

THE PERFECTION OF THE CHURCH

COLOSSIANS 1:28

This is the final message in our series on the church. We have looked at the Identity of the Church, the Composition, Purpose, Resources, and Meetings of the Church. We have explored the Mark and Mission of the Church. And, finally, we will be considering the Perfection of the Church.

The book of Esther tells us that when the king of Persia, Ahasuerus, was looking for a wife, a woman who would sit on the throne as queen, Esther was one of many beautiful young maidens in the kingdom who were chosen to be candidates. We are told, however, that these maidens could not merely rely on their natural beauty and charm to win the king's favor. Before they could even be introduced to the king each was assigned seven personal attendants and then required to undergo twelve months of beauty treatments. It was only after twelve months of beauty treatments, administered by seven personal attendants, that they were permitted to even see the king's face. It was only after this intensive time of preparation that they were considered "worthy enough" to be in the king's presence and perhaps be chosen as the next queen.

That's hard for me (and most guys) to imagine. It took me all of fifteen minutes to get ready for *my* wedding. I took a shower, combed my hair, shaved the peach fuzz on my chin, put on the ill-fitting clothes that I had rented, and drove to the church.

Twelve months of beauty treatments? Performed by seven full time attendants? I mean, I've heard about spas, and I know about facials and manicures and pedicures. But when my wife went to a spa one time it took no more than four hours to do all that stuff. I can understand maybe *two* full days of beauty treatments. But what do you do on day three? On day forty-three? On day three hundred and forty-three?

I don't know the answers to those questions. But I do know that these seven personal attendants did *something* on all 365 days for these maidens, because King Ahasuerus had a standard—a very high standard. And I would suggest to you that given the amount of time and attention and detail that was involved in attaining that standard, that the standard must have been *perfection*, or at least as close to perfection as is humanly possible.

You might hear this and think, "That's preposterous! Who in their right mind would *insist* on perfection? Who would even *think* it's possible?"

I am not sure about this, but I wonder if the story of King Ahasuerus' twelve-month beautification program for these young maidens is recorded in the Bible as a *shadow* or an *illustration* of a greater reality. You see, in the New Testament the church of Jesus Christ is likened to His Bride—more specifically, His fiancée. The actual wedding, described in Revelation 19, takes place after Jesus comes and the church is united with Him in heaven.

But the Apostle Paul tells us that between now and then the church is in a beautification process, authorized and supervised by Jesus Himself. And the goal of that process is the *perfection* of His bride. Paul said in Ephesians 5, ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her,* ²⁶ *that He (that is Christ) might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (5:25-27).*

In this passage about marriage, and in the context of the admonition that husbands should love their wives, Paul gives us a glimpse of a greater reality, of which marriage on earth is only a shadow. He says that earthly husbands ought to love their earthly wives just as the ultimate husband, Jesus, loves His heavenly bride, the church. And the way He loves

His bride is by preparing her to see His face and be in His presence forever. And the result He is looking for is even higher than the standard set by King Ahasuerus. Listen to the language he uses. **Verse 27**, ²⁷ *so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

Just like King Ahasuerus, King Jesus has authorized spiritual beauty treatments for His church, comprised of hundreds of millions of people. And those treatments are going on right now and will continue until Jesus comes, so that when we finally get to see His face and be in His presence, we will be perfect. And the perfection He is talking about here is moral and spiritual perfection. We will be wholly holy.

Paul talked about this in another place as well. In Colossians chapter 1, as he was describing his own ministry, he said, ²⁸ *We proclaim [Jesus], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone **perfect** in Christ.* ²⁹ *To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*

In Esther's day, when the decree was made to seek out all the beautiful young maidens in the kingdom, a man named Hegai was the king's steward in charge of the women and their beauty treatments. Hegai was responsible to ensure that the treatments were having their desired effect, and in doing so he had one goal in mind. He wanted to please the king. He wanted to present the future queen to the king *as perfect as possible*, because given the king's status and position, he was worthy of nothing less.

