

LIFENEWS

THE DIFFICULT PATH OF SANCTIFICATION

by Jeremiah Shawver
parksidevisalia.org

This month, one of the students in my hermeneutics class presented a paper on the prosperity gospel and the Korean church. This paper was interesting and got me thinking about why this kind of preaching is so popular. The claims of prosperity preachers are demonstrably false through scripture and through the experience of normal Christians. This preaching – which says that when you follow Jesus, you will have a life separated from suffering because of your faith – is popular because we would like this to be true about our lives. We want the Christian experience to be easy and free from suffering. But we learn quickly that this is not the case.

My oldest daughter and I have begun to read *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. If you have never read it, a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, joins a group of dwarves and a wizard, Gandalf, on a journey to recapture the dwarves' treasure. They face all kinds of dangers on this journey: horrible weather, treacherous mountains, trolls, and goblins. Recently, we read from the chapter titled *Over Hill and Under Hill*. The company has left Rivendell ready to cross the misty mountains. Tolkien opens this chapter this way:

There were many paths that led up into those mountains and many passes over them. But most of the paths were cheats and deceptions and led nowhere or to bad ends, and most of the passes were infested by evil things and dreadful dangers. The dwarves and the hobbit, helped by the wise advice of Elrond and the knowledge and memory of Gandalf, took the right road to the right pass... It was a hard path and a dangerous path, a crooked way.

Upon reading this opening, my daughter asked, "Why did they take a dangerous path?" My only answer was "because it was the right path." There may have been easier paths for the company to take, and there may have been quicker paths. The right path was long and dangerous. As I thought more about this conversation, I was reminded of this paper on the prosperity gospel. Often, people look for the easiest or fastest path to sanctification, but the difficult path may be the right one.

As a child, I learned this definition of Sanctification: Being separated from sin and set apart to serve God. This sounds easy enough. But in reality, to be separated from sin is described by scripture as putting to death (Colossians 3:5), boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26-27), and running a race (Hebrews 12:1-2). The point is made that the path will be difficult. To quote Levi, The Poet, "There is no bridge for bypassing crucifixion." That is to say, nothing of the typical struggles of living in a fallen world. We may want a life that does not require discipline and is separated from suffering. This is not what we have been promised. Instead, Paul says he learned to be content in every circumstance, showing us that in our path toward holiness, we may go through all kinds of suffering. David writes in Psalm 23 that the Lord is with him in the darkest valley. This is true for us as well.

I hope that this is an encouragement for you. Your path may be difficult as you follow Christ, but this does not mean it is wrong. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." Our goal in sanctification should be to rely on Christ to show us where to go, even when it is difficult.