



GROWTH

The Christian Life is different: harder, and easier. Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked — the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself, my own will shall become yours." — C.S. Lewis

Once we've experienced God's grace, we want to grow. In Philippians 3:10 the apostle Paul revealed his main passion in life: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings." In 2 Corinthians 5:14 he described how that motivated him: "For Christ's love compels us..." The Greek word for "compel" means to control, dominate, to hold in its grip. Paul never recovered from discovering the astonishing love of Jesus for him, such an unlikely and unworthy recipient. So it is for us. We don't want to stay the same. Something within us makes us want to grow, to pursue Jesus and to be more like Him. This theme of growth resonates throughout the New Testament:

- "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." - 1 Corinthians 3:6-7
- "What we're hoping for is that as your lives grow in faith, you'll play a part within our expanding work." - 1 Cor. 10:15
- "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." - Eph. 4:15
- "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." - 1 Peter 2:2
- "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." - 2 Peter 3:18

Sanctification: The Process of Progressive Spiritual Transformation

A redeeming encounter with Jesus leaves us changed people. But the initial change is just the beginning of more change – in fact, the start of a lifetime of change. As followers of Jesus we are no longer the people we used to be and yet we are not the people we will eventually be. One of Jesus' best friends, the apostle John, described it like this:

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

And so it appears that the goal of God in the changing of man is to make us like His Son. He is the model, the one to emulate. Without destroying our unique personalities, He is intent on transforming our fallen selves until we resemble Christ.

The Greek word for transformation is the basis for our English word "metamorphosis." We use it to describe the changing of a lowly caterpillar into a soaring butterfly. It occurs four times in the New Testament; twice in the Gospels (describing Jesus on the mount of transfiguration), once in Romans 12:2 ("*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*"), and once in 2 Corinthians 3:18. In this last verse Paul is writing to the Corinthians about the glory of the New Covenant. Unlike Moses, who wore a veil over his face, we have had a spiritual veil removed so that we can see

the "glory of God in the face of Christ." Paul uses that metaphor to describe our spiritual awakening, our God-given release from blindness. But he doesn't stop there. He continues to portray the process we have come to call "sanctification" – the progressive change that takes place over a Christian's lifetime.

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

We have "unveiled faces." And we simultaneously "reflect" and "behold" (the word for "reflect," translated, means both) the Lord's glory. As we do that, the Holy Spirit works on us and in us, so that a progressive "morphing" takes place. Lo and behold, often imperceptibly to us but often more visibly to others around us, the resemblance begins to take shape. The early Christians experienced this osmosis:

"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13)

It was apparent to others that they had been with Jesus. Perhaps it was their language or manners, but in some significant way their three-year association with Christ had begun to rub off in a way that others could notice.

John Ortberg, in his book The Life You've Always Wanted, writes:

"The little word morph has a long history. It comes from one of the richest Greek words in the NT. 'Morphoo' means 'the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person.' Paul used this word in his letter to the Galatians: 'until Christ is formed in you.' We are pregnant with possibilities of spiritual growth and moral beauty so great that they cannot be adequately described as anything less than the formation of Christ in our very lives.

The primary goal of spiritual life is human transformation. It is not making people sure they know where they're going after they die, or helping them have a richer interior life, or seeing that they have lots of information about the Bible. The first goal of spiritual life is the reclamation of the human race."

What's God's Part? What's My Part?

So – how does this happen? Is it automatic? If it were automatic, then wouldn't all Christians look the same, or at least be equally mature? And yet we're obviously not. So then, is it completely dependent on my spiritual efforts? That was the conclusion I came to early in my Christian life. I assumed that God had done all the work to get me to heaven, so now it was my job to serve Him and try to conform myself to what He wanted me to be. As you can imagine, that didn't last long. I soon sank into a no-win cycle of trial and error, the emphasis being on error. And my errors mounted up substantially, so that I felt the need to ratchet up my spiritual activity level to the breaking point. Studying the Bible, saying yes to every ministry opportunity (I hadn't yet learned that the need is not necessarily the call), sharing my faith, praying multiple times a day, working with middle school kids (OK, *you* find a tougher group!) until my brain turned to mush. All good things really, but I assumed God was standing by, evaluating my work like an Olympic judge. The only way to get higher scores was by increasing the degree of difficulty.

In His mercy, God soon brought people and literature into my life to help me discover what grace was all about. But a by-product of discovering grace was that I also began to study sanctification and soon noticed that it was a partnership, not a sole proprietorship. In regards to justification (becoming a Christian) I was *not* a partner with God. I was spiritually dead and unable to contribute anything to my salvation, except to receive it. But once reborn, my growth as a follower *was* a partnership. God's Holy Spirit had taken up residence in me, as He does in every believer. I cannot tell you how encouraging it was to realize that God was not watching from the sidelines, but fully participating with me in this process for spiritual growth. He was in there with me in the daily battle, my Lord and my comrade, my counselor and my helper.