In the same way, the Apostle Paul was King Jesus' steward to do just what Hegai did, only in a moral and spiritual sense. After describing the glory, power, and transcendence of the Lord Jesus, after describing what He did for us when He came to this earth in the form of a man and died on a cross to make us holy and presentable to God, Paul declared that His own personal assignment from Jesus was to prepare us, His fiancée, to meet Him, face to face. That assignment can be summarized at the end of verse 28, *so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*

Just prior to making this statement Paul told the Colossians that he had been commissioned by God to be a servant of the church—not just the church at Colossae, but the *whole* church, the redeemed people of God throughout the known world. His specific assignment as a servant of the church was to present the word of God in its fullness (v. 25), particularly demonstrating how God's revelation of Himself and His will has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (v. 27). This teaching was not merely to *inform* them about what God was now doing in the world, or to answer all their theological questions. This instruction was given in order to *transform* their lives.

Going back to the metaphor of a bride being prepared to see the groom (who happens to be the king), Paul's teachings were the beauty treatments that were needed to make the bride acceptable and presentable. They removed the unsightly blemishes and blotches and calluses and wrinkles and imperfections. And the reason Paul was dedicated to this task, the reason he labored with all Christ's energy which so powerfully worked in him (1:28), is because Paul had a singular goal. He wanted to please Jesus, which meant presenting the church to Him *as perfect*, because given His status and position, He was worthy of nothing less.

Paul understood that a day was coming when the bride would literally stand in the presence of the King and see His face for the first time. He understood that he was the one, like Hegai, who would present to the King each individual who had been entrusted to his care. And so, Paul said, "I work very hard to ensure that every person I am going present to King Jesus on that day is *perfect*. Because He is worthy of nothing less than absolute perfection."

The word translated “perfect” in verse 28 describes someone who is not lacking anything but is complete or whole. Again, using the metaphor of a wedding, it would be as though Paul was saying, “I am laboring with all the energy that God Himself gives me to make King Jesus’ bride as lovely, as appealing, and as impressive to Him as she can possibly be. My work on this earth is to give this bride as many beauty treatments as possible until we arrive together in the King’s presence, and I present her to Him.”

Of course, we’re not talking about physical beauty. We’re talking about inner beauty—a pure heart, internal holiness, godly behavior, mannerisms and conduct that correspond to Jesus’ nature. Paul said to the Galatians, “I am like a mother going through labor pains, until Christ is formed in you!” (Galatians 4:19). In other words, I exert a lot of energy and expend a lot of effort and endure a lot of pain so that you will be conformed to the image of Jesus.

And I’m convinced the reason Paul worked so hard at this is because he knew that he was, in some way and to some degree (like Hegai) responsible for the progress of each individual that God had entrusted to his care—which happened to be individuals from at least a dozen local churches.

That is a huge burden. Paul told the Corinthians that it was a burden he carried with him night and day. But it is a burden borne by every shepherd of God’s flock. For the author of Hebrews said that the leaders of a church will have to give an account to God one day for the people in their flock. And I believe that day is the same day Paul was talking about in Colossians 1 when he described *presenting* church members to the Lord. “Lord, I present Eutychus to you. And Lord, here is Lydia. And here is Onesimus and Euodias and Onesiphorous.”

I will do the same on that day. I am responsible to the Lord for you, and I must give an account to the Lord for you on that day. Pastor Brad and Pastor Mark and Pastor Michael will do the same. Our elders will do the same. As elders our assignment from the Lord is to prepare you to see Jesus on the day that we will be ushered into His presence for the very first time, and our sincere hope is that we can present you perfect in Christ.

I’m not sure there is any bigger or greater responsibility in the whole world, and I will admit that sometimes it keeps me awake at night. Because it is God’s intention that all of us become complete or whole in Christ—that Christ be progressively formed in us, and that we be ready to see Jesus when we are presented to Him on that day. And if this is your church, the elders and I are responsible, to some degree, for your spiritual development (your spiritual beautification), and we will be held accountable for you when we see the Lord.

