



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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What We Will Be

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Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

When we ask children what they want to be when they grow up, they often say something like "I want to be a fireman," or a baseball player, or a doctor, or a nurse, or a lawyer, or even president of the United States. Usually the answer has to do with some kind of job or profession, and often that's because they think it will be fun, or make lots of money, or people will look up to them for being so cool and successful.

Some people never quite grow out of that basic mindset. Even in middle age they still want to be whatever they think will bring them status, success, and security. But lots of people, as they get older, begin to want something more. Ask mature people what they want to be and, when they stop to think about it, their answers tend to shift from accomplishments in a career to qualities of character. They start to say things like "I want to be more patient," or more forgiving, or more tolerant. I want to stop being anxious about things. I want to be more generous and give something back. Some people even say "I want to be a better Christian."

Why is that, do you suppose? Why do people eventually start to think less about what they want to *do* and more about what they want to *be*?

Sometimes it's because they've already "been there and done that" in their vocation. They've achieved whatever they're going to achieve in their career, and maybe their children are all grown up, and even if those were sources of great satisfaction they start to wonder what else there is to life. After a while, thoughtful people come to focus more on being than on doing. They want to become a better person.

Sometimes people start thinking about other things because they just get tired of having to wear the masks of other people's expectations. The poet May Sarton wrote

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces¹

After a while we get tired of wearing other people's faces. We want to know who we are, and become the person we were meant to be. And fundamentally, that's not just about doing more things, but about growing into a uniquely individual soul made in the image of God.

The first letter of John says that what we will be has not yet been revealed. Each of us has a destiny, a future known for the time being only to God. We don't know what that will be, exactly, but John says we do know this: when Christ is fully revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

That's an astonishing claim. If we take it seriously it ought to lift our eyes above the preoccupations of everyday life and remind us that we were made for something inconceivably greater. We were made for things we can barely begin to imagine. We were made to be like Christ.

If that really is true, why isn't more obvious to us? Why don't we just see Christ clearly, right here and now, so that all our doubts would disappear and we could skip all the uncertainties of this life?

Apparently we need time to cultivate the sort of soul we were meant to be. We need time for our heart to adjust to the

¹ May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself," from *Collected Poems 1930-1993* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

light of heaven, the way our eyes need to adjust when we come out of darkness into a brightly lit room. As Emily Dickinson said,

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

Apparently we need times of uncertainty to learn to trust in God. We need to succeed a little to know the joy of creativity and accomplishment, but we also need to fail from time to time in order to be reminded that our ability to achieve anything at all is only a gift from God. We need to taste the pleasures of this life to develop a longing for heaven, but we need to die in order to get from here to there, because only God can raise us up to eternal life.

Over time God helps us see more clearly the person we were meant to be. Those of us who have had cataract surgery know that we didn't even realize how dull our vision had become until we woke up one day with a new, unclouded lens. Suddenly colors were brighter and images were sharper, and we didn't know what clarity we'd been missing until we saw the world with a new set of eyes.

And the more we walk with God, the more we learn to see not only the good things in life but also the hard things with a new set of eyes, too. I've been reading a book this week called *The Dark Night of the Soul*. It's by Dr. Gerald May, a psychiatrist who gave up his practice after twenty-five years to join the Shalem Institute in Bethesda, where he wrote and taught on the relationship between psychology and spirituality. The title of his book comes from St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, who were friends in the sixteenth century and wrote some of the greatest classics of the Christian spiritual life.

Dr. May says in the introduction to his book, "At the

outset I must confess that I am no longer very good at telling the difference between good things and bad things.” Of course, he says, there are all sorts of events in human history that can only be described as evil, “but from the standpoint of inner personal experience the distinction has become blurred for me. Some things start out looking great but wind up terribly, while other things seem bad in the beginning but turn out to be blessings in disguise.”

He says that when he was diagnosed with cancer some years earlier he naturally thought that was a bad thing, but the experience brought him closer to God and to his loved ones than he had ever been. At the time he was writing the book he was also waiting for a heart transplant, but he says, “At some point I gave up trying to decide what’s ultimately good or bad.... Although not knowing may itself seem like a bad thing, I am convinced it is one of the great gifts of the dark night of the soul.”²

We’ll have more to say about the dark night of the soul another time, but the basic notion is that God often works most powerfully within us precisely when we cannot see it, and when we cannot feel God’s presence at all. In John and Teresa’s Spanish the experience is called *la noche oscura*, where *oscura* means something like our English word “obscure,” or hidden. As May says, in this dark night when we can’t see what God is doing, “Faith darkens and empties the intellect, hope frees the memory, and love liberates the will.” Our souls gradually grow fit for heaven as we open our hearts to the hidden working of God’s Holy Spirit.

The apostle John says that one day we will become like Christ. What does it mean to become like Christ? I don’t know the details, of course, but when I think of Christ I think of

² Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 1ff.

someone who is strong and just and does what's right, but also one who is gracious and generous, loving even those of us who fall short of what we were meant to be. I think of someone with the power to heal every sickness and forgive every fault, but who also breathes into us the Spirit that will let us mount up with wings like eagles. When I think of Christ, I think of the kind of person I would like to be.

John says we will be like him *for we will see him as he is*. In this world our vision is limited and the light of heaven is refracted by all sorts of distorting influences. But even in this world we tend to become like the people we associate with, and we want to be like the people we admire. How much more, then, when we see Christ in all his glory will we want to be like him, and from his very presence we will draw the grace and peace and joy and strength we've always wanted.

If the future that awaits us is anything like that, then an obvious question arises: How much of what we will then be can we become here and now?

That depends mainly on the grace of God, but also on how much we want to grow; and surely we can all be better than we already are. We can learn to see more clearly beyond ourselves and reflect more fully the grace and generosity and love of Jesus in the way we relate to all God's people. That must be what John means when he says that those who are born of God do not sin: not that we never fall short or do anything wrong, but that what we want most of all is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning," John says, "that we should love one another."

One of our members shared with me the other day an article about grace from a Mormon magazine. We're not Mormons, of course, and we would disagree with some of the

things Mormons believe, but the author obviously knows a great deal about the grace of God and has felt it richly in her own life. She says that her father had many virtues, but he also had a bad temper and his family suffered a lot as a result of it. A few days before her father died, she was sitting at his bedside when she says

Suddenly, I found myself asking the Lord to forgive him for years of angry outbursts. As I prayed something unexplainable happened to me. In an instant I felt decades of hurt simply fall away. The feeling was spiritual, but it was also tangible. I could *remember* his anger, but I couldn't *feel* any of the pain. It was gone. It was "beauty for ashes" (Isa. 61:3). It was sweet.³

We live in a world where people define themselves by their differences, and some people even make a living by conjuring up hostilities, and most of us find it hard to let go of our grievances. But we are bound for a world where people will not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain, and the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and God himself says, "I will remember their sins no more." We are bound for a world where differences no longer divide, and grievances are set aside, and the glory of God will be its light.

What we will be, will be fit for that world. Lots of people long for that world, and they long to see signs of it here and now. "We are God's children now," John says. And the people of God ought to reflect more and more the light and love of God on the way to becoming what we will be when Christ is revealed, and we will be like him.

³ Sheri L. Dew, "Sweet Above All That Is Sweet," *BYU Magazine*, Fall 2014, 28.



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