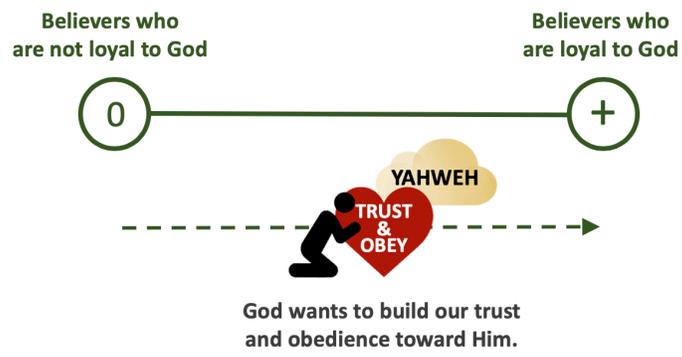
Sanctification is not measured by our reputation

Sanctification is not a self-improvement plan. Sanctification is the Holy Spirit working to get rid of sin in our lives. We have to learn, grow, stumble, sin, confess, get up, move again, fall again, etc. It is not a self-improvement plan where we try to get rid of an addiction, get better mental health or even get more joy.



Sanctification is not a self-improvement plan

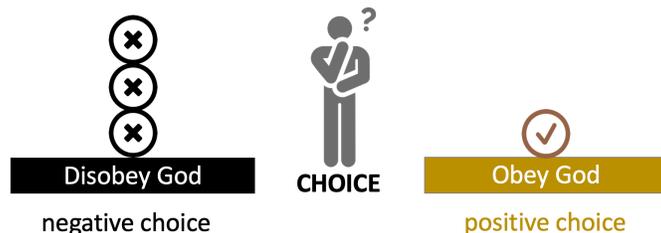
As believers, we need to take care that we measure sanctification by our growing trust and obedience in God and not by any other accompanying measures.



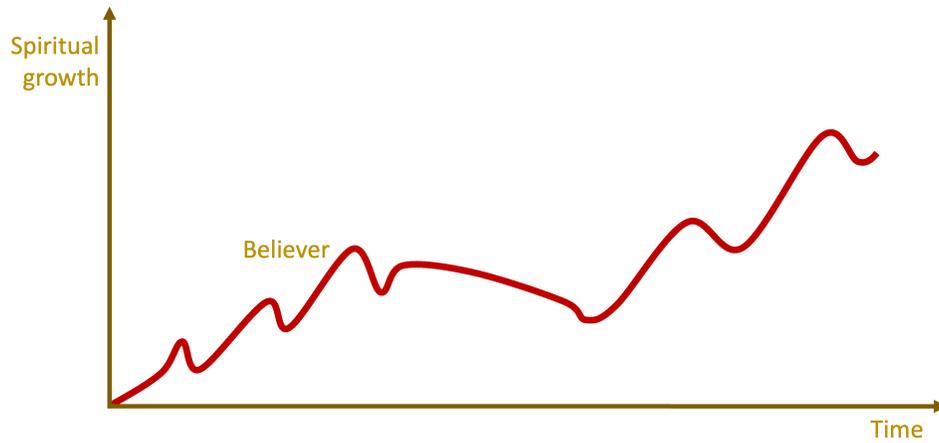
What Does the Sanctification Journey Look Like in our Lives?

Our journey is full of ups and downs. We are either progressing or regressing. There are two aspects of our growth: (i) the present moment and (ii) the long term.

- (i) **The present:** each moment, we can decide if we will obey God’s Word and will for our lives.
 - If we obey, we would have made a positive choice.
 - If we disobey, then we’ve made a negative choice.



- (ii) **The long term:** This is made up of many moments. If we made more positive choices, then we will be progressing in our growth. If we made more disobedient choices, then we will be regressing.



We all grow at different rates depending on how fast we learn the lessons that God is teaching us. God knows that at different spiritual stages, we need different training. He starts us off with “milk” which is training on simpler spiritual matters. If we learn well, He moves on to “solid food” which is more advanced spiritual matters.

Hebrews 5:13–14

¹³ For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. ¹⁴ Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.



Milk for spiritual babies



Solid food for the spiritually mature

Understanding this helps us be patient with our spiritual growth. One poor choice doesn't mean we are not growing. Knowing there is a progression in sanctification encourages us to learn well the lessons that God is teaching us now because there is more to learn.

Are there secrets and “surefire methods” to spiritual growth?

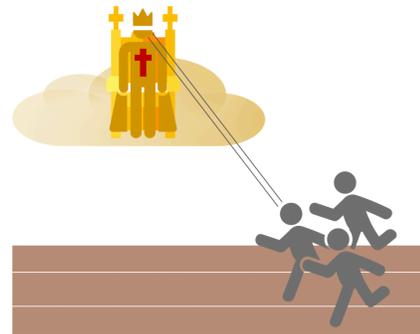
Spiritual growth is not a mysterious process. The Bible tells us clearly how the Spirit grows us: through the Bible. God did not give us the Bible only for us to ignore it. If we read the Bible willingly, prayerfully and then consistently obey God’s Word, we will develop godly habits in our lives. We will grow spiritually.



