

GROWING IN HOLINESS

Understanding
God's Role and Yours



R. C. SPROUL



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Pressing Toward the Goal

Knowing where we're going is crucial, but so is knowing how to get there. When we embrace the Bible's teaching that God created us so that we might praise Him through holy living, it is tempting to seek quick fixes and fast solutions. One of my greatest pet peeves is hearing Christians say things like "Come to Jesus, and all your problems will be over." Are you kidding me? I don't think my life became really complicated *until* I became a Christian.

When I think of my pre-Christian days, there was a sense in which, even though my life was empty of any meaning or any significance, it was a whole lot simpler. For the most part, I did what I wanted to do. I had been able to sear my conscience to such a degree that I could enjoy myself without feeling a terrible amount of grief or

remorse about it. *But with the rebirth of the human soul also comes the rebirth of the human conscience.*

The person who has become a Christian is now playing life for keeps. We begin to take life so much more seriously because we realize that it is indeed a serious enterprise. Unfortunately, conversion does not annihilate our propensity for sin. Christians are like the figures we see in comics—engaged in a moral battle, with an angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. We are torn between the two and greatly influenced by each side.

The Christian life is indeed a complicated matter. God certainly helps us grow through the grace He gives in abundant provision. But great growth still requires great labor.

I remember those initial weeks after my conversion when I read the whole Bible through from beginning to end, like a novel. I'll never forget the impact it had on me, reading it that way. I understood very little of it, but it still had an overwhelming influence on me.

However, I was in great distress and anxiety because, as I read it, particularly the Old Testament, I thought, "Wow, this God is playing for keeps. If I'm going to be a Christian, it's going to be all or nothing at all." I don't know why, but one of the first books I chose to study in depth was Philippians. I remember reading through the book and coming upon this passage: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13).

Those verses were weighty to me because I began to see that spiritual growth is something that, in the ultimate sense,

rests in the grace of God. He is working in us, through us, and with us. But at the same time there is an admonition for us to work out our salvation. I understood even then that spiritual growth, this progress in the Christian life, is a matter of labor, of toil. It may be a labor of love, to be sure, but the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, chooses that word carefully and precisely: work.

Sanctification is not a casual endeavor. Paul tells us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Now understand, this is not the fear and trembling of someone who cowers in the darkness out of total intimidation or some kind of paralyzing phobia. Rather, he's writing about a labor of care and of concern and of diligence that we take very seriously—to the point of fear and trembling. We don't tremble before our human adversaries in fear. We tremble before God and we do so with hope, knowing that God is working within us. We work because God works in us to work.

In my first study of the book of Philippians, I remember marking this significant section:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14)

As a newborn Christian, those verses hit me between the eyes. The apostle Paul, the greatest saint of the early

church, declares to his congregation, “I haven’t reached the goal yet. I haven’t attained it. I’m not perfect yet.” And here I was, being impatient. I had been a Christian for three or four months, and I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t crossed the goal line yet. But the apostle Paul shows how this pilgrimage is something that lasts our whole life. That was difficult for me.

Consider the various kinds of runners. Some run the 100-yard dash, while others run marathons. Each event requires a completely different psychology. I’m a sprinter, not a marathon runner. I would much rather tackle shorter work that has a clear beginning and a clear ending than projects that last for several years. I like to be able to see the finish line and give everything I have in a short burst of energy to make it to the end.

But that’s not the way the Christian life works. The Christian life is a marathon. You have to learn perseverance. You have to keep on keeping on. You have to know how to press on with the work. That’s why I felt the poignancy of Paul’s words when I read them carefully: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on.” We don’t simply *keep* on. We *press* on.

The Greek word translated here as “press” indicates applying force, applying pressure (if I may borrow from the word itself). So how does that apply to us? We tend to live from spiritual high to spiritual high. We hope that we will be sanctified in large doses, all at once. We want to relax and celebrate the victory in the 100-yard dash. But the Christian life is different. You run a 100-yard dash, but as soon as you break the tape you’re exhausted. You fall to

the ground, panting and gasping for breath. But then the first thing you hear is, “On your mark, get set, go!” and you have to do it again. You have to press on.

We don’t finish this race quickly and that can feel discouraging. But notice *why* Paul perseveres: “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). It’s as if Paul is testifying, “I’m running a race for heaven. I’m running for the prize that the Father has stored up for his people from the foundation of the world. I’m going to obtain that for which Christ has obtained me. Christ has possessed me that I might possess heaven. That I might receive the treasure that He has stored in His Father’s kingdom.”