However, there is something that, when I ponder this enormous responsibility and am tempted to become anxious, *does* enable me to sleep in peace (and I’m pretty sure it was the very thing that relieved Paul of his anxiety). In his letter to the Philippians, just after describing his joy in partnering with the church to proclaim the gospel, Paul says, *6 And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:6).*

Who is ultimately responsible for this beautification process that will result in moral and spiritual perfection? It is Jesus Himself. And Paul said that He will most certainly complete what He started.

Paul said something similar in the benediction of His first letter to the Thessalonians. *23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*

When will we be sanctified completely and be blameless (or perfect)? At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ—the Day we see His face; that great and glorious day that is the

climax of human history.

How can we be sure that it will happen? The God who called us will surely make it happen. And He's a God who is faithful, who always comes through, who always completes what He starts. And this faithful God guarantees that when the Bride of Christ finally gets to see her Groom, the Lord Jesus, she will be worthy and she will be pleasing to Him for all eternity.

My dear brothers and sisters, that is what this life is all about for a believer. We are preparing and being prepared to see Jesus. We are progressively being perfected in this life (that's called sanctification), and when we see Jesus, that process will be complete. We will be perfect.

God uses a number of means and methods to perfect us in this life in order to prepare us to see Jesus, but do you know what His primary method is?

Listen to what Peter says in his first letter: ³ *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* ⁴ *and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you,* ⁵ *who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.* ⁶ *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.* ⁷ *These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:3-7).*

The trials that Peter's audience were experiencing were not so different than the trials our Ukrainian brothers and sisters are experiencing. Many had been driven from their homes and were scattered throughout Asia. They had become strangers in foreign lands. But Peter reminded them at least half a dozen times in this letter that they were strangers in this world. They were citizens of heaven and were being prepared for that place. And he says in this passage that the trials and hardships they were going through now were producing things that would please and glorify Jesus. Their trials would produce praise, glory and honor on the day they met Him face to face.

And anticipating that day, putting our hope in that outcome, enables us not just to endure those trials with a stiff upper lip, but to endure them with joy. Look at **verses 8-9.** ⁸ *Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,* ⁹ *for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:8-9).*

We are now receiving the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls. But that salvation will be completed and consummated when Jesus comes. We will be *fully* sanctified. We will be perfect, and, thus, presentable. And Jesus *will* be pleased.

You might be thinking to yourself, "I hear what you're saying; I see the words on the pages of Scripture. But this is so hard to believe. When I look around at the church, particularly in America, I see so much imperfection and immaturity. It seems like that process of sanctification has stalled or is in slow motion.

"Then I look at my own life, and I see so little evidence of the fruit of the Spirit and so much evidence of the remnants of my old sinful nature! It seems I'm making precious little progress in my Christian life. There is so much that needs to be done in me if I'm ever to be presentable for Jesus!"

Take heart, dear friend. God is your Savior, and He is powerful. As you work out your salvation, be assured that God is working in you to will and to act according to His good

purpose. He has taken responsibility for your salvation, which includes your sanctification. He always completes what He starts. And He is faithful...He *will* do it!

As we close, let me read the passage in Revelation 19 that describes our ultimate destiny.

⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" ⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants, you who fear Him, small and great." ⁶ Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; ⁸ it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

The Perfection of the Church Ephesians 5:25-27; Colossians 1:28

Main Idea: Jesus is in the process of perfecting His church, and that process will mercifully and gloriously be completed when He comes.

Introduction: A king's standard of perfection (Esther 2)

King Jesus' standard of perfection (Eph. 5:25-27)
He wants His Bride to be wholly holy

At the "wedding" Jesus' Bride will be perfect

Paul's specific assignment from the Lord (Col. 1:25-28)
A servant of the Church (vv.25-27)
He taught the Word of God in its fullness

He connected the dots to reveal Christ

His instructions were "beauty treatments"

A Presenter on the Day of the Lord (vv. 28-29)
To present the Bride as "perfect"
The meaning of "perfect"

The reason for "perfection"

God ensures that Jesus' Bride will be perfected (I Thess. 5:23-24)