

KEEP GROWING

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

Last words are usually interesting and treasured. The last words which our Lord spoke before His ascension were: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1: 8). Among the last words of Paul were these: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4: 6-8). Simon Peter's farewell exhortation was: "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever" (II Peter 3: 18).

In a splendid manner Peter exemplified his own injunction to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." When Andrew brought him to Christ our Lord looked at him and said "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone" (John 1: 42). It had taken all the years of Peter's Christian life for that prediction to come true. When this rugged fisherman first met Christ he was just a bundle of unrealized possibilities. During the early years of his discipleship he had been selfish, self-seeking and unstable. In various ways he had failed miserably.

With the passing of time Peter had grown tremendously. He had become the marvelous and powerful preacher of Pentecost. At the time he penned our text he was a seasoned saint, writing words of comfort, encouragement and challenge to persecuted Christians. Slowly, but surely, He had trudged up the slope of Christlike character. He had not reached the top, by any means, but from the height which he had attained he looked up toward the unending ascent beyond, and then down at the aspiring souls of the Christians of the centuries to follow, and wrote, "Keep growing in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Present-day Christians desperately need to hear and heed these words.

I. The Command.

"Keep growing." Life must precede growth. No amount of cultivation will cause a post which has been set in the ground to grow. Nobody can get a marble which is imbedded in the soil to grow. But, every living thing should grow. We are always troubled if our plants and crops do not grow. If a child does not grow, the loving parents know that something is wrong and they suffer one of the greatest of earthly disappointments. What a thrilling thing when a child shows signs of growth! In general, growth produces a feeling of satisfaction, whether it be in a plant, an animal, a child, a business, a church or a Christian. While a baby is sweet and precious, nothing is more tragic than for it to remain one through the years.

Children are born to grow. They are expected to grow steadily, but surely. Their growth is unconscious and involuntary, but there is a thrill in it. Any

youngster considers it a compliment when somebody remarks 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 an institution for the feeble-minded, you have observed one of the saddest scenes in this life. But to fail to grow in soul is the supreme tragedy.

We are in the world to grow physically, mentally and spiritually. 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. He said, "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" (I Corinthians 13: 11). 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.'" The figure which Peter used in this last verse which he wrote 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. What kind of people are we becoming? Is our spiritual progress keeping pace with our material progress? Every Christian should be interested in the growth or development of a strong body, a keen mind and a great soul.

II. The Course.

"Keep growing in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." It is impossible for anybody to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" until he has been born from above. Our text says, "Keep growing in (not into) the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." After we have been born into a state of grace, we must keep on growing therein. Salvation is a free gift, but Christlike character is an achievement. Just as a child grows physically and progresses to manhood or womanhood, so the believer in Christ is to develop and grow in spiritual stature. A Christian cannot stand still. Either he will make progress or go backwards. Unless there is growth there will be deterioration. We must keep growing from spiritual babies toward "the measure of the fulness of Christ."

Since spiritual growth is a matter of the will and the affections, we can either assist or hinder its progress. We live our lives on an incline, and are always either going up or going down. "As soon as the stream stands, it stagnates." Cessation of growth has resulted in the failure of many ministers. Having reached a certain stage in their development, they stop growing. They did not stand still, but they started on the decline. Gradually, and perhaps unconsciously, they are like Samson in that their strength left them and they knew it not. Oh, the tragedy of that sort of thing! It is a sight to make angels weep. As one views such a spectacle, he feels like crying out with Browning, "Why stay we on the earth, unless to grow?"

According to our text the course or direction of our growth is to be along two lines:

1. In the grace of Christ.

If we are to grow in the grace of Christ, we need to understand His grace as it is revealed, bestowed and experienced. In the New Testament the word "grace" has two primary references. First, it signifies the unmerited love and favor of God the Christ. Second, it signifies the consequences of His unmerited love and favor, namely, the beauties and excellencies of the Christian life. This means, then, that we are to keep growing in our consciousness of that love which caused Christ to leave His home in heaven, take upon Himself the limitations and loads of human life and die for our sins on the cross. It also means that we are to keep growing in Christ-likeness. There is to be an ever-deepening appreciation for and appropriation of the love of Christ for us, and an ever-increasing approximation to the character of Christ. Growth in grace is the "process of our becoming what God would us be."

