

The Perfected Soul

A meditation on transformation,
one theme from Rick Hocker's book,
Four in the Garden

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Why couldn't all of us have been born perfect? Wouldn't that solve all of the world's problems? If we were perfect, God would've been spared a whole lot of anguish. But we're not perfect, neither at birth nor at death. We're born imperfect into an imperfect world where evil exists. God couldn't have planned it this way. Or did He?

What would it be like if we were created perfect? We would be flawless. Our bodies would have no defect or disability. We would be fully developed at birth, having all the knowledge we needed for life. We would know good from evil and would always make the right decisions. If we were perfect, there would be no room for improvement.

But without room for improvement, there could be no increase in intellect or maturity. There could be no growth, or change or expansion of spirit. We would be locked into a state of unchanging perfection. We couldn't become anything other than what we already were. We would have no need or desire to better ourselves because we had already arrived at our destination.

In creating us, God didn't want to create perfect beings. Instead, He wanted to create beings that are able to grow and expand without limit. He wanted these beings to have ever-increasing sensitivity, maturity and grace. He desired beings who could offer Him an infinite depth of relationship throughout eternity. These creatures would be the greatest of all God's creations.

Let's call this new kind of creature a PERFECTED being.

Although God can create perfect beings, such as angels, He cannot create perfected beings. Maturity cannot be created. It is developed over time and requires the fuel and fire of life's experiences. A perfected being is grown, not created.

God is at work cultivating perfected beings. This type of perfecting isn't a fixed destination, but a transformation. It is a state of continual growth. It is a constant movement from glory to glory, an ever-deepening and ever-widening quality of being. This process isn't static, but is dynamic like the infinite expansion of the universe. God has built into each one of us the unique capacity to grow indefinitely throughout eternity. This capacity sets us apart

from all other creatures, even angels. It qualifies us to become suitable companions for God.

The Process That Perfects

For us to be perfected, God had to design a process. Our life here on Earth *is* the process. God wisely determined that we be born into the world with a broken nature, predisposed to selfishness and willfulness. And He also determined that temptation and evil would coexist on Earth with us. Why? So we may be perfected.

How then are we perfected? We're perfected through suffering. We're perfected when we make mistakes, when we face challenges and difficulties. We're perfected when we show compassion to others, especially when we love and forgive the imperfect.

If we were perfect, we would never make mistakes, and, therefore, we wouldn't learn from them. If others were perfect, we wouldn't need to learn forgiveness or compassion. If we lived in a perfect world, we wouldn't be challenged or grow.

God's perfect plan hasn't been thwarted. It was God's intention that sin and corruption enter the world. The purpose of their existence isn't to torment us, but to give us something to overcome, and by doing so, to become transformed. Therefore, it becomes necessary that we must experience suffering—loss, disappointment and pain. With transformation in mind, God intends for us to suffer. He wants us to make mistakes. He desires us to taste failure. He also intends that we laugh and have fun. He wants us to experience the entire spectrum of life and feeling. He eagerly hopes that we will fully participate in the experience of life so we'll become the fullness of what we're intended to be.

I don't advocate self-imposed suffering. In times past, religious people used to indulge in self-inflicted suffering, such as self-flagellation, for purposes of sanctification. True sanctification cannot be hurried or helped by devices of our own choosing. Suffering is God-ordained and sanctification is the result of how we respond to that suffering. We must let God choose the means of our

sanctification and not add more vinegar to the cup of suffering He has destined us to drink. God wisely knows what's needed for our sanctification.

Responding to Suffering

Suffering is the catalyst for transformation. It has the potential to create a depth of character and maturity that is unattainable any other way. Suffering itself doesn't transform us, but is the fuel by which we can be transformed, if we seek it. The transformation depends on how we respond to the suffering.

The most spectacular human beings are those who've suffered in some way. They've been transformed through their trials into selfless, loving people. I think of the saints and martyrs who suffered and were remembered not for what they suffered, but for their character. These people wouldn't have been so amazing if they hadn't suffered as they had.

At some point in our lives, we will experience suffering. It's necessary for our growth. When we encounter suffering, we must understand that it can be utilized as a transforming energy in our lives. The suffering itself is not beneficial. The benefit comes from what the suffering can accomplish in us if we allow God to work through it. We shouldn't resist suffering, but allow it to change us as we trust God in the midst of it. Transformation occurs when we surrender our pain to God and He turns the pain into growth.

