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## **SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Psalm 27:1-14 2 Peter 1:2-7

The climb of the Christian life is growth from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. Spiritual growth, just like physical growth, does not happen overnight; it is a gradual process. But, unlike physical growth, spiritual growth is a matter of choice. We choose whether to be hungry for the Word; we choose whether to be motivated; we choose whether to advance in the Christian life.

In Psalm 27, David illustrates progression in spiritual growth through the seven circles of faith.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear?

Circle 1: Salvation. The foundation for all spiritual growth is salvation (1 Cor 3:11). "The Lord" in Hebrew is Jehovah; "salvation" is from Yeshuah, the Hebrew word for "Jesus." A thousand years after David wrote this psalm, Joseph was told by the angel, "You shall call his name Jesus for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The person who has believed in Jesus Christ for salvation begins to see that faith, which lays basic assurance in the plan and the person of God, can conquer fear.

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple. (Ps. 27:4)

Circle 2: Study. After salvation, growth can only come from study. We have to be positive to the Word. Baqash, "seek," means to diligently study. It is similar to the Greek spoudazo found in 2 Timothy 2:15, implying strong inner motivation. It is impossible to study so that we grow unless we have made a personal decision to be spiritually motivated. "To dwell in the house of the Lord" is analogous to living in the Word of God, learning to let the Word be the priority, more real and absolute than anything else in life. The house of the Lord in David's time was the tabernacle--the place of teaching. The New Testament equivalent would be the local church, to be there every time the doors are open and the Word of God is taught.

For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock. (Ps. 27:5)

Circle 3: Faith-rest. David is saying that he knows that if he commits himself to live in the tabernacle of God, to meditate, to study, to be strong in his motivation for growth, then in the day of trouble, God will spread His tent over him and he will receive divine protection from whatever may threaten him. Every time we hear the Word taught we choose whether to believe it or not. The only safe place in the universe is the place of faith, where we rest in the power of the Word. In this secret place we have an encapsulated environment that we carry with us. When we dedicate ourselves to living in the Word, then the Word of God will surround us wherever we go and we will have stability in life.

And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me; and I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord. (Ps. 27:6)

Circle 4: Spirituality. In Hebrews 13:15 we are exhorted to "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." The sacrifices of expressing joy which is gratitude to God, and of singing and praise, which declare the faithfulness of God, are expressions of the function of our priesthood in the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me and answer me. (Ps. 27:7)

Circle 5: Suffering. The Hebrew qara means "to call out loudly." Here it indicates intensive pressure which wrenches from the soul a cry for deliverance. Suffering is necessary for Spiritual growth. When we meet suffering with effective prayer, the process of growth is accelerated.

When Thou didst say, "Seek My face, " my heart said to Thee, "Thy face, O Lord, I shall seek. " (Ps. 27:8)

Circle 6: Occupation with Christ. The most extended part of this psalm deals with the sixth circle of faith because it is the most essential to the attaining of spiritual maturity. It is persevering through our sufferings to the point of occupation with Jesus Christ. David was able to persevere because when God said, "Seek Me," David said, "I will." He was motivated to know the Word of God and to understand the will of God. It is impossible to reach spiritual maturity unless we become occupied with the person of Christ. Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship. The purpose of all our study is to go from the written Word to the living Word, to seek from the page the person of Jesus Christ.

I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord. (Ps. 27:13-14)

Circle 7: Waiting. David knew despair, discouragement, depression. He faced it all, but he came through it all because he knew that God would bring blessing if he persisted in spiritual advance. Qawah is the strongest Hebrew word for faith. To advance from the cross to the crown, each of us must master the degrees of faith: amen, leaning faith; batach, wrestling faith; chasah, refuge faith; yachal, healing faith; and qawah waiting faith. Isaiah tells us that those who wait for the Lord will exchange their human strength for His divine strength. Not until we reach the waiting stage will we have that overwhelming strength of God, and not until we have that, will we have true courage in the spiritual realm.

There is no way in our own strength that we can either Teach or imitate spiritual maturity. It is a gift from God, a gift that is Y given in increments and can be received only by faith. We have C to follow God's plan, do it God's way--a principle, a promise, a doctrine at a time. To reach maturity, we have to pass through (I each of the seven circles of faith. It takes tremendous spiritual (I motivation. We have to be motivated to attain spiritual maturity more than anything on earth. If we have any other priority in (j life, we will not reach it.

