

Growing

In Christ



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Egerton C. Long

GROWING IN CHRIST

How do you measure growth? You can do it in various ways can't you? As a child did you have a wall at home marked up with short horizontal lines showing your height each year? Remember how excited you were when your mark was higher than your brother's or your sister's? But that was years ago. Adults aren't generally interested in growing – only in reducing! Who wants to grow now? What about growing spiritually? Have you ever thought about how you grow as a Christian? Do you know what it means? How do you measure spiritual growth?

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The New Testament speaks of several different aspects of spiritual growth. Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians might *'please God in every way, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God'*. (Colossians 1:10). In 2 Corinthians 10:15, Paul hoped that the believers' faith might grow. Peter spoke of *'growing up in your salvation'*. (1 Peter 2:2). In 2 Peter 3:18 we are told *'to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ'*.

Spiritual growth is growing in our knowledge of Christ and in our likeness to Him. It includes growth in our faith and in our knowledge of and obedience to God's Word.

ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT THIS SPECIAL KIND OF GROWTH?

I am sure many Christians are. I have often heard people say: 'I don't seem to be getting anywhere as a Christian... I wish I could really make some progress... What do I do? Will I experience a miracle or what? How do I grow? I really want to.'

Have you ever felt like that? Perhaps you do right now. Have you been looking at other Christians you see in church every Sunday and you've been thinking they have 'got it all together'? But are they really growing in Christ? They may have made a decision for Christ years before. They may even be teachers or leaders. But if you knew them better, you might discover from their attitude, their conversation, or from their activities, there is very little Christian grace or love in their lives. **Our standard, remember, is not other Christians, but is Jesus Christ Himself.**

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Lack of growth in Christians is nothing new. Paul wrote some strong words to the Corinthian church: *'I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere babes in Christ... for since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere*

men?’ (1 Corinthians 2:1-3). The problem was those Christian had not grown. They were still acting like spiritually immature babies instead of as growing Christians.

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul held before them the ideal Christian: *‘That the body of Christ may be built up until we all... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ... we will all grow up into Him... that is Christ.’* (Ephesians 4:13 & 15)

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Some of the ways by which many people evaluate spiritual growth may not necessarily be true indicators of growth. Here are a few examples:

1. Being very active in church life, going to every meeting.
2. Having an increased mental knowledge of the Bible without an increasing application of the truth in our lives.
3. Using what is called an “evangelical vocabulary”.
4. Praying in public.
5. Giving up certain ‘worldly habits’.

All these may be admirable Christian qualities but it is possible to be doing each of them with a wrong attitude or motive.

Spiritual growth must be inward before it becomes an outward expression. Again, Spiritual growth is growing in our knowledge of Christ and in our likeness to Him. This is God's plan for every one of His children. Every child of God should become more like the Son of God. God's primary purpose is stated in Romans 8: 29 – that we might be '*conformed to the likeness of His Son*'.

HOW CAN WE GROW IN CHRIST?

How does any growth take place? How does your garden grow? What do plants need - water, food, light, air, and room to grow. For best results in a garden, there must be cultivation, constant attention and even pruning.

How does a baby grow? Its needs are somewhat the same. A human baby is said to be the most helpless of all newly-born creatures. But given food to strengthen, air to breathe, and love to nurture, any normal baby will grow. Do you see how this applies to us as Christians?

If regular food is necessary for natural growth, it is equally true for spiritual growth. Peter said it so well:

'Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.'
(1 Peter 2:2)

Spiritual growth is obviously linked with our reading, studying and feeding on the Word of

God under the guidance of the Spirit of God. **There is no growth apart from this.** In fact, your growth can be severely stunted without this special food. After referring to the man whose delight is in the law of God, the Psalmist describes the growing Christian: *'He is like a tree, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.'* (Psalm 1:3) But in the previous verse the Psalmist makes it clear – all that depends on his meditation on the Word of God.

Our Saviour also said it very plainly – *'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'* (Matthew 4:4)

ARE YOU READING AND HEARING THE WORD OF GOD?

When you read your Bible, are you really listening to what God is saying to you through His Word? Ask yourself these questions: How much time do I personally give to the study of God's Word? Even more importantly, do I allow it to speak to me? Or is my reading of the Word of God rather mechanical? Is it infrequent? Spasmodic? Only when I feel like it?

It will require discipline on your part to give time to reading God's Word. It is very easy in our busy lives, to find reasons for not spending time with God and for not reading His Word.

Spiritual growth will come as the Word of God is recognised as the source of food for our soul. This will usually take place through our own personal reading. It is here that the impact of the Word on our life often is the greatest. *'How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your Word.'* (Psalm 119:9) It is not merely reading the Word but our obeying it which makes the difference in our lives.

ARE YOUR DAILY READINGS EFFECTIVE?

Often a Christian complains: 'I don't seem to get anything very much out of my daily reading. I read a passage but it doesn't seem to help me.'