2. In the knowledge of Christ.

By knowledge is meant in intellectual acquaintance with and apprehension of truth. God never intended for people to go to sleep mentally when they become Christians. Rather, He intended for them to keep growing mentally. He wants us constantly to be getting a broader grasp of and a firmer grip on the truth which has its source and center in Christ.

Keep growing along two lines, but in one direction, namely, toward Christ. Keep growing in the grace of Christ. That growth is primarily spiritual. Keep growing in the knowledge of Christ. That growth is primarily intellectual. The spiritual is first, and we should keep it in the first place everywhere and all the time. Our spiritual and intellectual growth should be progressive and continuous.

As we grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ, we will have a clearer perception of the perfect will of God and a greater determination to conform to it. Moreover, as we grow in grace, we shall become more receptive to the Word of God. When we are immature Christians, we are apt to be full of doubts and misgivings. Life seems more interrogative than declarative, but, as we grow in grace, we shall feed upon the precious promises of God's Word, and find them more than sufficient. Furthermore, as we grow in grace, we will not be unduly anxious about the future because we know that God is both able and willing to make abundant provision for all our needs, and we will have the deepening conviction that the best is yet in store for us.

For your own happiness, for the sake of others and for the glory of the Lord, keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ as long as you live. Always remember that you can no more grow spiritually by merely wishing to do so than you can reduce physically by the same process.

III. The Conditions.

Certain conditions are necessary if we are to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

1. Proper food.

Just as the plants and animals must have the proper food, if they are to grow in a satisfactory manner, so must we. The best food for the Christian is Christ, the Bread of Life, and the Bible, the Water of Life. Our efforts to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ should be directed toward keeping in close touch with Him. In the event that we fail to feed our souls upon the Word of God, we rob ourselves of that which God intended that we should 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. Wholesome atmosphere.

For spiritual growth a wholesome atmosphere is exceedingly important. We are impressed and influenced greatly by our surroundings. The atmosphere of our homes, schools and churches have much to do with our principles and habits. We plant our lives in the churches and yield them to the cultural influences of the Holy Spirit. The best atmosphere for growth in grace is in fellowship with Christ in private prayer and in public worship. Nobody can grow spiritually without Bible study and prayer. Neither can anybody be and do his best for God and stay away from the services in the Lord's house. God's blessings are not promised to the ignorant or the wise, to the weak or the mighty, to the obscure or the famous, but to the faithful.

3. Vigorous exercise.

There must be exercise before there can be growth. This is true in the realm of the physical, the mental and the spiritual. That which we use will increase. That which we refuse to use will disappear sooner or later.

What constitutes spiritual exercise? Witnessing for Christ, doing something in behalf of His cause and in His name every day, and constantly working at the task of introducing others to the Saviour. Through the centuries great Christians have expected great things from God and have attempted great things for God.

"Keep growing in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." In addition to making you happy, that will enable you to live on a higher plane, be useful to others and please the Lord. Our Lord takes special delight in His children who keep growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. Since you took Christ as your Saviour, Master, Inspirer, and Example, have you kept growing in grace and in the knowledge of Him? Do you have more of His grace in your heart, more of His truth in your mind and more of His beauty in your character? If so, thank the Lord and "keep growing in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" until the day of eternity.

Let us join the saintly Charles H. Gabriel in the prayer:

More like the Master I would ever be,
More of His meekness, more humility;
More zeal to labor, more courage to be true,
More consecration for work He bids me do.

More like the Master is my daily prayer;
More strength to carry crosses I must bear;
More earnest effort to bring His Kingdom in;
More of His Spirit, the wanderer to win.

More like the Master I would live and grow;
More of His love to others I would show;
More self-denial, like His in Galilee,
More like the Master I long to ever be.

Take Thou my heart, I would be Thine alone;
Take Thou my heart and make it all Thine own;
Purge me from sin, O Lord, I now implore,
Wash me and keep me Thine forevermore."