God has so designed the system that we either do it His way or we don't do it at all. His way is centered on the church. Apart from involvement in a local church and apart from the exercise of our spiritual gifts, we can „t reach maturity.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pas tars and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ ... (Eph. 4:11-12)

Two of these--apostleship and prophecy--were temporary gifts. When the apostle John finished writing the last books of the Bible and died, both apostleship and prophecy Passed from the scene. The other teaching gifts are given for the purpose of ,quipping believers for service.

The Greek word katartizo, "equip," was used three ways in the ancient world: medically, it meant to set a broken bone; militarily, it meant to get supplies to an army on the front line; economically, it meant to provide needed funds. The word means to equip according to the need. In the spiritual sense in this passage, it means for the believer to find his spiritual gift and function in it.

After we have sat in Bible class and received the Word, the next step is to go out into the world and act on what we have heard. If we have no service, no function, no operation in the supernatural exercise of our spiritual gift, we will have no spiritual maturity.

The purpose of service is for the building up of the body of Christ. "Building up" is oikodomeo, from oikos, "house," and domeo, "to build." The word means "edification" The pastor teaches the congregation; the members of the congregation, having been equipped by the pastor, now all function in their spiritual gifts. Because the spiritual gifts are all functioning, the believers are edifying each other and strengthening each other so they can do what the Church is supposed to do: evangelize, tell the world about Jesus Christ. This is what makes for a dynamic local church.

... until We all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. (Eph. 4:13)

The ultimate objective is expressed in four pictures of what we want to attain:

1. The unity of the faith. "Faith" here is not subjective but objective, referring to that which we believe. "The unity of the faith" means that because the Word of God is taught in its entirety, we have a systematic development of our understanding of the Word of God.

2. The knowledge of the Son of God. This is functional, experiential knowledge. We know Jesus Christ not because we have heard or studied about Him, but because we have experienced Him. We see His power in our lives, His confidence, His boldness, His courage, His humility. And we see these things in the live of others in the local church, and we come to a practical, experiential knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ. He is not someone who is absent; He is someone who is present. He is not someone who is weak; He is someone who is powerful. He is someone who lives and breathes within individuals and within a local church.

How will we ever come to the experiential knowledge of the Son of God? Only one way, we have to come to systematic unity in our understanding of Bible doctrine. If we do not accept the full counsel of God, we will never see the full glory Christ.

3. A mature man. Mature, from teleios, can also be translated "complete. This means that we have put all the pieces of the puzzle together. We have a dear understanding of the full scope of doctrine and have applied it to life. We have been taught and because we have the unity of the faith and because we have the experiential knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ, we are mature.

4. The fulness of Christ. To reach this point means that we are filled with quality, controlled by our occupation with Christ and influenced by Him in everything we do. We start out in the Christian life just working toward Christ and in time begin to be occupied with Him. But then what happens? As we develop a systematic understanding of the written Word, Jesus Christ the Living Word becomes alive to us. He becomes real, more real than anything else. He becomes important to us. As He does, we begin to

have epignosis, experiential knowledge of the Son of God. We reach spiritual maturity and then He fills our life, controls our thinking, influences our actions. Jesus Christ has become the most important thing in life.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ. (Eph. 4:14-15)

If we persist in the teaching and application of the Word, we will not have to be children all our lives. The Greek meketi, "no longer," says, "It is time to move on." The writer of Hebrews admonishes his readers by telling them that by now they ought to be teaching others, they ought to be functioning in their spiritual gifts, but they are not. Why? Because they have become dull of hearing, reversionistic (Heb. 5:11-14).

The word Paul uses here for "children" is nepios. The word refers to an adult who is childish. In the spiritual realm this is someone who has been a believer for a long time, but who is still trying to make Christianity an outward thing instead of an inward production, human effort, human good, instead of the inward thing. He still doesn't understand that Christianity is supernatural and invisible; he is still trying to make an issue of invisible divine production.

"Tossed" and "carried about" are both in the present tense, indicating Persistent action. This is the childish believer's C lifestyle--constantly shifting, constantly unstable, constantly affected by external shifts in the wind, living a life built on circumstances. No believer can attain maturity if his life is built !! on conditions around him. !!

But instead of remaining children, we may grow. "Speaking the truth in love" means communicating Bible doctrine in the power of the Holy Spirit. The phrase takes us back to where Paul began in verse 11 with the communication of the Word by gifted teachers in the filling of the Holy Spirit. When doctrine is taught this way, we will grow up in all aspects. Atlxano refers to natural, normal growth. This is the normal Christian life--spiritual advance from the cross to the crown.