Paul continues, “I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind . . .” (Phil. 3:13). Paul had no time to waste dwelling on his failures. His concern was always the next step. His vision was fixed on heaven.

God is calling us, even now. We usually think He is calling us to do this or that task—to live in this or that city. And those realities are true. But even further, Christ is standing in heaven calling us to Himself. That’s where we have to keep our vision: on the goal line, on the end point, which is exactly where Paul’s vision was set. The reward for all the pain in our souls and for all our patient endurance is Christ Himself. He is the reason we press on toward the mark.

Often in Scripture the promise of heaven is portrayed as entering into rest because there is a weariness of our souls that can only be healed with rest. That’s why we go

to worship. That's why we read God's Word. That's why we gather together with the people of God. So that we may be rested and refreshed. Then we are able to work some more. We can work out our salvation.

Just as a runner must have oxygen in order to keep on moving, so we must have God's means of grace to keep our souls refreshed. We need the strength that comes from the grace of God, which we experience every time we enter into His presence. We need the prayers and accountability and fellowship of other believers. We need other Christians, just as other Christians need us (1 Cor. 12:21).

Recalling Our Purpose

If we want to experience greater Christlikeness, we need to intentionally plan to grow. If we want to grow in holiness, we must begin with our Maker, Designer, and Sustainer. Knowing our destination shapes our journey along the way. To grow in holiness assumes a standard to live by. It also assumes One who requires such a standard. So we begin with God as both Creator and Redeemer.

God's activity in redemption was not an afterthought. He planned to redeem the world before there ever was a world. He promised "eternal life" to His own children "*before the ages began*" (Titus 1:2). Again, He "saved us and called us to a holy calling . . . because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus *before the ages began*" (2 Tim. 1:9). That means, from all eternity, God knew that He was going to create, that there would be a fall, and that He would redeem His people.

He intends for all of creation to move toward the glory of the Creator. And that glory is seen most wonderfully in His work of redemption.

With that end in mind, how did God create the world? And why did He do it the way that He did? As we read the creation account in Genesis 1–2, we notice that there is a kind of hierarchical movement in its structure. It moves from the lesser to the greater, from the inanimate object of nature to the plant life, to the animal life, to the creation of the human race. It's as if there is a rising crescendo.

However, the understanding that I encounter frequently in the church is that creation reaches its pinnacle on the sixth day. That is the day when the image-bearer of God is created and man is given dominion over all the earth. And certainly, in that ordering structure of Genesis, we do see such a rising crescendo that reaches a high point on the sixth day.

But there is a great danger in looking at the sixth day as the pinnacle of creation, because the creation account does not stop at day six. There are not six days in creation. There are seven. And if we are moving in a rising crescendo, we must see that the pinnacle, the acme point, is not day six. It is day seven. The seventh day is the highest point of creation.

Now, what happens on the seventh day? In Genesis 2:1–3 we read, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because

on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

Notice two points with me. First, on the seventh day God rested. Second, God sanctified or set apart or hallowed the seventh day. Which means that God took one day and set it apart from every other day. This day became a day marked as holy. Ever since then, the life of the human race has followed the pattern of a seven-day cycle. Why did God structure it in such a way?

Of course, there is a functional or utilitarian purpose for humanity, for the livestock, and for all the land. Along with the animals and the land, mankind now has the opportunity to rest from toil and labor. There is a regular period of refreshment and renewal. But the seventh day was set apart not simply to rest from labor. It is also a time of special consecration for the people to assemble together for the purpose of praising God in His majesty and holiness.

Furthermore, as Christians today continue to experience and honor that seven-day cycle, it makes us look back with wonder and gratitude at creation while pointing us forward to the final goal of both creation and redemption. Each Sabbath day we look forward to that time when the kingdom of God is fully consummated and we join the assembly of saints in heaven.

As Hebrews 12:23 teaches, we are coming “to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” Christ is establishing His kingdom, and one day His people will enter into that rest. They will enter into that perfect state of glorification. Every trace of remaining sin will be re-

moved from us, and we will be made completely holy. Then the purpose of creation will be fulfilled in heaven. We will enter into our rest, and the process of our sanctification will be complete.

Therefore, contrary to what secular philosophers teach, that there is nothing higher in the universe than humanity, God's Word portrays our proper significance. The creation account indeed is structured in ascending order of importance, but the creation of mankind is not ultimate. It is penultimate. We can't stop on the sixth day. We must go to the seventh day and see that the goal of creation is Sabbath holiness to the glory of God.