The real issue is growth, not how much suffering we have experienced. Suffering isn't the only way we can grow. Growth can come from many sources. More suffering doesn't guarantee more growth. Some people suffer much and don't grow at all or become bitter. The quality of our character isn't proportional to how much we've suffered.

Scripture gives us the analogy of the refiner's furnace in regard to suffering (Isaiah 48:10). Silver and gold are refined by heating the metal to a very high temperature at which the impurities float to the surface and can be skimmed off. In the same way, suffering becomes the fire that heats up our lives and brings out our imperfections. God is then able to lay hold of our sin and immaturity, and perform a deep work of growth and healing. Thus, we are refined and purified by passing through the fire of suffering.

Scripture also says that it was fitting that God should make Jesus, the author of our salvation, perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). As a perfect example for us to follow, Jesus demonstrated that suffering is part of the human experience. Although Jesus was already perfectly divine, he needed to be made perfect in his humanity through what he suffered. As imperfect followers of Christ, we can expect that we, too, should have to experience suffering in order to be perfected.

A New Creature

I believe God passionately desires for us to become the full expression of what He has designed us to be. There is a unique destiny for each one of us that is in the heart and mind of God. Therefore, I believe that each person's life, with all its difficulties, is custom-designed to produce a special result. All the elements of our lives, the good and bad, are the culture in which we are grown. The difficulties and failures that are unique to your life are designed to be the means by which God can fulfill His final design for you. Everything in life does have a purpose—the formation of a new being out of the raw materials of a human soul.

At this stage, we are like caterpillars, frail and vulnerable. We can break or self-destruct. As caterpillars, we cannot comprehend what it will be like to be a butterfly. Its beauty is beyond us. Its new nature is inconceivable to us. And yet, in spite of that, we'll experience this marvelous transformation that is beyond butterflies and the static perfection of angels. I believe God created the miracle of metamorphosis to foreshadow the mystery of our inevitable transformation.

This world is a specially designed mixture that contains the potential for spiritual life and maturity. God created this world for the primary purpose of maturing souls. Our life on Earth becomes the crucible into which the raw materials are put in. Because of these divinely placed ingredients, an enhanced form of spiritual life can be cultivated—transformed human souls.

In reality, we're being groomed by God for God. We're being groomed for relationship with Him. Some people think that we're being groomed for service, but God already has angels to serve Him. God is developing in us the capacity to be His companions for eternity. All the relationships in our lives

are intended to prepare us to have relationship with God. As we make mistakes in our interactions with others and learn from them, we grow in our ability to listen and communicate and to develop those skills that will enable us to interact with God Himself. In cultivating our relationships, we're cultivating our capacity to relate to God.

Not All Become Butterflies

Not every seed that's planted grows to maturity. Unfortunately, people disqualify themselves every day by their choices. The very life that's intended to transform them is rejected or avoided. This is a sad reality and yet God knew this would happen. Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-8) tells the story of a farmer who sowed seed, but only the seed that fell on good soil grew to maturity. In the same way, God has scattered billions of seeds, or souls, upon the Earth in hope that some will grow to full maturity, although not all will succeed.

We can sabotage this process of transformation. Oftentimes, we do so by our own ignorance. We don't understand life or God. We don't know how to respond to life as it presents itself to us. We hide from it or we reject it entirely. Our choices determine how much we're transformed by our circumstances. Do we make choices that stimulate us to grow and be stretched? Or do we make choices that keep us comfortable and stagnant? We won't grow if we aren't challenged. We won't expand if we don't take risks. We grow very little when life is easy and comfortable. We can mature the most when life hands us difficulty.

A New Perspective

We shouldn't concern ourselves too much with the unfairness of life, unanswered prayers, or bad decisions we have made. A more worthwhile focus is to seek to be transformed by life. We shouldn't measure our life by all the good or bad things we have done, but by how we have responded to life's circumstances, whether good or bad. Did we choose to trust God and entrust our lives to Him, believing He can transform us through everything we go through?

God hopes we might understand this process of transformation and embrace it. To embrace this process is to embrace life. To embrace life is to welcome its joys and pains, to deeply experience the full spectrum of life's experiences, and to allow it to transform us into beauty.

“We are not material beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings who need an earthly journey to become fully spiritual.” – John Bradshaw

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Rick Hocker

Author of *Four in the Garden*

An Allegory about One's Relationship with God

Readers' Favorite International Book Award Winner

Available in print and e-book at all online stores

Email: mail@rickhocker.com

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