

Purity and Holiness – by Shan Lu

I am very passionate about the subject of purity and holiness, so passionate that I don't even know where to start.

Purity and holiness matter a lot to God, hence they matter to me, in the sense that not only do I seek to be continually purified and sanctified in my own personal walk with God, but I also desire to see many more believers pursue such a lifestyle. For this, I think I have been made an advocate.

So, I am going to start with the 'why' question: Why do we need to be purified and sanctified?

You may have already come across many well thought out theological expositions and commentaries on it. For me, the reason is very simple: RELATIONSHIP.

Ever since I had my first encounter with the Lord in 2008 and got baptised by the Holy Spirit on the spot in an obscure place in London, I have been in a relationship with the living God – not in name only, but walking with Him daily and remaining in constant communion with Him. Though unseen, He is more real than the physical reality of this world. I can vividly feel the richness and depth of the bond between my spirit man and the Lord in my heart, which transcends this earthly realm, and which altogether gives me the assurance of the knowledge – and I need no one to persuade or dissuade me – that I do not belong to this world; I'm only passing through; God created me for eternity, to DWELL WITH HIM.

Have I always felt this way? Nooooo. It's definitely been a journey, which began in late 2010. One day, the Lord told me to book a weekend away with Him. I did. There, at a beautiful English country hotel, He told me that He is my Bridegroom and that is how He wishes to relate with me. Since then, my Christian journey has been discovering and experiencing layer upon layer of what that relationship entails.

The receiving of the bridal revelation is one thing, the walking out of it is another, just like there are different stages in a romantic relationship, the wooing, the courting, the engagement, the wedding, the honeymoon... and then the time of testing begins, and after children are born, the heat is turned up sevenfold, or more, some would say. But haven't we all at some point delighted ourselves in the beautiful sight of an old couple being so in love and so in unison with each other, like the aged wine, rich and fragrant, having spent their lifetime rubbing off each other's rough edges and persevered, and become totally ONE? This is like our relationship with the Lord, except that He is perfect; He doesn't need to change, we have to change.

After a short period of being wooed and romanced by the Lord subsequent to receiving the bridal revelation, little did I know that I was soon to be left in the wilderness for 5 years, deprived of all Christian fellowship and supports. In those years, all I could do was clinging to the Lord Himself, believing that He loves me, and has already demonstrated His love for me on the Cross, and THAT IS ENOUGH. At some point, I came to the decision that, I will love the Lord regardless of what the future holds for me; I will love the Lord not because

what He can give me, but because He is worthy. With such a will, I walked through dreadful loneliness and despair, and eventually found total contentment in the sole companionship of the Lord and hope in Christ.

From the wilderness, I then headed into the valley of the shadow of death where I experienced excruciating hurt and let-downs by Christian leaders. But I knew Jesus said that *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word”* (Joh 14:23), and that *“If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mat 6:15)”*. So, in this case, to love the Lord is to forgive those who wronged me, to resist the urge of my flesh to judge, resent and demand justice, and be healed by the Lord. I overcame. I could look into the eyes of those who hurt me and know with a clear conscience in my heart that I love them, despite it all.

From the valley of the shadow of death, I was then cast into a fiery furnace where I was faced with the task of dealing with deep childhood wounds amidst ongoing persecution from family members. Being determined to obey the Word of God to demonstrate my love for Him, in spite of the agony, I learnt to love and honour my earthly father and mother in the Lord, and was subsequently restored and made whole by my heavenly Father.

The journey is far from being over. Today I am being tested and stretched in a new way...

Reflecting on my past walk and the difference each season of testing made, what I can now say is that, I finally understand the purpose of refinement in a Christian's life:

It is for us to be able to DWELL IN CLOSE PROXIMITY WITH GOD.

To the natural mind, there seems to be a paradox, but it's really no paradox at all in the realm of the spirit, specifically speaking: God loves us and longs to dwell with us, so He draws us to enter the holy places by the new and living way that Christ opened for us (Heb 10:19-20). Yet at the same time, He keeps Himself a distance away from us until we become sanctified and able to endure His holiness; and the more we are sanctified the more we are able to experience oneness and intimacy with Him. For anyone who thinks otherwise, usually the missing link is the understanding of God's holiness.

We know that God does not change (Mal 3:6); the coming of Jesus and the shedding of His blood, by which we are imputed Christ's righteousness and are justified by grace, do not mitigate who God is, nor His nature. Holiness is God's nature. And we find out in the Bible what happens when one transgresses against such nature, i.e. approaches God with profaneness or without first being sanctified.

A good example is in Leviticus 10:1-3. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered 'strange' fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died. The Hebrew word used here for 'strange' is **zoor** (Strong's: H2114), meaning 'profane'. After the incident, the Lord said, ***“I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified”*** (Lev 10:3, KJV). By the death of Aaron's two sons who drew near with profaneness, the Lord was shown to be holy.