And it all culminates with Christ: "all things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:16). That includes people. God uniquely created mankind in His own image and after His own likeness.

Does being made in His likeness mean that God has a body—two legs, two arms, two eyes, and so on? No, not at all. We're not the physical image of God. And of course people have minds and wills just as God does. But the main point of being made in the image of God is even greater. What is the purpose of an image but to mirror and reflect something other than itself? If we read the Old Testament carefully, we see that the goal of human life is to mirror and to reflect the very character of God.

God is holy, and we are to reflect that holiness so that this whole work of growing in sanctification is a growing in holiness. It is a growing within us—not only of redemption, but of movement toward the fulfillment and consummation of the very purpose of our creation. We were made

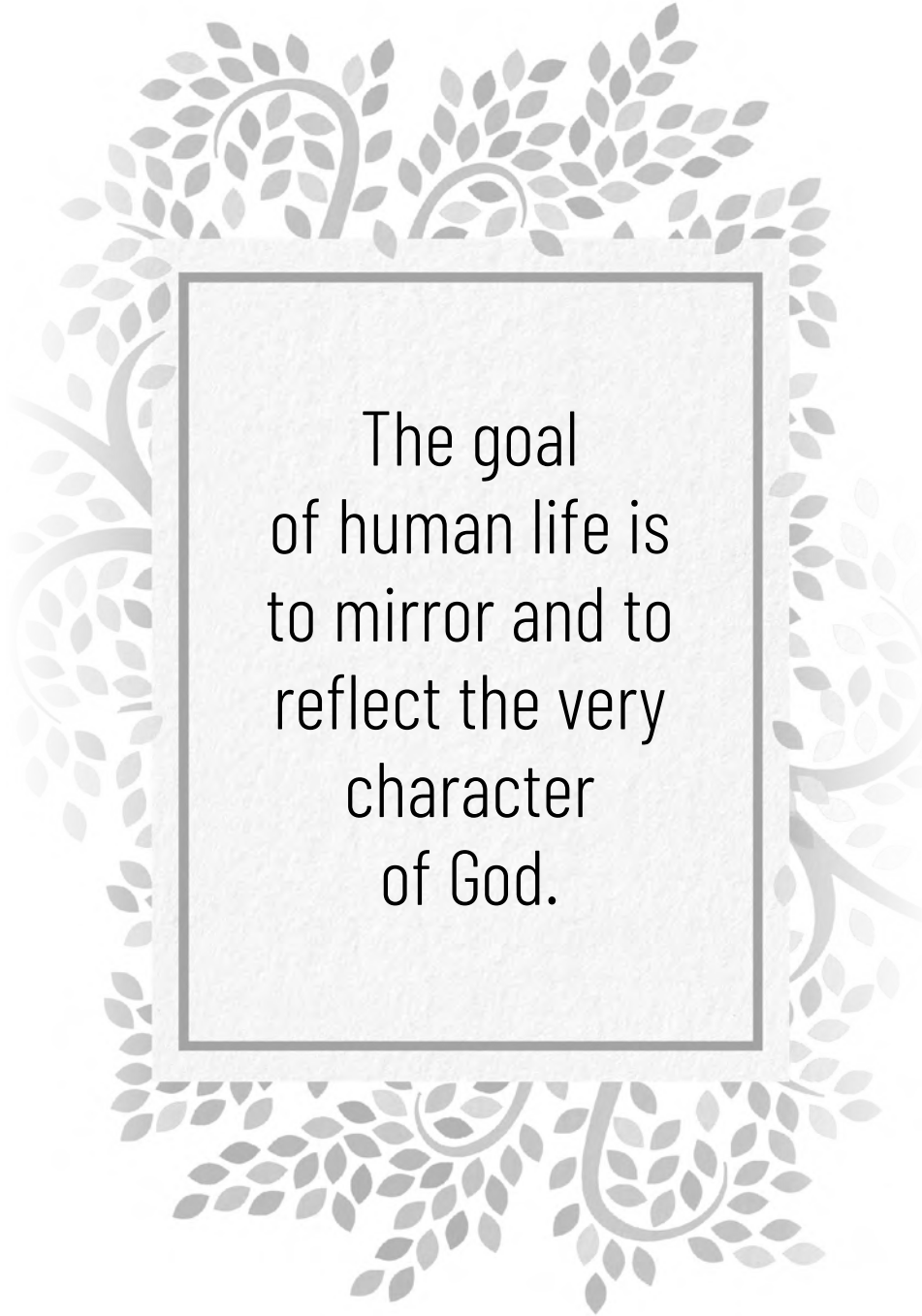
to glorify God and to bear witness to the whole cosmos about His character. He demands of His people, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16, which quotes Lev. 11:44–45).