There are several answers to those remarks. Possibly the way you were feeling at the time may have been the problem. If you are under tension or perhaps unwell, either can seriously affect your spiritual appetite.

Or think of it this way – can you remember every meal you have eaten during the last three weeks? Breakfast may have been the same every day, but can you remember every lunch, every dinner or every snack? No! You can't! Then let me ask you: Where would you be today if you had not had them, starving or already dead?

Those daily meals have maintained your life. They go by quickly and are easily forgotten, but you could not live without them.

Just as you cannot remember every meal you have had, so you will find that you do not always remember that portion of the Bible you read recently. But as your regular intake of food does you good, so does regular daily Bible reading. A well-read Bible is usually the sign of a well-fed soul.

There will be times (they will increase as you grow in Christ) when you will receive a special thought or blessing, exactly suited for the circumstances of that day. That is an enriching experience. Remember to praise God for it.

At other times it will be “quiet food”. Persistent reading of God’s Word, coupled with a heart open to the Spirit of God can mean so much. Determine to feed your soul daily as regularly as you feed your body. Practise His presence with you constantly. One hymn says it so well: ‘Beyond the sacred page, I seek you Lord.’

DO YOU NEED FURTHER HELP?

Another answer to the question of how to get more from your daily reading could be to use a daily devotional guide. There are so many available. Any Christian bookstore will show several to you. Thousands, even millions of Christians around the world use these booklets regularly. Why not pick up a copy and see if it can help you.

Be sure however that you read the scripture passage given for that day carefully. Don't just read the little story or comment in the devotional booklet. It is the Word itself which will help your spiritual growth. Nothing can be a substitute for it. Ask God to help you hear what His Word is saying and what it is saying to you.

One other caution: Never become legalistic or bound by such ideas as: 'I must read three chapters every day.' By all means read three chapters if that helps you! Read more if you wish. But don't skim through your reading without thinking and then say 'I've done my Christian duty for the day.' The purpose of reading is to receive food. That cannot always be done by hurried or compulsive reading. We can become proud of how much we have read, but it may not have meant very much to our lives.

The Pharisees of Christ's day knew the Scriptures. They even fasted regularly. They were proud of their achievements but they were very far from what God wanted them to be. Never let that happen to you. Look at what Christ said in Matthew 23: 23-26 and be warned by His strong words.

WHAT ELSE CAN HELP US GROW?

Again, you can receive spiritual food or be greatly challenged by a sermon. The preacher may throw light on a Bible passage, helping you

see an old truth presented in a new way. As this happens, your soul assimilates the food and growth takes place.

In Ephesians 4 Paul states that one of the purposes why God has placed gifted men and women in the church, is to help us be built up and become more mature. (Ephesians 4: 12-13) Therefore we need to be linked with a church where the Word of God is clearly and regularly taught. This is a tremendously important part of our Christian lives.

Joining in worship with God's people in a local church can strengthen our desire to know more of Christ and to grow in Him. What is your present position in this regard? Remember the New Testament knows nothing of Christians living in self-imposed isolation from the family of God.

The right environment for spiritual growth is a vital, interrelationship with fellow believers, in prayer, in study, in worship and in service. We grow best when we are in fellowship with a local group of committed Christians.

Quoting that important 4th chapter of Ephesians again, we find Paul speaking of Christians as all 'growing' simultaneously. His words in verses 12-13 are significant: *'So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature...'*

Paul's words to the Colossians also tell us how we can help each other to grow. *'Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...'* (Colossians 3:16)

If you want to grow spiritually, you will need the fellowship and help of other believers. A burning coal will only stay alive in the fire with other coals. Take it out and it dies. Are you vitally linked with a group of Christians? Are you ministering to them, are they ministering to you? This is all part of our spiritual growth.

There are other ways that the Spirit of God may use to teach you what the Word of God has to say to you and so help you grow. It may be through a Bible study group. Can you link yourself with such a group? It could be a great help. This is a popular and profitable method of learning God's Word. The truth discovered will aid your spiritual growth.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR PRAYER LIFE?

Alongside your daily reading (which is God speaking to you through His Word) you need to speak to God. Have you been doing this? How often? Jesus is our great example in prayer. If He, the Son of God needed to pray, we certainly need to do so.

Jesus spoke often about our praying. Three times in Matthew 6:5-7 He said *'When you*

pray... when you pray... when you pray.' In other words He expects us to pray. It is part of our life as a Christian. It is part of our spiritual growth.

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus gave three suggestions about prayer. First, (v5) He said, '*Let your prayer be **sincere.***' He contrasted those who prayed so that others could hear them. But Jesus was saying, 'Don't try and impress others. Certainly don't try to impress God. Just be yourself.' His first helpful word: Be sincere.