I noticed that God was just as passionate about my spiritual growth as He was about my spiritual birth. I was heartened by the book of Philippians, perhaps Paul's most positive letter. In the first chapter he writes: "... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God started something in me which

He fully intends to finish. That's good news! One chapter later, there is an amazing couplet of verses which, for me anyway, put together the God's-part / my-part puzzle:

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Philippians 2:12-13)

What does Paul mean by "work out your salvation"? Doesn't that go against the idea of grace? One commentator explains:

The biblical concept of salvation needs to be understood in order to comprehend Paul's intent here. Salvation has many aspects, including a present one. Hence, "working out" salvation does not mean "working for" salvation, but making salvation operational. Justification must be followed by sanctification, by which the new life in Christ is consciously appropriated and demonstrated. "With fear and trembling" does not contradict the joyful spirit permeating this letter. Christian joy is the experience of every believer, but holy fear of God that trembles at the thought of sin is also the attitude of the careful Christian.

So, in verse 12, "work out your salvation" is my part. I am to exert effort to pursue Christ. The Christian life is not passive, although at the same time that I work I am also to rest in Him — knowing His gracious love for me. But look at the next verse – "It is God who works in you." To me, this spells out God's part. It says that God is working in me. He not only enables me to live the Christian life ("to act") but He also even gives me the desire to do so ("to will"). How gracious is that? He doesn't even assume that I'll have a non-stop desire to follow Him, so He supplies that as well. The same commentator continues: *"The Philippian Christians can carry out the exhortation of verse 12 because God himself produces in believers both the desire to live righteously and the effective energy to do so."*

So, how does sanctification actually take place? At the risk of over-simplifying things, let's divide this process into two halves: things we think and things we do.

Concepts: Things We Need to Know

Much of sanctification happens in our thought-life. Paul writes in Romans 12: *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* In a sense, our fallen minds need to be re-programmed to see the world as God sees it, to perceive life through a Biblical worldview. A worldview is the grid through which we understand reality and answer the questions: is there a God? What is He like? What is the nature and purpose of man? Where did the world and the cosmos come from? Where is history going? The Scriptures address and answer all of these questions, and the combined answers make up what we call a Biblical worldview.

Theology is the systematic treatment of many of these same questions. It is the gleaning from the entire Bible of truths (doctrines) that God has revealed through the Scriptures. A working knowledge of these basic doctrines provides a foundation for the renewing of our minds. Books like Know What You Believe by Paul Little can

provide a solid start for beginners. Theology deals with God's attributes, the person and work of Christ, the meaning of sin and salvation, the identity of a believer, the nature of evil, Satan, angels and demons, the purpose of the church, and the "things to come" the consummation of history.

While all of these truths have been meaningful to me, some have had more of an effect on my daily life than others. For instance, a major concept for me has been the realization of my identity in Christ. I had to learn to see myself as God sees me, to accept the truth about his work in me regardless of whether my feelings matched up with that image. Sanctification is not just learning facts; it is the process of "owning" those truths, of letting them sink in, becoming part of how I see and respond to life. It is not just knowing about God, but gradually getting to know Him personally. Paul knew that a growing, increasingly intimate relationship with God would radically alter the lives of the new Christians he worked so hard to help. He revealed to them his prayer for them in the first chapter of Ephesians:

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

Paul's desire was that the doctrines he had taught the Ephesians might find their way deep into their hearts, so that they instinctively applied Biblical truth to everyday situations. He wanted them to operate out of a personal relationship with God that was growing deeper all the time.

Practices: Things We Can Do

What can we do that will help us grow? Two of the greatest activities, loving others (groups and community) and serving others (gifts and mission) will be dealt with separately in later papers. So let's just focus on what we do as individuals.

Many of the actions that lead to spiritual growth have been called "spiritual disciplines." To begin with, it's important to remind ourselves that these activities can easily degenerate into mere religious duties which we mistakenly think will earn us our acceptance before God. In addition, we also can do them as a way to compete with other believers. This is precisely what Jesus warned against in the Sermon on the Mount: Matt 6:1, *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' (praying, giving, fasting) before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."*

Instead, these are things we can do, which the Spirit can energize and use to help us get to know God better. Our motive is always gratitude for His grace, never a vain hope that we do them "so that" He will love us more.

- **Prayer**

Jews certainly knew about prayer before Jesus came along. But what He added was the invitation to come before God as "Abba" — "Daddy" — in an intimate, loving relationship in which we can pour out whatever is on

our hearts without fear of retribution or cold indifference. In essence this is what David did in the Psalms, and what Jesus and the New Testament writers later emphasized.

