

Are you Growing in Grace?

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Growth is one of the surest signs of healthy life. It is so, whether in the vegetable or animal kingdom, nor is it otherwise in the realm of grace. Growth, therefore, we expect to see in every Christian. In Nature, at a certain point, growth stops and decay sets in, but with the believer it should continue all his earthly days.

No sensible person expects the convert of yesterday to be anything but a babe. But we do not expect him to remain a babe. With a keen appetite for wholesome spiritual food, a good digestion, plenty of Heaven's fresh air and exercise, he is bound to grow. And the scripture, "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3: 18), applies to every one of us.

WHAT IS GROWTH?

Growth has no direct connection with age. — A man may be white with years, and have passed many a milestone since his conversion, and yet be spiritually a stunted child. Some of the Hebrew believers were like this. They were stumbling over the Christian alphabet when they should have been teachers, and needing milk when they should have been fit for strong meat. (See Heb. 5: 12-14).

Growth is not necessarily connected with what we do. — There may be much earnestness and activity, yet no growth. The Ephesian Christians sadly exemplified this in their later years. When the Apostle Paul wrote his epistle to them, they were like a tree planted by rivers of waters, green and vigorous; but when the Lord Jesus addressed them through His servant John, though recognizing their *works, labour, and patience*, He had to say, "Thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from whence *thou art fallen*." The top shoot of the fair young tree had been nipped by frost, and growth was stopped. (See Rev. 2: 1-7).

Growth does not even depend upon what we know. — Our mental development may far outstrip our spiritual. An "infant prodigy," whatever he may be in musical or educational circles, is a pitiable object in the Christian sphere, and comes to a bad end. The novice, if capable of seizing abstractions, may speedily grasp much truth in his mind, but let him not assume that he has *therefore* become a giant and able to instruct his grandfather.

Under this delusion some of the Corinthian believers fell. They were enriched in "all knowledge"

(1 Cor. 1: 5); they assumed to be wise (1 Cor. 3: 18); they all attempted to be teachers (1 Cor. 14: 26); they even began to let their minds run riot with the cardinal truth of resurrection (1 Cor. 15: 12, 35). As a matter of fact, they were ignorant (1 Cor. 6: 2, 3, 9, 15, 19; 1 Cor. 8: 2; 1 Cor. 10: 1; 1 Cor. 12: 1; 1 Cor. 14: 38; 1 Cor. 15: 36), fleshly and but babes (1 Cor. 3: 1-3). They used their "knowledge" to the damage of some of their brethren (1 Cor. 8: 11). Such knowledge only puffs up. Love builds up (1 Cor. 8: 1).

Growth therefore is altogether a question of what we are. — The very epistle that exhorts us to "grow in grace" opens with a fine statement of what it really is. It runs thus: — "Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity" (or *love*) (2 Peter 1: 5-7).

With faith we all have started. But to it virtue or courage must be added, if it is to count for much. Courage needs to be controlled by knowledge. Knowledge to be tempered with moderation. Moderation to develop into patience (or endurance). Endurance begets godliness. Godliness produces and develops brotherly kindness. Love, *Divine Love*, crowns the whole and welds all together in the heart of the believer.

These things, notice, are to be "*in us and abound*" (2 Peter 1: 8). They are not to be put on as a man puts on a coat, but to be produced inwardly in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that they become part and parcel of ourselves.

The Apostle Peter was really desiring that the features of the beautiful life of Christ should be reproduced in these believers.

Growth, then, is a question of character. As we grow we are moulded more and more into conformity to CHRIST.

ARE YOU GROWING?

Ask yourself, then: Is this kind of thing going on with me? Is there beneath my Christian activity and increase of Bible knowledge a sturdy development of Christian character?" Having asked, answer with candour and great care.

In thus doing, however, a danger lurks. While nothing is so helpful as honest self-judgment before God, nothing is more harmful than allowing this necessary inspection to degenerate into self-occupation.

Beware of getting your thoughts morbidly centred upon yourself.