Why is it we sometimes see no growth in a believer? One reason is because **many lack endurance**. When we don’t get what we want at the time that we want, we become impatient. We want everything now. But the Bible tells us that we need to endure and keep our eyes on Jesus, then we won’t become tired and give up.

Hebrews 12:1–3

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ² We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne. ³ Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won’t become weary and give up.



The passage doesn’t tell us there are better ways to grow spiritually.

Sometimes, as believers, if we don’t feel we are growing spiritually, we start looking for other, “better” methods, techniques or secrets. We think that maybe something else will work. Perhaps there’s a secret we don’t know about and if we just discover it, we can overcome our challenges, grow fast and triumph in our battles.

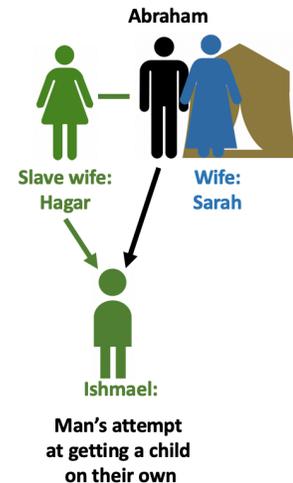
We think that God’s “simple” method of prayerfully reading the Bible and obeying its instructions, plus the Holy Spirit’s guidance is not enough. But we need to be careful about thinking this way.

Abraham and Sarah faithlessly came up with their own solution for having a baby instead of waiting for God's promise.

Similarly, we would just be mistrusting God and trying to come up with our own "solution" if we rush our spiritual growth with other "methods".

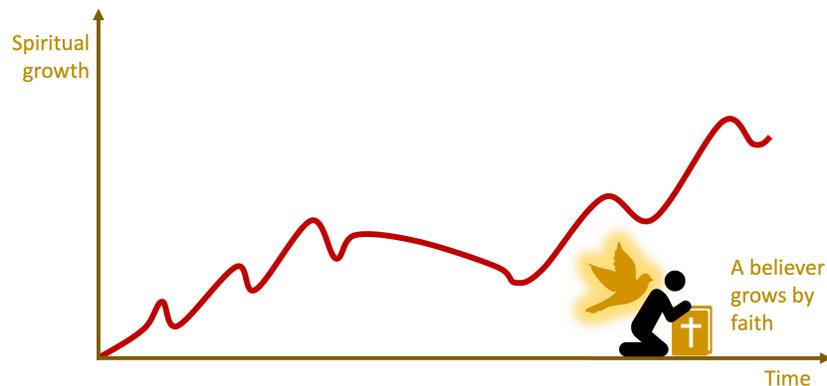
Without faith, and when things are not done God's way, our "solution" will often lead us down wrong roads fraught with problems and even more heartache.

Faith in God is the foundation of everything. We receive justification by faith and **we grow by faith**.



Romans 10:17

So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.



If we are serious about growing spiritually, we would take reading our Bible and praying seriously. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He teaches and guides us. And we can be sure that God will do the work of growing us.

Who or What are the Enemies of Our Sanctification?

Originally, our spiritual growth should have proceeded without obstacles. But because of the Fall, our sanctification is continually opposed by:

- i) The world
- ii) the devil and
- iii) our own sinfulness.

Learning trust and obedience to God
AFTER the Fall



Ironically, God is able to use these enemies of our sanctification to sanctify us!

Joseph recognised God's hand at work when his brothers attempted to destroy him. He said:

Genesis 50:20a

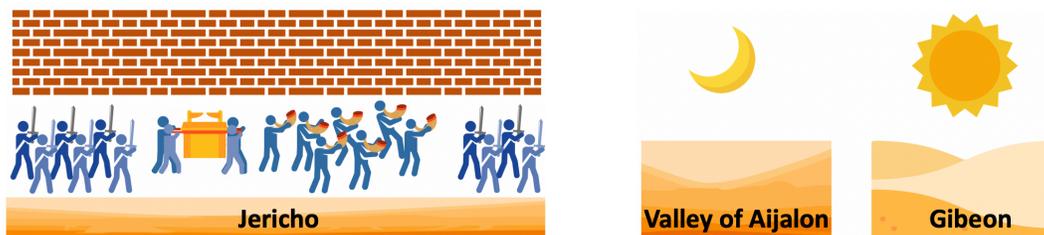
You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.



How does God want us to fight the enemies of sanctification? By submitting to Him.

God taught the Israelites this lesson during the period of the conquest and settlement.

