

GROWING SPIRITUALLY

"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever." 2 Peter 3:18.

This text contains the last words which Simon Peter recorded in the Scriptures. For that reason they are interesting and treasured. Peter was an excellent example of his own injunction, "Keep on growing." He had certainly grown through the years. When he first met the Master he was just a bundle of unrealized possibilities. He was a rugged, robust, and swearing fisherman. Through the earlier days of his discipleship he had been selfish, self-seeking, and unstable. Quite frequently he had failed Jesus. Yet, he had grown and had become the powerful preacher of Pentecost. And here he is a seasoned saint, writing words of encouragement, comfort, and challenge to other Christians.

We are interested in progress: the progress of our children in school, in the professions, and in business; progress of our scientists and inventors, and the progress of our churches. This urge to make progress is natural. The best test of progress is within. What kind of people are we becoming? Is our spiritual progress keeping pace with our progress in a material way?

We should be interested in our growth, and in the growth of others from the standpoint of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. Every person should be interested in the development or growth of a strong body, a keen mind, and a great soul. All three phases of our natures should be cultivated.

Every living thing should grow. Growth is the law of all life. If there is no growth, there is no life. We are always troubled if our plants and crops do not grow. If a child does not grow, we know that something is wrong. In general, growth produces a feeling of satisfaction. This is true of the growing plant, animal, child, business, church, and Christian.

All will agree that life must precede growth. When one is born he is a baby, but he is not expected to remain a baby. He is expected to grow. There is nothing sweeter than a little baby, and there is nothing a mother watches more closely than the growth and development of her child, but there is nothing so tragic as a baby that remains one through the years. What a grief to parents if the child does not appear to be growing. And what a growth. Write it in italics -- the day when he first stands alone and takes a step, or the day when he shows his first tooth. It means that the child is growing a body. Underline it -- the day when he first asks a question. For the child has started to grow a mind. Set it down in capitals -- the day when he shows the beginnings of a moral and spiritual sense. It is the day of days, for the child is growing a soul.

Children are born to grow. They grow steadily and slowly, but surely. Their growth is unconscious and involuntary, but there is a thrill in growing. There is no compliment that we can pay a child that is more appreciated than that he or she is growing.

Arrested development is one of the most deplorable calamities in human life. Because Tom Thumb was never more than forty inches tall Barnum exhibited him as a freak. Sadder still is the plight of those who do not grow in mind. If you have ever visited one of our institutions for the feeble-minded and looked on men and women whose gray matter and emotional control are undeveloped so that they cling to their rag dolls and their marbles in spite of the passing years, you have looked on one of the saddest scenes in life. But to fail to grow in soul is the supreme tragedy.

We are in the world to grow a soul. The seers of humanity have recognized this fact. Browning said, "Man was made to grow, not stop." George Eliot declared that early in life she perceived that the object of life is to grow. It is regrettable that some have been Christians for years but are still in the infant stage. Paul taught us that childishness is to be left behind. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Some are not aware of their spiritual immaturity. They are like Hambone, who said, "Ev'ry time I wants to be a bettuh man ole man debil pat me on de back en say, 'You pretty good man lak you is.'"

Jesus came as a little baby in the arms of Mary, but He grew. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." We should advance in likeness to Him with the passing of the years. Oh, the marvel, the mystery, the romance of Christian growth. In the last verse which Peter wrote, he exhorts us to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." The figure which he used is that of infancy advancing to the full stature of manhood and womanhood. What we are is important, but what we are becoming is far more important. We are not only in a state of grace, but we are also to grow up therein. To fail to grow means not only arrested development, but degeneration. We live our lives on an incline. We must go up or down; progress or retrogress.

I. The Meaning Of Spiritual Growth.

To grow in grace is to increase in conformity to the will of God and advance in likeness to the Lord Jesus. It is the process of our becoming what God would have us to be. It is to grow in faith, virtue, meekness, gentleness, patience, and usefulness.

While physical growth is involuntary, spiritual growth is a matter of the will and the affections. As we become more like the Master, we grow in considerateness, kindness, and courtesy toward others. The winsomeness of courtesy crowns Christian character with bloom and beauty. Jesus Christ was the very acme or soul of courtesy. Long ago it was said of Him that "He was the world's first true gentleman." He won people by His charm. Children ran to Him, and sinners were drawn to Him. As the disciples caught His spirit, graciousness pervaded their lives like a fragrance. They sometimes differed with one another, but they differed like Christian gentlemen. Courtesy is important in our own lives.

II. The Nature Of Spiritual Growth.

1. It is a gradual or progressive development.

Although salvation is a free gift, Christ-like character is an achievement. We must grow from spiritual babes toward the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. All development in the Christian life is accompanied by struggle.

2. It has knowledge for its foundation.

As we grow in the knowledge of Christ we grow in likeness to Him. To know Christ is to love Him, and to love Him is to grow like Him.

3. It ought to be constant.

We should grow in grace and knowledge as long as we live. God alone knows what greatness of intellect, grandeur of character, and splendor of achievements come within the range of each of us.

We are to keep on growing in the grace of Christ, and in the Christian graces, that is, in Christ-likeness. We are also to keep on growing in the knowledge of Christ, that is, increasing our acquaintance with Him and our apprehension of the truth. God wants us to grow along both spiritual and intellectual lines. Although our growth is to be along two lines it is to be in one direction, namely, toward Christ. You will observe that the spiritual is put first in our text.

We ought to put it first and keep it first. We ought to give the spiritual first place every where and all the time.

III. The Reasons For Spiritual Growth.

1. For our own happiness.
2. For the sake of others.
3. For the glory of Christ.

IV. The Requirements For Spiritual Growth.

We do not grow spiritually by mere wishful thinking. We can no more grow spiritually by wishing to do so than we can reduce physically by the same process. There are certain things that are necessary if we would grow.

1. Food.

The food on which the Christian feeds is Christ, the Bread of Life, and the Bible, the Water of Life. Christ and the Bible are the dependable revelations of God. We have the blessed opportunity of feeding our souls upon the Word of God. In case we fail to do so we rob ourselves of that which God intended us to have, and as a result we are anemic and without an adequate vision, a growing faith, and a robust hope. A neglected Bible always means a starved spirit, a dwarfed soul, and a barren life.

2. Atmosphere.

In spiritual growth the atmosphere is not everything, but it is very much indeed. We are constantly impressed, influenced, and molded by our surroundings. The atmosphere of a home, a church, or a school has much to do in forming our habits and principles. We plant our lives in the churches and yield them to the cultural influences of the Holy Spirit. We discover that the best atmosphere for growth in grace is in private prayer, which is fellowship with Christ, and public worship, which is fellowship with God's people. We cannot grow spiritually without prayer, and the more we pray, the faster we grow. Neither can you be your best for God and stay away from the services of the church. God's blessings are not promised to the wise or the ignorant, to the mighty or the weak, to the famous or the obscure, but to the faithful.

3. Exercise.

What constitutes spiritual exercise? Witnessing for Christ, doing something in behalf of His cause and in His name every day, and constantly seeking and striving for the welfare of others. Without exception, great Christians "have expected great things from God and have attempted great things for God."

V. The Results Of Spiritual Growth.

Spiritual growth enables us to live on a higher plane, makes us happy, enables us to be more useful to others, and pleases the Lord. If Christ is your Saviour, Lord, Example, and Inspirer, do you have more of His truth in your mind, more of His grace in your heart, and more of His beauty in your character? If so, "go on growing in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."