

# The 'Seven Feet of Gravel' Cure

by Daniel Steele

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*Daniel Steele's sermon emphasizes that true sanctification is attainable in this life through faith in Christ, rather than relying on death as a means of purification.*

**Scripture:** Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 6:13, Colossians 2:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 7:25

**Topics:** "Sanctification", "Faith In Christ"

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## Description

Daniel Steele preaches against the belief that death is the only cure for sin, emphasizing that unbelief paralyzes the will and hinders action. He criticizes the idea that sanctification only occurs after death, arguing that many miss out on experiencing perfect love due to prejudices or reliance on human teachers. Steele highlights the importance of purifying the body in this life through faith in Christ, refuting the notion of post-mortem sanctification.

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## Transcript

A person suffering from an annual attack of hay fever, having been told that Oliver Wendell Holmes, the poet physician, had effected a cure of that malady in his own case, wrote to that renowned littérateur, inquiring for the antidote. In accordance with his concise and vigorous style, the great humorist replied, "Seven feet of gravel." By this laconic answer he corrected the report of his own cure, and strongly intimated his belief that death is the only specific for that disease. This despair of healing, when once in full possession of its subject, would shut out a further trial of remedies. Unbelief paralyzes the will and destroys the motives to action.

It was an evil day when Christianity was blighted by that admixture of pagan philosophy which teaches the eternity of matter and its inherent, essential, and ineradicable sinfulness; and that the human spirit, so long as it is encased therein, must bear the taint of its polluted envelope. Down through the Christian ages this pagan element has wrought its baneful work, responding to every cry for the complete cure of sin, "Seven feet of gravel."

This dreadful answer belittles the glorious Gospel, discrowns its Author, and dishonours His successor, the Holy Comforter and Sanctifier. It dwarfs and degrades the Gospel because it makes it, in respect to entire sanctification, as great a failure as the Law (Heb. x. 1-3). Especially note the contrast between Heb. vii. 19, and vii. 25. It discrowns Christ, because it ascribes a greater power to death, making it exterminate that inbred sin which had successfully defied His grace; and absurdly making an effect annihilate its cause. It dishonours the Holy Spirit, called Holy because it is His office to make believers perfectly holy --

by making death usurp His office, and accomplish a work which had baffled His power. What else can the Westminster Catechism mean when, in answer to the question, "What benefits do believers receive from Christ at their death?" it replies, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." How utterly aside from the Bible this answer is, will be seen when we examine the only proof text which the Westminster Assembly could find for the doctrine of death-sanctification (Heb. xii. 23): "To the spirits of just men made perfect."

Here is a glaring instance of the fallacy which logicians call *petitio principii* -- "begging the question" -- since there is no hint that this perfection is wrought in death. This is unwarrantably assumed. The Greek scholar will observe that the participle "perfected" is not in grammatical agreement with spirits, but with men, understood; so that the literal translation is, "To the spirits of righteous, perfected" (men). This strongly implies that they were made perfect before they became disembodied spirits. The best scholarship will sustain us in the assertion that perfection of character is not here spoken of -- that is sufficiently indicated by the term "just," or "righteous" -- but the completion of their course on earth; "to the spirits of the righteous who have finished their earthly course."

The same verb is used by Jesus Christ in Luke xiii. 32, not to indicate the perfection of His moral and spiritual nature on the third day, but the termination of His earthly career. Hence the American Committee on the R.V. insist on adding in the margin, "Or, I end my course." This is the meaning of the same word in Phil. iii. 12: "Not that I have already obtained, or reached the end of my course." With this rendering all the New Testament Greek lexicons agree. This explanation removes one of the most common subterfuges into which Christians leading a mixed life of sinning and repenting are wont to run for shelter, when plied with Scriptural proofs that entire sanctification is required in this life. "Paul," say they, "had not attained spiritual wholeness or perfection, why should we be urged to excel him?"

But we return from our exegetical digression, in which we find not, in all the Book of God, a vestige of Scripture favouring either a post-mortem sanctification or a spiritual purgation by death itself. Still, we do not deny that many souls aspiring after holiness, but through all their lives bewildered by erroneous theological teachings and misapplied Scriptures, as they approach eternity, rising above the mists, aided by the special illumination of the Holy Spirit, do lay hold of Christ as a complete Saviour, and experience perfect cleansing through faith in His blood. Many of these have very gladly testified to a strong regret that this grace of perfect love, casting out all fear, and excluding all sin, was not received and enjoyed by them many years before, while in the full enjoyment of health. They now see that this was their privilege, and that death is by no means a factor, or a condition of entire sanctification. They plainly declare that they missed this great grace through some groundless prejudice against its experience and expression, or through too great reliance on fallible human teachers, to the neglect of the great Teacher Jesus Christ, and a reluctance to follow perfectly the unerring Guide, the Holy Spirit.

The candid student of the New Testament, especially of the Epistles, which unfold the uttermost extent of salvation under the dispensation of the Paraclete, will not fail to discover the prominence given to the purification of the material element of human nature through faith in Christ. In Romans xii. 1, the body, in distinction from the mind (ver. 2), its spiritual tenant, is to be holy, not after death, but while "living." In chapter vi, 6, we read that the purpose of the crucifixion of the old man is, that the body "in so far as it is a sin-body" (Meyer) might be destroyed, "annihilated" (Cremer), "done away" (R.V.). In Colossians ii. 11, we are assured that "the circumcision of Christ," that entire sanctification of the heart (Jer. iv 4) which Christ provides for in the gift of the Holy Spirit, consists in "putting off the body of the flesh" (R.V.), not merely the outward "sins of the flesh". The significant and weighty double compound Greek noun, "putting off," found

nowhere else in Greek literature, is invented by Paul to express the thoroughness of this purging of the whole body from all sinful tendencies. Hence the meaning is, "a complete 'putting off' and doing away with this body 'of the flesh,' in so far as God, by means of this ethical circumcision, has taken off and removed the sinful body from man (the two acts are expressed by the double compound), like a garment which is drawn off and laid aside" (Meyer).

St. Paul declares (I Cor. vi 13) that "the body is for the Lord" (Jesus), inasmuch as it is a member of Christ, and "the Lord is for the body;" that is, He purposes to rule and use it as His member, and an instrument for His use, and a mirror for reflecting His glory. "The body is His due, for He assumed the body, and hath therein sanctified us; and we are joined to Him by the resurrection of the body." Thus says Bengel, who adds, "Quanta dignatio!" -- "How great an honour!" This honour culminates in the nineteenth verse: "What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost," His peculiar and perpetual habitation, the last place which He hath chosen for the erection of His altar (Deut. xii. 14). How impressive the injunction which follows, when cleared, as it is in the Revision, of the gloss which diverts the emphasis from the body, the subject under discussion. "Therefore, glorify God in your BODY."

The strongest proof text (1 Thess. v. 23) for the entire sanctification of the body in the present life is found in that prayer of the Apostle Paul in which he makes an exhaustive analysis of man's compound nature, and prays that each specific part may be preserved blameless, after supplicating the very God of peace to sanctify the undivided whole. In his enumeration of parts, Paul descends from the highest and distinctive part, the spirit, the dome of man's being, wherein he is receptive of the Holy Spirit, to the animal soul, containing the passions and appetites in common with the brutes, the second part in the detail which needs the purifying power: thence he goes down to the material foundations of this divine temple and prays for the keeping pure of the sanctified body.

In this chapter we have not discussed "the flesh" in the Pauline sense of that term. We have attempted to prove that the body is to be sanctified and the flesh is to be crucified.

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