- His instructions were to trust Him and obey what He had told them. God would win the battle for them regardless of how strong the enemy was (for example, Jericho and Aijalon).



- The Israelites were not supposed to attack the enemy with their own strength and ignore God (for example, Ai). This was because the battle against evil was God's, not theirs.

This is the same way that God wants us to confront the enemies of our spiritual growth. For example, the devil is one of the greatest enemies to our growth. Yet God tells us to submit to Him and "resist" (not battle) the devil.

James 4:7

So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.



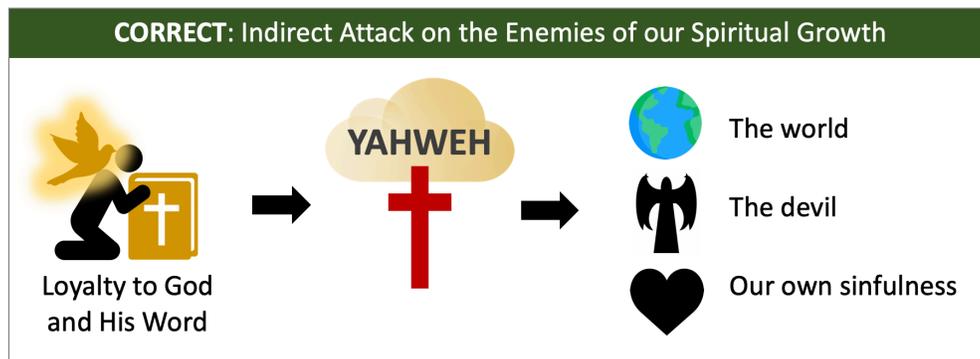
There are Christians who believe they must battle the devil. However, this is not what the Bible teaches. Scripture tells that even Michael, the archangel, didn't scold Satan in his own power. He knew the battle against evil belongs to God so He told Satan that God would rebuke him.

Jude 9

But even Michael, one of the mightiest of the angels, did not dare accuse the devil of blasphemy, but simply said, "The Lord rebuke you!"

Similarly, in response to Satan's attacks, a Christian should continually pray to God, asking Him for help and trusting Him. God is in control of the universe. And this includes Satan. God can stop Satan from causing harm. Instead of focusing on defeating the devil, we should focus on obeying God and His Word.

Moreover, Satan is the master deceiver, liar and slanderer. Aside from our own sinfulness, we risk falling into greater temptation and sin by engaging him on our own. Instead, the better tactic is to turn to our loving God in prayer, asking Him to rebuke, or repulse, Satan's attack.



There may be times when Satan tempts us to make poor decisions. We can defend ourselves with God's Word. We aren't attacking Satan directly but are using Scripture to protect our minds.

Jesus is our ultimate example in using Scripture to defend against the devil. When He was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus would answer each of Satan's temptations with the words, "The Scriptures say" or in some translations, "It is written".



Matthew 4:4, 7, 10

[**First temptation:** Satan told Jesus to change the stones to bread. Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3.]

⁴ But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

[**Second temptation:** Satan told Jesus to throw Himself off the roof of the temple and His angels would catch Him. Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16.]

⁷ Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'"

[**Third temptation:** Satan told Jesus to worship him and he would give Jesus the whole world. Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:13.]

¹⁰ “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.’”

Jesus knew that the Word of the living God is the most powerful weapon against the temptations of the devil. And it happened just as God said it would: the devil went away.

If Jesus Himself used the Word to counter the devil, we should do the same. And we should be confident that the devil will flee.



Note that in tempting Jesus, Satan also quoted Scripture! The devil knows the Bible well and he uses it in a manipulative way. He quotes God’s Word out of context, twisting its meaning.



In order for us not to fall for this, we need to know the Bible well. That is our best defence against the evil way that Satan uses Scripture to trip and confuse us.

God loves us so much that He gave us many accounts from the conquest and settlement period that teach us how we can get rid of evil in our own lives and how we can grow in our relationship with Him. He asks us to trust that He would do this work in us. We just need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, cling to His Word and patiently grow. God will battle the enemies of our spiritual growth. He will battle the devil, our own sinfulness and the world. We simply need to go to Him, trust Him, ask of Him, lean on Him and obey Him. He will do this for us and in us. This is His promise.

Philippians 1:6

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

This work of sanctification or spiritual growth is never completed during our lifetime. Some believers will grow a lot, some will grow very little. But all of us will be made fully into the character of Christ after death at the resurrection of all believers.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. Starting today, what can you do differently to build your trust and obedience towards God?
2. As fellow believers in Christ, how can we help each other through our sanctification journey?
3. We know we will have ups and downs in our sanctification journey but how can we maximise our “ups” and minimise our “downs”?



Pre-reading for next lesson: Job 1–2, 38–42