God has given us a transcendent sign of the goal of our redemption in the very institution of the Sabbath day. Therefore, make it a practice every Sabbath to think about why it exists. Ask yourself, “What is this rest toward which my heart yearns?” The Sabbath points to the day when God will remove all our restlessness and when He will welcome us into His eternal rest. We will see Him as He is. We will be holy and blameless in His sight. We will praise Him for all eternity. So again, just as God aims to glorify Himself through our lives in redemption, so also do we see that same aim in creation.

Planning to Grow

People often ask me, “How do I know the will of God for my life?” That’s an important question, and I understand the struggles behind it. We could get into all the ramifications of discerning the specific aspects of God’s will for our lives. But I typically respond by saying, “We should be more concerned about the *ultimate* will of God for our lives, because the Scriptures tell us that our sanctification—our progress in holiness and purity—is the will of God for us” (1 Thess. 4:3).

We live in such a works-oriented environment that we tend to think we must pile up all sorts of achievements in order to please God. Of course, I don’t mean to denigrate



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in any way the importance of our works. We are called to do good works for God and to be zealous for doing them (Titus 2:14). But there's a certain sense in which God is much more concerned about what we *are* than about what we *do*. He looks for greater Christian character and godliness as we are being molded and conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

Near the end of his life, the apostle Paul wrote to his friend Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). He knew that he was about to reach the goal line.

Now, the very concept of a goal line uses that word "goal." Various businesses and organizations carefully draft purpose statements to state why they exist. The very reason for their being, what they're trying to accomplish, is encapsulated in the word "purpose." They ask themselves, "How do we develop a strategy to reach or to accomplish our purpose?" Thus, they begin to set objectives and goals—ways they can help themselves get to where they want to go.

Just like an organization, your purpose is the overarching reason for your existence. It's asking yourself, "What is the single achievement I'm trying to accomplish in my life?" Beneath your purpose or aim are various goals and objectives you make in order to help set yourself up for success. But we often make our goals either too large or too small. If we *overestimate* ourselves, we get discouraged when we miss the mark. If we would simply set a more realistic goal, we would avoid such discouragement. Likewise, if we *underestimate* our goal, we get bored when

we hit the mark too easily, but if we would simply set a more challenging goal, we would avoid such boredom.

Therefore, we must set concrete goals that stretch us but that are achievable. Let me suggest a central formula for setting goals in your life, whether they're spiritual, physical, relational, or vocational goals. Simply take the word "to," add a verb along with a quantifiable, measurable noun, and then a date. That's the formula.

For instance, say that my overall objective is to make my yard more beautiful next year. After thinking through what would most increase its beauty, I decide *to plant five flowering trees by April 30*. Do you see how measurable that is? I include a specific objective with a specific date. After April 30, I will know if I have failed, if I have partially succeeded, or if I have fully succeeded.

Granted, there's a real sense in which you can't quantifiably measure spiritual goals. Who could put an accurate microscope on the soul? That's one of the reasons why Christians get caught up in trying to pursue external exploits and feats. They want to assure themselves that they're measuring up as Christians. And that's dangerous business indeed.

On the other hand, we can learn certain things from the practice of setting goals. We can ask, "If my purpose is to be sanctified, if my purpose is to grow up to the full maturity of the image of Christ to which I'm called, then what are the objectives that God has set for His people? What has God given me to advance my spiritual growth?"

We talk a lot about the means of grace and about how we can grow in the Lord by making diligent use of such

means. For example, the Bible is a central means of grace, and so one of my objectives as a Christian is to master the Scriptures. Unless I have the Word of God feeding my soul, I'm not going to make very much progress in reaching my purpose of sanctification in this world.

Another vital means of grace is prayer. I know that my spiritual development will be stunted radically if my prayer life is weak, so one of my objectives is to be more fervent and active in prayer in order to grow spiritually. Similarly, I need to be involved in worship in the church on Sunday morning.

These are various means of grace, and we can state them as objectives in the Christian life. But how do we translate such values into specific, concrete goals?

Let's say you want to better know the Bible. You can enter into a formal Bible study program of some sort. Maybe it's the About the Bible program or the Precept program or a Bible Study Fellowship program. Such groups provide discipline and structure. They hold you accountable to study the Scriptures more. Of course, joining such a group does not guarantee that you'll grow. The point isn't to simply check off Bible reading or Bible study from your to-do list. Again, you can't track the progress of the soul with such quantifiable measures. But you can track your progress and your use of such means of grace. Choose specific books of the Bible to study or a specific Bible study program to join or a specific Bible degree to pursue.