Three children, let us suppose, have little gardens prettily marked out in their father's grounds. How very different they look! In this one the weeds grow rank and long, the flowers few and feeble. No traces of a trowel and rake and watering-pot! In the second all is tidy, the weeds kept well down, and the flowers, if not high-class, are healthy; while the third shows marks of much labour. Indeed, it is almost painfully tidy, but every flower is either drooping or dead. How easy it is from the state of the gardens to divine the character of the children! And if the careless, go-as-you-please style of number one is to be deplored, the feverish anxiety which led number three to continually pull up one and another of the plants to see how the roots were getting on is almost as disastrous from a practical point of view.

Avoid both extremes. May the good Lord deliver you from that careless and easy-going kind of

religion which never allows you to honestly ask yourself the question: "Am I *really* growing in grace?" for fear of being disturbed; and also from the morbid self-occupation which leads YOU to be always asking yourself that question, and everlastingly tugging up everything in your poor heart by the roots in the endeavour to answer it.

Hit the happy mean by facing the question with the heart in the sunshine of the love of Jesus, and if driven to the conclusion that your growth is but small, let it spur you cheerfully on to know more of Christ.

IN WHAT DO WE GROW?

It is important to remember that as believers we stand in the grace (or favour) of God (see Rom. 5: 2), and hence it is we are told by the Apostle Peter to "grow in *grace*."

Grace, then, is the soil in which the believer is planted. Not *the world*, though if one judged by the ways of some Christians, one might almost think so. Though all believers stand in grace, many so surround themselves with a worldly atmosphere that all progress is stopped.

It is very easy for us to abjure the world in the abstract, whilst heavily indulging in its pleasures in detail.

To illustrate this. Some time ago a prayer meeting was being held. Considerable fervour was manifested in the meeting. A man commenced to call upon God. In earnest tones he cried: "Lord, save us from the world!"

"Amen! Amen!" rose in loud chorus from all parts of the building.

A moment's pause, then: —

"Lord, save us from the tobacco!"

Dead and ominous silence! It seemed to kill the meeting.

You may not approve of praying in this fashion, but it shows how easy it is to pray to be preserved from the world in the abstract and to cherish it in detail.

Solomon's vines, remember, were nipped and spoiled by the "little foxes" (Cant. 2: 15). There were plenty of them, and being small, they crept in without attracting much attention.

Many Christians, too, suffer from living in an atmosphere of *law*. They live and move, read and pray, serve and worship, by rule. No one can expect to grow if encased in cast iron!

How sweet is the liberty that grace gives! *Liberty*, I say, and not license. For the grace that brings salvation also *teaches* "that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2: 12).

Let us strike our roots deep down into grace. Let us bask in its sunshine. Oh! the humbling, soul-subduing effect of knowing that, in spite of all we find in ourselves, the sweet and perfect favour of God rests upon us because of Christ, and nothing can separate us "from the love of God which is in" — not ourselves but — "Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 39).

HOW DO WE GROW?

Of late, a good deal has been said in public about the poor physique of thousands of children

attending school. The practical question is, What is to be done? Will the case be met by giving them plenty to do in the way of exercise and activity? No, they have not the stamina or vigour for much of that. Shall we include some health instruction in the school studies, and teach them how the human body grows, adding cell to cell and tissue to tissue, the value of different kinds of food, and the laws governing the process of digestion?

Six years of such studies will not add as many inches to their stature as a six months' course of good feeding — substantial meals of suitable food, four times a day and seven days a week!

If you would grow, then, select good spiritual food. *Good food*, remember. Not novels, light literature, or other worldly rubbish. And *digest* it. Take time to meditate and turn things over in your mind. When the ox chews the cud it generally lies down. In the same way spiritual digestion is greatly favoured by a little quiet, with the knees bent in prayer.

The food of the Christian is in one word — CHRIST — "increasing in (or 'by,' see margin R.V.) the knowledge of God " (Col. 1: 10) — and since it is in Christ that God is known to us Peter puts it, "Grow in grace and *in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*"

It is good to know *about* Him, and everything that helps us in this direction is profitable, but the point of supreme importance is to know the Lord Jesus Christ Himself; to enjoy that holy intimacy which is the fruit of daily living and walking in His presence. Even here upon earth to be

"Close to His trusted side

In fellowship divine."

