

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Changed from the Inside Out

Scripture: Ezekiel 36:26; 2 Corinthians 5:17

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Although heaven will be our first encounter with true, complete perfection, the Lord is already at work in the lives of His people preparing us for that perfection.

God begins the process of perfecting us from the moment we are converted from unbelief to faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit regenerates us. He gives us new hearts with new, holy desires (Ezekiel 36:26). He transforms our stubborn wills. He opens our hearts to embrace the truth rather than reject it, to believe rather than doubt. He gives us a hunger for righteousness and a desire for Him. Thus the new birth transforms the inner person. From that point, everything that occurs in our lives—good or bad—God uses to make us like Christ (Romans 8:28–30).

In terms of our moral and legal status, believers are judged perfect immediately—not on the basis of who we are or what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us. We are forgiven of all our sin. We are clothed with a perfect righteousness (Isaiah 61:10; Romans 4:5), which instantly gives us a standing before God without any fear of condemnation (Romans 5:1; 8:1). And when Paul writes that God has “raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6), he is again speaking of this position of favor with God that we have been granted by grace alone.

We are not literally, physically seated with Christ in the heavenlies, of course. We are not mystically present there through some kind of spiritual telepathy. But legally, in the eternal court of God, we have been granted full rights to heaven. That is the high legal standing we enjoy even now, on this side of heaven.

But God does not stop there. Having judicially declared us righteous (Scripture calls that *justification*), God never stops conforming us to the image of His Son (that is *sanctification*). Although our legal standing is already perfect, God is also making *us* perfect. Heaven is a place of perfect holiness, and we would not be fit to live there unless we too could be made holy. In a sense, then, the blessing of justification is God’s guarantee that He will ultimately conform us to the image of His Son. “Those whom He justified He also glorified” (Romans 8:30).

The seeds of Christlikeness are planted at the moment of conversion. Peter says that believers have been granted “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). If you are a Christian, the life of God dwells in your soul, and with it all that you need for heaven. You have already passed from death to life (John 5:24). You are a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17). Whereas you were once enslaved to sin, you have now become a slave of righteousness (Romans 6:18). Instead of receiving the wages of sin—death—you have received God’s gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). And eternal life means *abundant* life (John 10:10). That is what Paul means when he writes, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Now let's be honest. Even the most committed Christian doesn't always live as if "the new has come." We don't always *feel* like a "new creation." Usually we are more keenly aware of the sin that oozes from within us than we are of the rivers of living water Christ spoke of. Although we "have the firstfruits of the Spirit, [we] groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). And we groan this way all our lives. Remember, it was a mature apostle, not a fragile new Christian, who cried out in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Here's the problem: Like Lazarus, we came forth from the grave still bound in grave clothes. We are incarcerated in human flesh. *Flesh* in the biblical sense refers not just to the physical body, but to the sinful thoughts and habits that remain with us until our bodies are finally glorified. When Paul speaks of *flesh* and *spirit* he is not contrasting the material body with the immaterial spirit—setting up a kind of dualism, the way gnostic and New Age doctrines do. He uses the word *flesh* to speak of a tendency to sin—a sin principle that remains even in the redeemed person.

Paul clearly spells out the problem from his own experience in Romans 7.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. (Romans 7:15–21)

As believers we *are* new creatures—reborn souls—vested with everything necessary for life and godliness, but we cannot fully appreciate the newness of our position in Christ because of the persistent presence of sin.

Like Paul, we "delight in the law of God, in [our] inner being" (Romans 7:22). Only the principle of eternal life in us can explain such love for the law of God. But at the same time, the flesh constricts and fetters us like tightly bound grave clothes. This flesh principle wars against the principle of new life in Christ. So we feel like captives to the law of sin in our own members (Romans 7:23).

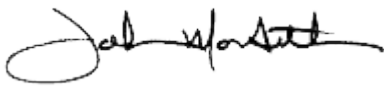
How can this be? After all, Paul earlier wrote in this very epistle that our bondage to sin is broken. We are supposed to "have been set free from sin" (Romans 6:22). How is it that just one scant chapter later, he says we are "captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (Romans 7:23)?

The answer is, being a captive is not quite the same thing as being *enslaved*. As unredeemed sinners, we were full-time slaves of sin—willing servants, in fact. But as Christians who are not yet glorified, we are captives, unwilling prisoners of an already defeated enemy. Although sin can buffet and abuse us, it does not own us, and it cannot ultimately destroy us. Sin's authority and dominion are broken. It "lies close at hand" in the believer's life (Romans 7:21), but it is no longer our master. Our real allegiance is now to the principle of righteousness (Romans 7:22). It is in this sense that "the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Even though we still fall into old patterns of sinful thinking and

behavior, those things no longer define who we are. Sin is now an anomaly and an intruder, not the sum and substance of our character.

God is changing us from the inside out. He has planted the incorruptible seed of eternal life deep in the believer's soul. We have new desires to please God. We have new hearts and a whole new love for God. And all those are factors that contribute to our ultimate growth in grace.

Although sin has crippled our souls and marred our spirits—scarred our thoughts, will, and emotions—we who know Christ have already had a taste of redemption. As we set our hearts on heaven and mortify the remaining sin in our members, we can experience the transforming power of Christ's glory on a daily basis. And we long for that day when we will be completely redeemed. We yearn to reach that place where the seed of perfection that has been planted within us will bloom into fullness and we will be completely redeemed, finally made perfect (Hebrews 12:23). That is *exactly* what heaven is all about.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [The Glory of Heaven](#); all Scripture references are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.)

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