Likewise, if you want to pray more, join a group that meets on a regular basis for prayer and encouragement.


Make it a matter of principle to *never* forsake such gatherings where you pray with the saints (Heb. 10:24–25). Church attendance is vital for Christians to grow in their sanctification. Again, just because you faithfully go to church doesn't necessarily mean you are a strong Christian. But one way to guarantee stunted growth is to forsake assembling with other believers. The point is to translate your dreams of spiritual growth into concrete patterns of behavior that God has designed to promote your spiritual progress.

Remember, there aren't any shortcuts. You may find various resources at Christian bookstores on how to be a spiritual giant in three easy lessons, but you're wasting time and money reading a book like that. Why? Because there are no such easy lessons with three quick steps. It's work—pressing work, demanding work—and it requires a plan. Which is precisely why Jesus tells us there is a cost to discipleship.

Therefore, whoever sets his mind to following Christ without counting such a cost is a fool. Instead, you must study the Scriptures to understand what God wants you to accomplish with your life, what the various obstacles you must overcome along the way are like, and what means He has provided to enable you to overcome them.

Becoming Like Christ: The Goal of All Spiritual Growth

If we plan to walk as disciples of Christ, we must wake up and move in the direction of action. For spiritual growth

A decorative floral wreath made of stylized leaves and branches, rendered in a light gray color, surrounds a central rectangular box. The wreath is composed of various leaf shapes and curved stems, creating a circular frame around the text.

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to take place, there has to be effort. There has to be discipline. There has to be a willingness to pay the price to overcome all kinds of adversity and obstacles in a very real struggle. But a goal set before us at least tells us in which direction to focus our energies in the struggle. People can be determined and they can be zealous. But if they're not moving in the right direction, then it's not likely that they will end at the right place.

So what is the goal of spiritual growth? Or to ask it another way, what is the purpose of the Christian life? You will remember how I noted earlier in this chapter that there seems to be an ascending pattern as we read the account of creation in Genesis 1–2. Instead of seeing day six and the creation of man as the climax of creation, it would be more faithful to see day seven—when God blesses all His work and rests—as the highest pinnacle. Which means that just as “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Gen. 2:3), so also He created and consecrated people to be holy. Mankind did not create God; God created mankind. God does not exist for humanity; humanity exists for God.

Thus, the Bible teaches us that we commit idolatry when we shape God into mankind's image. That's idolatry: worshiping creation as if it were God. The greatest problem in our theology today is that God has been created in a human image. That is why we said earlier that people have been created with a unique capacity to reflect and to mirror God's character.

That means that you, as a human being, have been so constituted, so made, so endowed by your Creator with