Then bit by bit we shall discover His many-sided glories, and appreciate the various characters in which He stands related to us. In the following lines we shall try to suggest a few of them.

The beginning of our acquaintance with Jesus is as

SAVIOUR, — TO DELIVER.

To the anxious sinner, burdened with guilt, groaning under sin, and trembling before death and judgment, Jesus stands forth as Saviour. He has grappled with sin; He has died and is risen again. How perfect and attractive He is! No wonder that the newly-pardoned sinner cares for no one and nothing else.

Can you look back to a moment when you tasted the joy of salvation, as Israel did when on the further shore of the Red Sea's judgment flood they sang, saying, "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously . . . and He is become my salvation"? (Ex. 15: 1, 2). Or as it was with Israel centuries later, when David met Goliath of Gath, and in the name of Jehovah wrought deliverance? Then the awful tension and suspense was ended. A mighty thrill ran through the watching hosts, "and the men of Israel and of Judah arose, and shouted." (1 Sam. 17: 52).

It was so with us. We have been delivered. Our days of mourning and suspense are over. The victory is won, and Jesus lives! And though perhaps years have rolled away since first we knew Him thus, the thrill of that moment is in our hearts to-day

We do not advance far before we see the same Jesus in another character. He is

LORD, — TO COMMAND.

The Gospel, of course, presents Him to us as Lord (2 Cor. 4: 5). We not only believe with the heart unto righteousness, but also confess Him as Lord with the mouth unto salvation (Rom. 10: 9, 10). But some little time passes ere we realize what this means.

Jesus is in the place of authority. It is His to command, ours to gladly obey, and that means *the surrender of our wills to His*.

The conversion of the Apostle Paul was an ideal one. He reached the point of surrender very speedily (see Acts 9: 5, 6). While in the dust of the road to Damascus he acknowledged Jesus as his Lord, and his whole life was transformed. Most of us lag far behind him. Still, to that point all of us have to come.

We were talking to a Christian young man the other day, and during our conversation he referred several times to "the old days," when he was a worldly, easy-going believer, having just a languid interest in the things of God. He said, "I really believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins, and had I died I am sure I should have gone to heaven."

Still, they were "the old days," for a new day had dawned with the discovery that Jesus was his Lord, a Master to live for and to serve. Passing under this new management a great alteration took place. He was a different man.

Has this new day dawned in *your* history? If not, may it speedily come! It lies at the very beginning of Christian growth.

One of the first results of a hearty acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ is that the convert gets plunged into a good bit of trouble and soul exercise, since his very efforts to do the will of his newly found Master bring him into conflict with his own will.

Three things at least have to be learned.

First, the true character of the flesh (i.e., the old evil nature still within us), hopelessly bad. "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7: 18). If "*no good thing*," then not even a *good* desire is to be found there. Yet how long it takes most of us to abandon all expectation of good or even improvement from within.

Second, the terrible power of the flesh. Such power that even the fact of being born again, and therefore possessing a new nature, does not *of itself* enable us to overcome. We find a man saying, "The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7: 19). He desired the good, proving the existence of the new nature within him; yet such was the power of the old that it overpowered the new, bringing him into captivity (Rom. 7: 23), and making him a thoroughly wretched man (Rom. 7: 24).

Have you never started out to live, as you supposed, a valiant Christian life for the Lord, only to find yourself defeated, not by giant foes without, but by the traitor "flesh" within?

This, then, is the lesson you are learning.

Thirdly, what God has done as regards the flesh in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8: 3). What a relief it is to know this! God now treats the flesh as a condemned thing, and has done with it. It just remains for us to fall into line with God, and in our turn to treat it as a condemned thing, to be done with. This we *can* do, inasmuch as having believed in Jesus we have received the Holy Spirit, the

new power, and He is more than a match for the power of the flesh.

Led by the Holy Spirit, we lift our eyes to heaven, and Jesus now becomes to us

AN OBJECT, — TO CONTROL.