Secondly, let your prayer be **simple** (v7). Don't pray over and over without thinking of what you are saying. Let your prayer be the simple, natural expression of your heart. Remember you are speaking to your Heavenly Father. Let your words be simple.

Then Jesus gave us a remarkable **sample** of what prayer should be like – *this is how you should pray.* (v 9-13)

How does this sample prayer begin? With praise - this is our recognition of the One to whom we are speaking. Praise must be a vital factor in our prayer life.

Then follow the various parts of prayer – submission, petition and confession, concluding with the real motive of prayer – **Thine is the glory.** **We need to make sure that we include these aspects of prayer when we pray – praise, submission, petition and confession.**

Remember always as you pray that God is our loving heavenly Father to whom we can bring everything. We can ask Him to develop our spiritual lives. We can ask Him to speak to us through His Word. Again this is an extremely important part of our spiritual growth and maturity. But the best way to learn to pray is to pray!

WHAT ABOUT EXERCISE?

What happens physically if we continue to eat but never exercise? We become lazy, sluggish and over-fed. One way to overcome those tendencies is sufficient exercise. In the same way, we need to exercise our spiritual faculties. How? In several ways – by passing on to others what we have learned, by witnessing to others about Christ, or by any type of Christian service which involves giving out what the Spirit of God has given to us. It has been said ‘Teaching others what we have learned is one of the best ways to stimulate your own appetite.’

Exercise is part of spiritual growth. Ask yourself these questions:

‘What am I doing for Christ?’

‘Is there more that I could be doing?’

Why not ask the Lord to show you?

THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Beyond everything else, it is only the Spirit of God who can help us grow. He alone can help us love God's Word. He alone can interpret and apply God's Word to our hearts and minds. He alone can reproduce Christ in our lives. He alone can produce the fruit of the Spirit. Paul expresses this truth beautifully in Galatians 5: 22-23: *'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control'*. These qualities are only seen perfectly in Christ, but they are also what the Holy Spirit wants to reproduce in us.

The real test of spiritual growth lies here. The final question is 'How much of Jesus Christ can be seen in my life?' The test is not 'How much of the Bible do I know?' - although that is tremendously important. It is not 'How much am I doing for Christ?' although we must be active for Him. The ultimate test is 'How much has the Spirit of God been allowed to work in my life setting forth Jesus Christ?' Remember our previous basic statement: **God's purpose for every believer is for each one to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.** We are children of God. We belong to Him and those who belong to Him must become like Him. It is as simple as that. It is our heart attitude that matters the most. That is what God sees.

In this process of being made 'Christ-like' God may use or permit testing to come into our lives. This is sometimes hard to understand - we look at the test and ask 'Why?' What we should be asking is 'what is God's purpose in all of this?' It may be that God simply wants our faith to grow. Or it may be there is something He wants to change in or remove from our lives so that we might be more like His Son. It is all part of our spiritual growth.

DO YOU WANT TO GROW – SPIRITUALLY?

Is there in your heart an active desire to be like Christ? To grow spiritually? God has promised if there is the desire, it will be fulfilled. Jesus said: *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'* (Matthew 5:6)

In the Old Testament, we are told in Hosea 6:3 *'Let us acknowledge the Lord, let us press on to acknowledge Him. As surely as the sun rises, He will appear. He will come to us like the winter rains. Like the spring rains that water the earth.'* These are God's promises and God can always be trusted to fulfill His Word.

Paul's one desire was that he should press on to know Christ – more and more intimately. He did not feel he had arrived spiritually. He wanted all that Christ had for him, now and in the life to

come. Read what he wrote in Philippians 3:10-16: *'I want to know Christ... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me... Forgetting what is behind... I press on toward the goal...'*

Tell God, your Heavenly Father, your desire. Tell Him you're longing to know Him better, and to be more like His Son. He won't play games with you. He will hear your prayer and answer you. Then don't be impatient. Let God do it in His way, and in His time. But make sure you are doing your part too. REMEMBER – you are never too old to start growing – even if you have been in church all your life! Trust Him to do His part as you do yours. Tell the Lord you want to grow. Let the Holy Spirit have His way in your heart and your friends will soon see the growth He brings about. God bless you. Start today!

HOW TO RECEIVE JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOUR

If God has been speaking to you as you have read this booklet and if you are willing now to take Jesus Christ as your Saviour, here is what you should do:

Confess – tell God in your own simple words that you are a sinner, needing a Saviour. (Read Romans 3:23)

Accept – tell God that you see Jesus Christ your only Saviour and will accept Him now. (Read Romans 6:23)

Believe – that Jesus Christ has saved you because you asked Him to do so. (Read Romans 10:13)

If you have made this decision today then sign your name here and tell someone else what you have done. Join a church where you can hear God's Word preached and have fellowship with other believers.

I acknowledge myself to be a sinner in God's sight.

I accept Jesus Christ now as my Saviour.

I thank Him for saving me.

Date _____/_____/_____

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