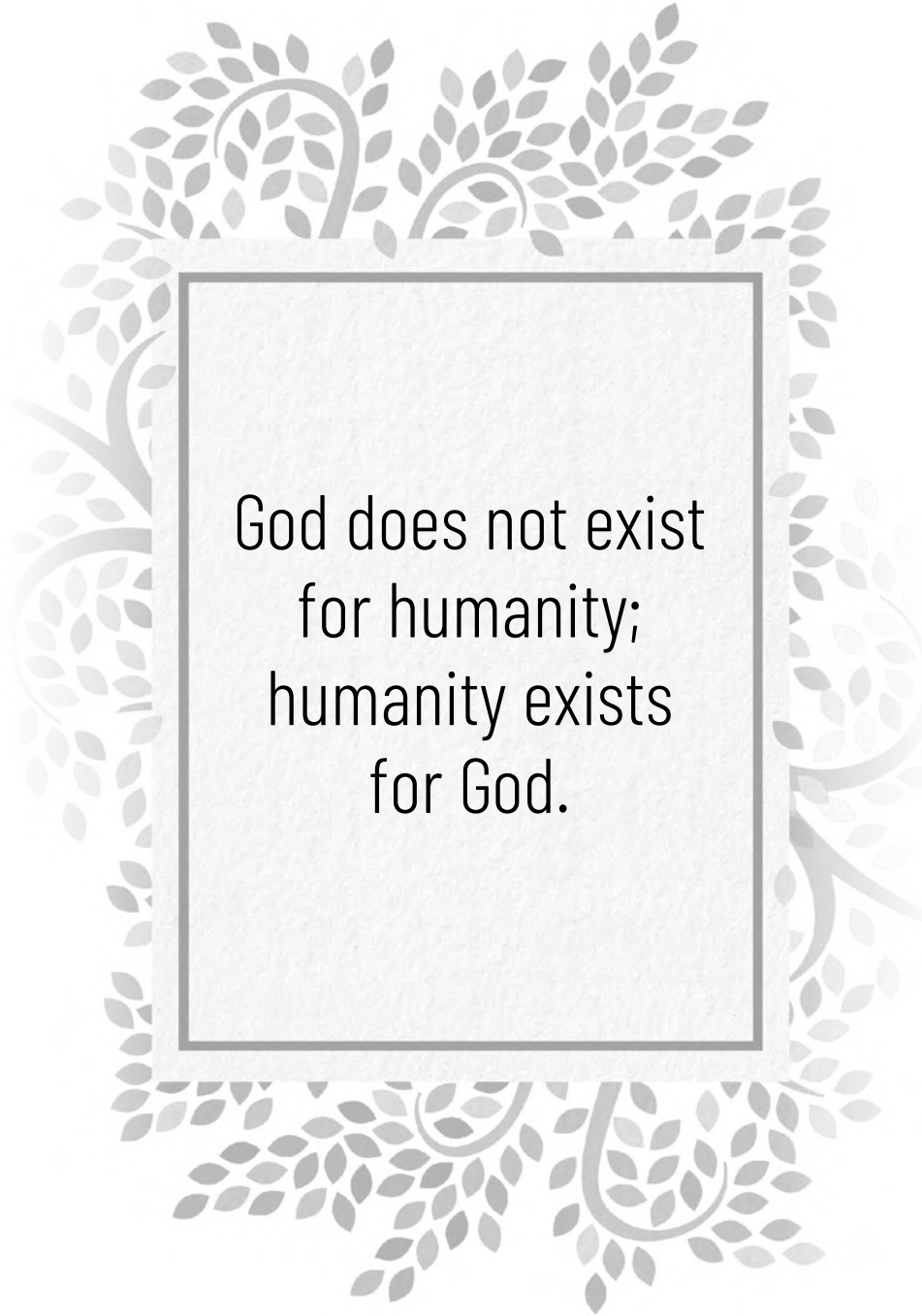
certain faculties that you therefore have a capacity in creation to reflect or to mirror the holiness of God. You are not holy in and of yourself. But God *is* holy in and of Himself, and He has called you as His creation to bear witness to Him—to reflect to the rest of the world His very character.

Is that not what Christ does in His life of perfect obedience? Does He not fulfill the purpose and the destiny for which humanity was created?

That is why Paul says Jesus is the new or last Adam in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (1 Cor. 15:45; Col. 2:9). But more than that, He is the brightness of God’s glory, the express image of His person (Heb. 1:3), which is why Jesus can say to His disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Now, we have to be careful here. I’m not suggesting for a moment that deity is reproduced in us by any means. But do you remember what happened when Moses went up to the mountain and talked with God? His countenance was changed. His face was shining, glowing. There was a physical manifestation of refulgent glory radiating from Moses.

Why did that happen? Was it that the internal glory of this shepherd from Midian finally broke through his skin so that people could see what was really inside of Moses? You know better than that. Rather, Moses was so intimately connected with the presence of God and surrounded by His glory that, when he came down from the mountain, that same glory was still reflecting from the face of Moses in all its brilliance.