Lesson 3-5: The Goal--Spiritual Maturity Romans 12: 1-2 Philippians 2:3-11

Spiritual maturity is the point at which we begin to live the normal Christian life. By the time we reach maturity, we are able to maintain the filling of the Spirit for prolonged periods of time. Because of this we are ready to start using to the full the resources that God makes available to us. At maturity we recognize how awesome are the responsibilities and opportunities God has given us, and the question we face is this: "Am I going to be faithful in using what God has provided to accomplish the task He has given me to do?" If we say yes, we will begin to see what sacrifice is really all about.

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Rom. 12:1)

With the word "therefore," Paul brings everything he has taught so far in this epistle to the point of practical application. He wants us to put shoes on our theology. He is saying that somewhere along the line our theology has to relate to our lives.

Oiktirmos means more than "mercy." While it does refer to the compassion that arises from a recognition of someone's need, it also always implies a provision to satisfy the need. God has compassion on us because He recognizes our need, and He holds out to us resources, provision, wealth--the riches of His grace.

"Present," is *paristemi*, from *histemi*, meaning "to stand or set," and *para*, "beside." It means to make something available. The word is used in Luke 2:22 for the presentation of the baby Jesus at the temple. Joseph and Mary were, in effect, making Him available to God. In Romans 6:13, we are urged to make the C members of our bodies available to God as weapons of righteousness.

The issue in the Christian life is never our ability; God has resources to take care of that. The issue is our availability God has chosen to give us free will. AS unbelievers we had the right to believe in Jesus Christ or to reject Him. As believers we have the right to utilize the provisions of God's grace or to squander them

Paul is telling his readers that it is the purpose of God that we Present our physical bodies as a living sacrifice or offering. This would have been shocking to the people to whom this was written in AD 65. To the Greco-Roman mind, the body was something to be despised; only the mind mattered. But Paul wants them to understand that the body is important because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit and He wants it to be an instrument God can use in accomplishing His plan.

According to Hebrews 10:5-10, at the time of His physical birth, Jesus said essentially this to the Father, "You would not accept animal sacrifice and offerings as a cleansing of sin for the human race, but a body y., have prepared for Me... I have come to do Your will." The second Person of the Trinity entered the human race to offer His body as a sacrifice for sin. In the person of Jesus Christ, undiminished deity and perfect, sinless humanity were, welded together forever. Now God carries on through the spiritual body of Christ the work He began in the incarnation We are instruments to accomplish the will of God on earth.

In the Old Testament, all sacrifices had to be killed. But Paul says our sacrifice is to be "living" and "holy." The plan of God is that every believer be in full-time, 24-hour-a-day Christian service. "Holy" means "set apart" or "sanctified" and refers to the filling of the Holy Spirit. When we have no unconfessed sins in our life and are filled with the Spirit, we are acceptable to God. As believers, we are positionally righteous and sanctified always. We are practically righteous and sanctified only when we are walking in the Spirit.

This is our "spiritual service of worship." "Spiritual service" comes from two words, *logikos*, meaning "logical," "reason) able," "sensible," and *latreia*, a word used for priestly service, but referring in ancient Greek to the work of a common day laborer. It is logical and reasonable that God would require 24-hour-a-day service from His servants. Christianity is a full-time job, and working at it full time is our act of worship.

Think about what this means. When you pull on your grubbies to go to work in the morning, you ought to be going to worship. If you work in an office, you ought to say, "I have to go to the office from nine to five to worship." If you are a carpenter, the logical place for you to worship is out there where you are every day sawing boards and slamming nails. If you slop hogs for a living, you ought to have an attitude that says, "I carry in my physical body the Spirit of God. I am the sanctuary and because I carry Him with me, every single thing I do is important to Him, and I will make it an act of worship."

The first indication that we are arriving at spiritual maturity is that we worship every day, wherever we are. What does it take to have that attitude? It takes focus. We have to be able to concentrate, to fix our minds on reality, and not be sucked in to the lies all around us. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2)

"Be conformed to" is *suschemntizo*. Schema is outward appearance. Paul uses a present passive imperative here. The imperative is a command; the present tense tells us not to keep on being conformed.

The passive voice tells us that we receive this action because we live here in this world. The world is constantly putting pressure on us, and the pressures cause us to conform. Paul says do not allow yourself to be pressed into a mold. Outward conformity is the problem here.