And this is the real secret of the believer's practical deliverance from the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Satan, the wily adversary and accuser, busies himself in attacking the *faith* of the saints (see 2 Cor. 11: 3; 1 Thess. 3: 5; 1 Peter 5: 9), and hence to meet him the shield of faith is needed (Eph. 6: 16).

The flesh supplies us with all those baser desires, which each of us knows too well, as also with every other desire not in accordance with the will of God.

The world — the gigantic system around us, which Satan and man have engineered between them in the vain hope of making the latter happy and contented without God — like Bunyan's great "Vanity Fair," contains within itself attractions suitable to every taste and temperament, and all appealing to the lusts of the flesh within.

Though volumes could well be written as to the believer's deliverance from this threefold enemy, and the way of it, that deliverance itself is simply and sweetly enjoyed by those who, having learnt enough of the world and self to be sick of both, turn to Jesus and find in Him —

". . . The Object bright and fair
To fill and satisfy the heart."

Is Jesus *this* to your soul — an Object to love and live for? Paul said, "the law [or control] of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law [or control] of sin and death" (Rom. 8: 2).

A striking illustration of the power of an object to control occurred when the first military airship made a trial trip round London. During the brief hour that it hovered over the Metropolis it became the object of a million pair of eyes. Everything else was forgotten. The latest fashions lost their attraction, shops were deserted, dinners left to get cold. 'line man of business dropped his pen and the student his books. Everybody stopped and gazed at this new object in the sky, and for the moment got clean delivered from their ordinary life.

It was the novelty of the thing that attracted, however. Not so with Jesus. He who has loved Him longest and known Him best most feels His blessed and permanent attractions. Summed up in one word, it is all centred in His mighty and eternal LOVE. Just as a powerful magnet will extricate a needle from a heap of sawdust, the magnetic love of Jesus will deliver a soul from any amount of worldly and fleshly rubbish. May God bring both readers and writer under its power increasingly.

If all this is to be kept up, we shall know and appreciate the Lord Jesus in another character, viz.,
as

HIGH PRIEST, — TO SUSTAIN.

There are a good many Christians about who want to be more devoted, or to live "the higher life." But though their desires are good, their circumstances are trying, and their performance poor. Are you one of them?

Possibly you are acquainted with the Epistle to the Hebrews, and therefore know well that Jesus is your great High Priest in heaven (Hebrews 4: 14), but the question is, Do you really and practically know Him as your great High Priest who sustains your soul day by day, amidst the many trials and difficulties of life?

Only those whose faces are set in the right direction need expect the help of the Priest. To help a man on the wrong road is no real help at all. Hence the careless, worldly-minded believer will not get the help of the Priest; he needs the services of Jesus as Advocate to touch his conscience and put him right. The earnest-minded believer who heartily acknowledges Jesus as Lord, and loves Him as Object, will both need it and get it, the result being not only that he is carried safely on to heaven by and by, but also carried into the holiest (*i.e.*, the consciously realized presence of God) *now* (Heb. 10: 19-22).

Nothing that can be said on the subject, however, will give such a sense of the grace and power of Jesus as our High Priest, as a little practical experience, gained in turning to Him in moments of difficulty and need. So take good heed to the exhortation: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4: 16).

All this will teach us to look joyfully up to the Lord Jesus as

THE HEAD, — TO DIRECT.

Christ is the Head of the Church, even as the husband is the head of the wife (Eph. 5: 23).

From Him, too, as Head all nourishment and supply for His body comes (Eph. 4: 15, 16).

Wisdom, direction, and nourishment are everyday needs, and the supply of them is not in ourselves, but in Him. As Head He is the overflowing source of all. To "hold the Head" (Col. 2: 19), is to appreciate and cleave to Him as such, and thus to really find in Him that which makes us happily independent of man's wisdom in the way of rationalism (Col. 2: 8), and his religion in the way of ritualism (Col. 2: 20-23).

Christ is everything, and thus He becomes everything to the believer's heart. We look outside Him for nothing.

One word of warning. Do not think that each one of these steps in the knowledge of Christ stands alone. They are closely connected, and often merge into one another in the believer's history. The great end is that we may be thoroughly established; no longer children, but full grown men, Christ being everything to us.