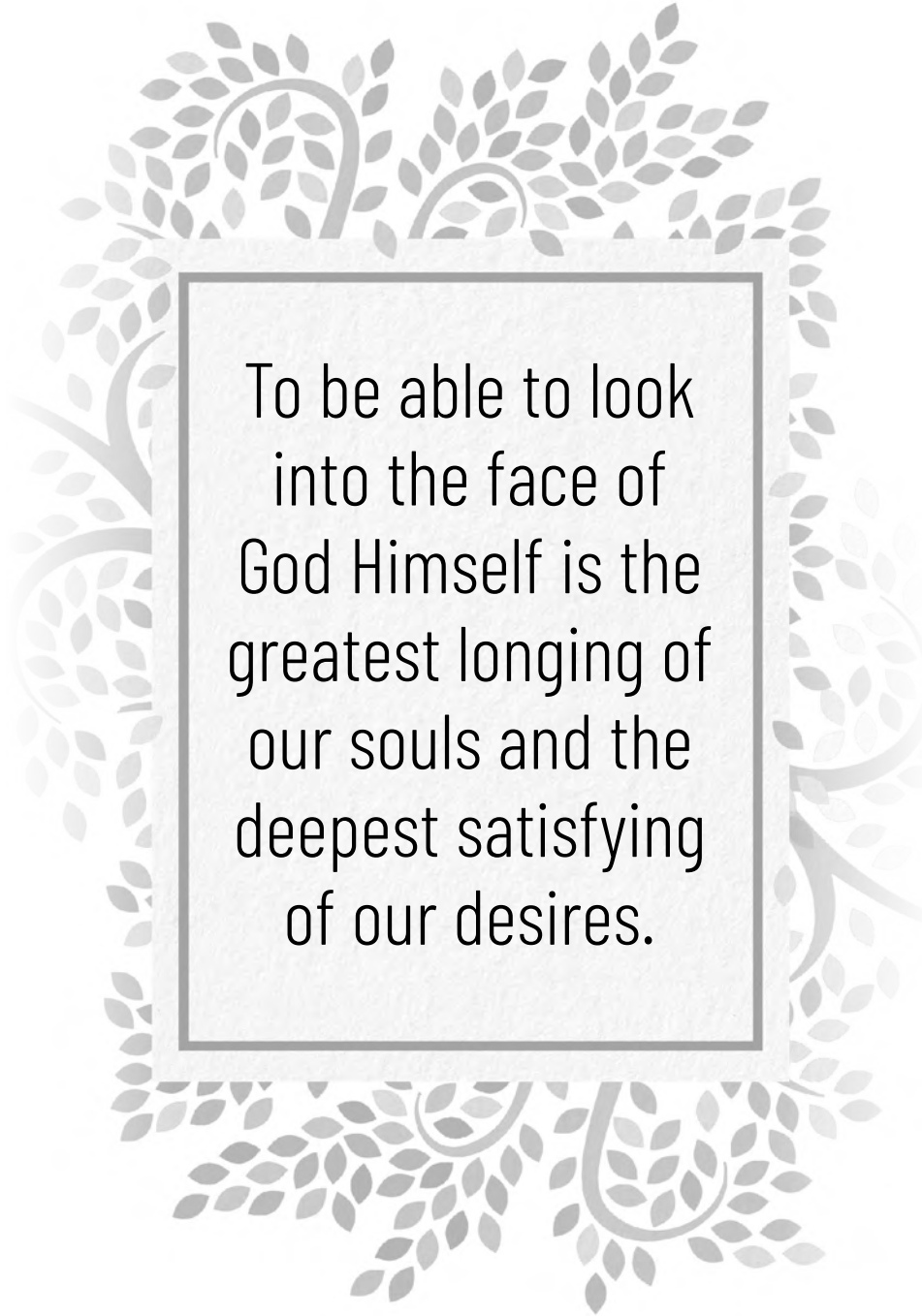
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Likewise, the highest goal of the Christian is what we call the “beatific vision”—the *visio Dei* or the vision of God. That is the glory for which we live and move and have our being. That is the greatest hope of the consummation of our lives. To be able to look not at the face of Moses but into the face of God Himself is the greatest longing of our souls and the deepest satisfying of our desires. We have sinned; it is true. We are now soiled, besmirched, defaced. But we are not erased. God has preserved us. He has not annihilated us. Yes, “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin” (Rom. 5:12), but God has purposed to preserve and redeem us.

In the riches of His kindness, He still promises “I will be your God” (Jer. 30:22). “I will dwell in your midst” (Zech. 2:11). “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (James 4:8). “I will make my dwelling among you” (Lev. 26:11). “My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Ezek. 37:27).

Thus, God continues to have a relationship with His people. But there was one absolute prohibition that He still maintained. What was it? “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). You can come close, but no one will see His face—not even Moses. “You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:23).

Oh, what great glory we lost when we sinned. Will it always be this way? The best part of the gospel is that we can confidently answer, “No!” In his first epistle, John tells us,