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Because it is relational, there is no "right way" to pray. It can take many forms, from a structured method to a literal walk in the park. Prayer is talking to God, telling Him what's going on inside us, sharing struggles, asking for help. But prayer is also listening:

"The garden of our private worlds is cultivated not only when we draw apart for times of silence and solitude, but also when we begin, in that environment, to deliberately practice the discipline of listening. I have not met many who know how to listen to God. Busy people find it hard to learn how. Most Christians learned at an early age how to talk to God, but they did not learn to listen well. We listen every time we open the Scriptures and place ourselves at the feet of the inspired writers who unfold the mysteries of God. We listen when we sensitize ourselves to the proddings of God's indwelling Holy Spirit." — Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*

- **Bible study**

Because the Bible is alive, it is more than a book of facts. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures in our lives to hone us and cause us to grow.

"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

Therefore we need to expose ourselves to the Bible on a regular basis. How often and how much? That's up to us. But like healthy nutrition, a regular diet of personal Bible reading provides fresh insight and guidance to our daily lives.

- **Journaling**

Some people love to write, and may even find that writing their thoughts to God is easier than praying. It can be, in fact, a way to pray. Gordon MacDonald, in *Ordering your Private World*, writes about his practice of journaling:

"I am reminded that the Lord once had the Israelites save 'three quarts of manna' (Ex 16:33) so that they would have a tangible reminder of His constant care. My journal became my 'three quarts,' for in it I had all the testimony I needed to the faithfulness of God in my life. This reminding process, which a journal provides, is very significant. Today after twenty years of journal keeping, I have acquired a habit. Hardly a morning passes that I do not open the journal and record the things I hear God saying through my reading, meditation, and daily experience. When the journal opens, so does the ear of my heart. If God is going to speak, I am ready to listen."

- **Solitude**

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and prolific writer about

will run around begging for affirmation, for praise, for success. And then you're not free. Solitude is where spiritual ministry begins. That's where Jesus listened to God. That's where we listen to God."

- **Fasting**

Fasting is choosing to do without eating for a period of time in order to focus upon God. It is often coupled with praying for specific things. Again, it is not magic and it is not done with the thought that God will be more likely to answer our prayers if we suffer a bit. It is to deprive ourselves temporarily of immediate gratification and to realize our dependence upon Him.

- **Sabbath**

Although observing the Sabbath is not a New Testament command, it is still a spiritual practice that can help us. The whole original point of a Sabbath was to keep us from non-stop work, and to allow God to show us that He can help us get done in six days what we think will take seven. It is setting a day aside for relaxation, time with friends and family, allowing our brains and bodies to rest, to remember that God loves us and wants us to enjoy life. It means taking a break from everyday stress. The Westminster Catechism's first question – "What is the chief end of man?" – is answered by, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Taking a Sabbath break reminds us of that truth.

- **Meditation**

Learning spiritual truths in class, a book or by reading the Bible is great. Meditation takes it a step further. It means to set aside time to allow some of that truth to take root by dwelling on it. It may look like taking a walk and repeating a few memorized verses over and over, or picking them apart to see their hidden meaning, and taking time to allow deeper insights to come to us. Have you ever received an especially significant letter from someone you love? You probably spent the next few days delightedly obsessing over the meaning of each phrase, turning them over in your mind. That's meditation.

- **Music & the Arts**

What other practices have you found meaningful? God is the giver of our sense of creativity, and if you're an artist, perhaps you find you're most "alive" when you're listening to music, playing an instrument, painting, writing music, working with wood or writing a poem. Don't be afraid to bring your relationship with God into that part of your life. The lordship of Christ extends to all of life, not just a truncated "religious" section of our lives. Take the composer George Frederic Handel, for example. In the summer of 1741 Handel, at the peak of his musical prowess but depressed and in debt, set out to write The Messiah and finished it in an astonishing 24 days, rarely leaving his room and hardly stopping to eat. While writing the "Hallelujah Chorus," his servant discovered him with tears in his eyes. He exclaimed, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!"

The Goal: A Christ-Centered Life

The book of Proverbs describes the wise person as one who not only knows about God but has put truth into practice so that his life is full of "hokma" – Hebrew for the "skill of living." Wisdom is knowledge plus application, all within the context of knowing God. Proverbs chapter two portrays our relationship with God in the form of a father teaching his young son:

*My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you,
turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding,
and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.*

In the New Testament the goal of spiritual transformation is "Christlikeness." The Holy Spirit is working in us, filling us, producing spiritual results: *"... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*

That's where we're headed, as a church body and as individuals:

"...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 fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13)

Recommended Reading

- Renovation of the Heart, by Dallas Willard
- Invitation to a Journey, by Robert Mulholland
- Know What You Believe, by Paul Little
- The Life You've Always Wanted, by John Ortberg
- Living by the Book, by Howard Hendricks
- Knowledge of the Holy, by A.W. Tozer
- Discipleship Essentials, by Greg Ogden
- The Fight, by John White
- Growing in Grace, by Bob George