The word translated "world" is not "world" at all. It is the Greek *aion*, "age." It refers to the trends of human history. Paul is saying, "Do not allow yourself to be molded by the trends of society. Do not allow yourself outwardly to take on the appearance of the world, the age in which you live."

Instead, we are to be transformed, metamorphw. *Met* means "to change;" *morphoo* means "form." It refers to a transformation or a change that is inner and involves essence. Paul is telling us to be changed on the inside. As we are transformed, the changes that begin on the inside will work their way out and will affect what we look like on the outside. This passage is calling for a little bit of spiritual non-conformity. It is a challenge to us as believers to go against the tide, to stand on our own, based on our own understanding and knowledge of the Word of God.

This is exactly what Paul means when he tells us in Philippians 2:12 to work out our salvation. The principle is this: Every thing of the world--the cosmic system--works from the outside in, trying to change the inner man by making the outer man look or talk or act in certain "acceptable" ways. But God's plan is different. It works from the center to the outside. Everything God does in our lives starts inside with our attitude, our thinking, and works its way outward. The change God wants will take place first in the hidden recesses of our essence, our spirit and our soul, and then will transform what is on the outside. Christian growth will be seen last of all in what we do.

Just how is it that we are to be transformed? "By the renewing of your mind" Renewing" is *anakainoo*. *Ana* means "again and again." *Kainos* means "new in quality." The renewing of the mind means the constant improvement of the quality of our minds through the repetition of the teaching of the Word of God. Isaiah 28:10 tells us that God's plan is "order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there." We put promise upon promise, precept upon precept and we advance step by step by the renewing of our minds.

God's plan is not to change people by requiring them to wear certain clothes or talk certain ways. The plan is to have the Word taught, and wherever the Word is received, it will change the recipient from the inside out. When someone changes his activity by his own free will, as a response to the Word of God, there is genuine growth. That is the only kind of growth that counts. God's plan starts at salvation when we become new creatures by regeneration because of union with Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Then we move to Romans 12:2, to the renewing of the mind. The result will be that we will eventually fulfill Romans 6:4, walking in newness of life. If we renew the mind through consistent long-term study of the Word of God, we will find experiential newness of life; our life will have quality because our thinking has quality.

The purpose of this growth, Paul says in Romans 12:2, is to "prove" something. *Dokimazo* is an athletic word that means "to prove through testing." God has tests--trials, pressures, adversity, even prosperity--planned for every life. When are we going to present our body a living sacrifice? Every time we face a test. And what are we going to prove? What is called here the "good and acceptable and perfect" will of God. "Perfect," *teleios*, is a word that is used in the Bible for maturity. It means to be complete, to be without lack. Every time we are tested we have the chance to prove, by facing pressure and overcoming, that the will of God works in life.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus ... (Phil. 2:5)

"Have this attitude" is the present active imperative of the verb *phroneo*, which means "to think." This is a command to keep on thinking like Jesus Christ thought. The active voice tells us that we choose whether to do this or not. First Corinthians 2:16 says that the Bible is the mind of Christ. If we ever hope to think like Christ, we have to know and understand how He thought. This only comes through consistent study and application of the Word in the filling of the Holy Spirit. Being conformed to Christ begins with thinking.

Apart from study of the Word, we cannot know how or what to think, because the mind of Christ is totally opposed to all human perception and human logic. Paul illustrates this in the verses just before and just after his command to have the mind of Christ.

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4)

The Lord Jesus Christ treated every member of the human race as more important than Himself, and He was God in the flesh. He made people know that they were valuable by the way He treated them. His whole life was spent looking out for the interests of others. Mark tells us that Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), and all the gospel accounts bear witness to the fact that He served every day of His life on earth.

What a radical change it would work in society if we thought that way. Think what it would mean in your life and mine if 24 hours a day we were offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God in this way. What if we offered the encouragement, the consolation, the affection, the compassion of Christ to every one we came in contact with today? What if we put other people and their needs before ourselves? What if our attitude was that this other person's concerns are just as important as ours; his problems are just as pressing; his feelings matter as much?

If we had that attitude then every day would be a day of true worship, because we would be living every hour as a sacrifice to God, experiencing the very life of the person of Jesus Christ. But it can only happen one way: the mind has to gorge on the Word of God, the soul has to be saturated with the Word of God. As we feast on the Word day after day, the transformation slowly takes place, and it causes us to think and act like Jesus Christ thought and acted.

... who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:6-11)