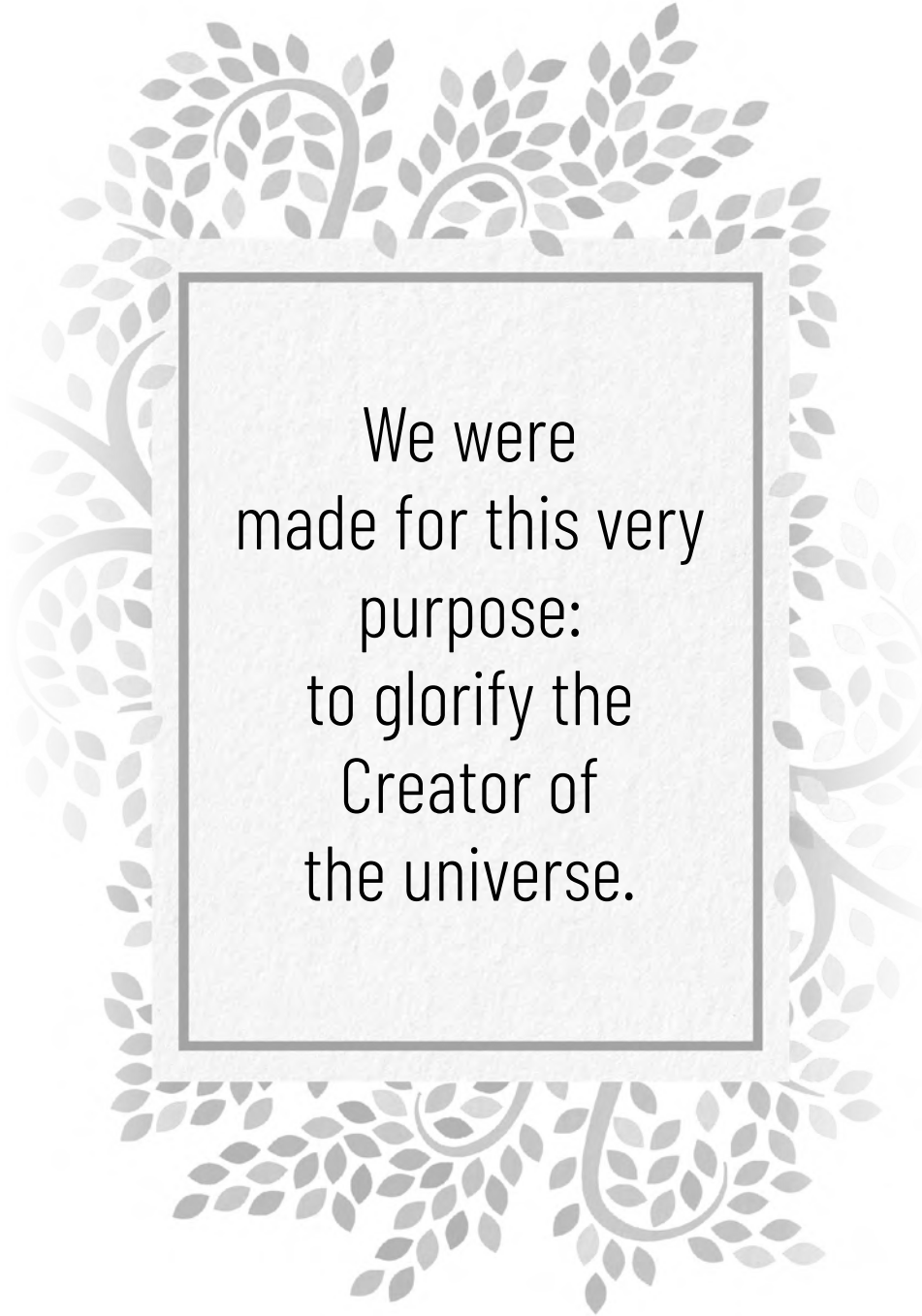
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See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1–2)

Does that make your soul sing? We shall see God as He is. Not as He is reflected. Not as He is mirrored by the glory of His creation. Not even by the image of His people whom He has made. But we will see Him as He is in Himself. We will look directly into the unveiled face of God, and in that moment the whole fullness of our human spirit will be satisfied as the whole fullness of His beauty will be glorified.

That is our deepest longing and our highest good. How then can we receive this greatest of all gifts? Who is promised this vision, this opportunity to see God? The pure in heart. Jesus declares, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). But, my friends, we are not pure in heart. That is why nobody reading this book has ever seen God.

The goal of our lives is to be conformed to the image of Christ. To fulfill the original purpose for which we were created; namely, to reflect the very character of God to the world around us. The first catechism question I learned as a child was from the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is man's chief end?” or “What is man's principal purpose?” or “What is the goal of the human race?” And



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the answer I was taught to recite is “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” I was never able to put those together in my youth because I didn’t think glorifying God could be enjoyable.

However, I have since learned that my greatest joy is God’s highest glory. We were made for this very purpose: to glorify the Creator of the universe. We were made for holiness. And when we reject it, we suffer a deprivation—a deep-rooted sense of lostness and restlessness because we are out of sync with the nature for which we were made.

But when our souls prize the glory of God, we have the motivation we need to press on toward the goal of living holy lives. The end fuels the means.