Another example is in Number 16. Korah, Dathan, Abiram and 250 chiefs assembled themselves together against Moses and Aaron and said to them, *"You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"* The rebels were essentially saying, "We are all holy; there is no differentiation. Why do you consider yourself holier than us? Why do you consider yourself more qualified than us to draw near to God?" When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, and he said to Korah and all his company, *"In the morning the Lord will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Him."* From the Bible we know that the next day, Korah, Dathan and Abiram along with their households were swallowed up by the ground beneath them, and fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men. What those men were really rebelling against was the principle that only those sanctified could draw near to God without suffering consequences. In challenging such a principle, they despised God and held His holiness in contempt. The story didn't end there. The next day, all the congregation grumbled against Moses and Aaron on account of the death of those men, meaning they sympathised with their cause, which, in turn, meant that they too despised the holiness of the Lord, so a plague broke out among them. Moses and Aaron acted as fast as they could to make atonement for the people, nonetheless, 14,700 died on that day.

It was for the same reason that the Lord, who called and chose Israel to be His people, kept Himself a distance away from the Israelites after the incident of the golden calf, saying, *"I will send an angel before you... but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people"* (Exo 33:2-3). It was for the same reason that the Lord stationed the consecrated Levites around the tabernacle in the midst of the camps of other tribes as 'a human shield', that there might be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel (Num 1:53; 2:17). Even Moses, to whom the Lord spoke face to face as to a friend, was denied entry to the promised land after striking the rock twice at the waters of Meribar, because he failed to uphold the Lord as holy (Exo 33:11; Num 20:10-13; 27:12-14).

This is the same God we are serving today.

Whilst under the New Covenant there might not be literal fire coming out from the Lord to consume us, for we have passed from death to life because of our faith in Jesus Christ, it does mean, however, that the Lord to a certain degree withholds Himself from us so long as we are still unsanctified, and that the level of intimacy to which one is able to enjoy with the Lord is subject to the level of sanctification to which one has undergone.

It's become increasingly obvious to me in my own personal journey that, after each season of refinement, in which a part of me dies and a new degree of Christ is formed in me (Gal 4:19), I am able to experience a greater depth of oneness and intimacy with the Lord, such that the beauty and delight of being in spiritual union with Him have surpassed all that the world has to offer. Besides, unlike the 'high time' that we sometimes experience at a conference or a good meeting and that comes and goes, the awareness of such spiritual union with the Lord is constant; it solidifies and builds on. It's like every time I overcome in a trial and thus become more sanctified, the capacity in me for hosting God's presence and glory increases, and as a result, the degree of His permanent dwelling within me increases,

from glory to glory (2Co 3:18). This has given me the incentive to embrace all refinement in life in whatever shape or form, because I know it only serves to bring me closer to the Lord, who is infinitely worthy, and compared with whom, what is this light momentary affliction?

But you've got to really love the Lord and desperately want more of Him in your life to not mind the uncomfortable and often painful refinement.

The Benediction Prayer is beautiful when cited as it is, but would sound slightly awkward if it were to be changed into the first person – "Lord, bless me and keep me, and make Your face shine upon me and be gracious to me; and lift up Your countenance upon me and give me peace." There is nothing wrong in asking God to bless us, but when we make our interactions with God all about 'me', then over time the relationship becomes one-sided.

Remember, earlier I mentioned the different stages of a romantic relationship. The only stage in which one-sidedness may be justified is the 'wooing stage' – but we can't stay in that stage in our relationship with the Lord forever, right? For any relationship to work, grow and deepen, it has to be two-way. In the 'wooing stage', a guy buys a girl flowers, takes her to nice restaurants... he tries to impress her with a little bit of performance. While this is all nice and cute, it somehow suggests that the relationship is not quite solid yet. Now, speak to a young couple who have just had their firstborn. At that stage of relationship, there is much more wrestling and negotiation involved, I mean, who's gonna get up to calm the crying baby (most likely the mother), who's gonna get the grocery (probably the father), let alone the dirty socks lying on the floor, squeezing a tube of toothpaste from the top or bottom... Whilst this is chaotic and tiring, the two, against the natural desire of their flesh, are in different ways laying down their own interests and preferences for the sake of other person, and together building something beautiful called the 'marriage', with a life-long commitment.

The true beauty of our relationship with the Lord is that, not only are we loved by Him, WE GET TO LOVE HIM BACK TOO.

Jesus said in John 14:21-24: "**Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. Whoever does not love Me does not keep My words. And the word that you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.**"

Jesus has already prescribed the definition of loving Him – OBEYING HIS WORD, to simply put. His word reveals the righteous ways of God, so by obeying His word we walk in righteousness. Speaking from experience, I know my old self really dislikes God's righteous ways; it desires to have its own way. Therefore, I have to be very INTENTIONAL with the choice I make in a circumstance God puts me in, to either let my natural self have its way, or intentionally suppress its lust to let God have His way, which isn't always easy, but certainly results in a fruit of righteousness, leading to sanctification.

Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (Mat 5:6). Paul also told us to ‘pursue righteousness’ (1Ti 6:11; 2Ti 2:22), and through obedience present our members to God as instruments for righteousness, and that the grace of God empowers us to do so (Rom 6:12-23). This suggests to me that, in hungering and thirsting for righteousness and in pursuing righteousness, eagerness and POSITIVE ACTIONS are required from us. However, it may be said that in the church, many have adopted a rather passive approach regarding sanctification. I think this is partly due to people generally being more familiar with the imputed righteousness of Christ, yet somewhat less aware of the need to have Christ who is our righteousness formed in us (1Co 1:30; Gal 4:19), which leads to sanctification, and which needs us to intentionally pursue.

I like using this analogy to distinguish those two. Justification by faith is like God seeing each repentant sinner through ‘a glass of righteousness of His son’ to deliberately overlook all our sins (2Co 5:21). For all who through faith believe in Jesus Christ, it is COUNTED to us as righteousness (Rom 4:22-25). Sanctification, on the other hand, deals with what is actually behind that ‘glass’, i.e. our actual spiritual state, in order that by actively pursuing righteousness we may attain to perfect righteousness FOR REAL – the perfect sacrifice of Jesus was not only for us to be justified, but also attain to perfection (Heb 7:11,19; 8:6-7; 9:9; 10:1,14; 12:23-24).

Upon being born again, we made room in our heart for Christ to come to dwell, but that does not automatically suggest that instantaneously our entire heart is set apart for the Lord. For out of it, as the Bible says, still comes *“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”* that all defile a person (Mar 7:21-23). Therefore, we need to HAVE OUR HEART CIRCUMCISED (Rom 2:29). One of the most important aspects of the sanctification of the heart is obeying the greatest commandment ‘love the Lord your God with ALL YOUR HEART’, meaning giving our whole heart to the Lord, harbouring no idols in our heart, be it money or career or family, or indeed, anything.

Moreover, despite being born again, our flesh is still very much alive and kicking. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:19-20, *“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* Therefore, we need to HAVE OUR FLESH CIRCUMCISED as well (Col 2:11). We do so by aligning ourselves to the righteous ways of God expressed in His word, both logos and rhema. In doing so, we ‘love the Lord with ALL OUR SOUL’.

Furthermore, we are all born into the worldly system and naturally follow the course of this world and are entangled in it (Eph 2:1-3). Therefore, we also need to HAVE THE WORLD CRUCIFIED TO US, AND WE TO THE WORLD (Gal 6:14), so as to be set apart from it, to be in the world, but not of it. We do so by choosing a lifestyle of totally depending on God for our livelihood and having the means of living generated from the world sanctified. In doing so, we cease partaking in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, on whose wisdom the worldly system is built, and instead, solely partake in the tree of life, that is, God Himself,

and put on the mind of Christ, who is wisdom from God. Then we would be 'loving the Lord with ALL OUR MIND'.

Having had our sins washed away by the precious blood of the Lamb, from 'unclean' we become 'clean', but God is not just 'clean', He is 'holy'. In order for us to be able to walk in increasing oneness and intimacy with the Lord, we have to be assimilated into God's holiness, which is the essence of sanctification. As it is written, "*You shall be holy, for I am holy*" (Lev 11:14,45; 1Pe 1:16).

So, where does all of this lead to? A holy Bride, fully sanctified and made ready, presented to Christ the Bridegroom King in splendour. She will dwell with her Maker Husband in their Father's house in eternity – God dwelling with man (Rev 21:2-3).

A holy God can only be joined to a holy Bride; a holy God can only dwell among a holy people.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:2, "*I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.*" Transforming us into a virgin Bride by means of refinement is the reason why God doesn't simply rapture us to heaven upon our getting saved by calling on the name of Jesus; rather, He uses the circumstances of this life as catalysts for our sanctification, in the hope that with our eager cooperation, we would be prepared as much as possible for our life with Him in eternity. There is a place that the Lord prepares His Bride, and there is also a place that the Bride has to make herself ready (Eph 5:26-27; Rev 19:7-8) – the choice and action required on our part.

But you've got to want this and be willing to pay the price. You may think it's too much; you may think I'm happy with just a ticket to heaven, having my own little place somewhere up there; not a problem if it's far removed from the throne of God; I don't know Him that well anyway. That's fine, the imputed righteousness of Christ may enable you to do just that. God doesn't force Himself on anyone, for love does not seek its own. But if you, like me, seek to receive God Himself as your inheritance and won't be satisfied until you are fully one with Him, then I adjure you, my friend: Please use well your remaining time on earth for advancement in sanctification, to be prepared as much as possible as a bride for Christ.

The joy that was set before Christ for which He endured the Cross, despising the shame, was not just for winning Himself a bunch of acquaintances, but a Bride.

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." (1Th 4:3)

"...He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness." (Heb 12:10)

"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb 12:14)