

# Spiritual Growth 1. Introduction

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## Transcript

### Spiritual Growth

#### 1. Introduction

The name which is usually given to our subject by Christian writers is that of "Growth in Grace" which is a scriptural expression, being found 2 Peter 3:18. But it appears to us that, strictly speaking, growing in grace has reference to but a single aspect or branch of our theme: "that your love may abound yet more and more" (Phil. 1:9) treats of another aspect, and "your faith groweth exceedingly" (2 Thess. 1:3), with yet another. It seems then that "spiritual growth" is a more comprehensive and inclusive term and more accurately covers that most important and desirable attainment: "may grow up into him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Let it not be thought from this that we have selected our title in a captious spirit or because we are striving after originality. Not so: we have no criticism to make against those who may prefer some other appellation. We have chosen this simply because it seems more fitly and fully to describe the ground which we hope to cover. Our readers understand clearly what is connoted by "physical growth" or "mental growth," nor should "spiritual growth" be any the less intelligible. This Subject Is a Deeply Important One First, that we should seek to understand aright the Spirit's teaching on this subject. There seems to be comparatively few who do so, and the consequence is that the Lord is robbed of much of the praise which is His due, while many of His people suffer much needless distress. Because so many Christians walk more by sense than by faith, measuring themselves by their feelings and moods rather than by the Word, their peace of mind is greatly destroyed and their joy of heart much decreased. Not a few saints are seriously the losers through misapprehensions upon this subject. Scriptural knowledge is essential if we are better to understand ourselves and diagnose more accurately our spiritual case. Many exercised souls form an erroneous opinion of themselves because of failure at this very point. Surely it is a matter of great practical moment that we should be able to judge aright of our spiritual progress or retrogression that we may not flatter ourselves on the one hand or unduly depreciate ourselves on the other. Some are tempted in one direction, some in the other—depending partly on their personal temperament and partly on the kind of teaching they have received. Many are inclined to think more highly of themselves than they ought, and because they have obtained considerably increased intellectual knowledge of the truth imagine they have made a proportionate spiritual growth. But others with weaker memories and who acquire a mental grasp of things more slowly, suppose this to signify a lack of spirituality. Unless our thoughts about spiritual growth be formed by the Word of God we are certain to err and jump to a wrong conclusion. As it is with our bodies, so it is with our souls. Some suppose they are healthy while they are suffering from an insidious disease; whereas others imagine

themselves to be ill when in fact they are hale and sound. Divine revelation and not human imagination ought to be our guide in determining whether or not we be "babes, young men, or fathers"—and our natural age has nothing to do with it. It is deeply important that our views should be rightly formed, not only that we may be able to ascertain our own spiritual stature, but also that of our fellow Christians. If I long to be made a help and blessing to them, then obviously I must be capable of deciding whether they are in a healthy or unhealthy condition. Or, if I desire spiritual counsel and assistance, then I will meet with disappointment unless I know to whom to go. How can I regulate my course and suit my converse with the saints I contact if I am at a loss to gauge their religious caliber? God has not left us to our own erring judgment in this matter, but has supplied rules to guide us. To mention but one other reason which indicates the importance of our subject: unless I can ascertain wherein I have been enabled to make spiritual progress and wherein I have failed, how can I know what to pray for; and unless I can perceive the same about my brethren how can I intelligently ask for the supply of what they most need? Our Subject Is a Very Mysterious One Physical growth is beyond human comprehension. We know something of what is essential to it, and the thing itself may be discovered, but the operation and process is hidden from us: "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child, even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all" (Eccl. 11:5). How much more so must spiritual growth be incomprehensible. The beginning of our spiritual life is shrouded in mystery (John 3:8), and to a considerable extent this is true also of its development. God's workings in the soul are secret, indiscernible to the eye of carnal reason and imperceptible to our senses. "The things of God knoweth no man" save to whom the Spirit is pleased to reveal them (1 Cor. 2:11, 12). If we know so little about ourselves and the operation of our faculties in connection with natural things, how much less competent are we to comprehend ourselves and our graces in connection with that which is supernatural. The "new creature" is from above, whereof our natural reason has no acquaintance: it is a supernatural product and can only be known by supernatural revelation. In like manner, the spiritual life received at the new birth thrives as to its degrees, unperceived by our senses. A child, by weighing and measuring himself, may discover that he has grown, yet he was not conscious of the process while growing. So it is with the new man: it is "renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16) yet in such a hidden way that the renewing itself is not felt, though its effects become apparent. Thus there is no good reason to be disheartened because we do not feel that any progress is being made or to conclude there is no advance because such feeling is absent. "There are some of the Lord's people in whom the essence and reality of holiness dwell who do not perceive in themselves any spiritual growth. It should therefore be remembered that there is a real growth in grace where it is not perceived. We should judge of it not by what we experience of it in ourselves, but by the Word. It is a subject for faith to be exercised on" (S. F. Pierce). If we desire the pure "milk of the Word" and feed thereon, then we must not doubt that we duly "grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:3). To quote again from Pierce: "Spiritual growth is a mystery and is more evident in some than in others. The more the Holy Spirit shines upon the mind and puts forth His lifegiving influences in the heart, so much the more sin is seen, felt and loathed as the greatest of all evils. And this is an evidence of spiritual growth, namely, to hate sin as sin and to abhor it on account of its contrariety to the nature of God. The quick perception and insight which we have of inherent sin, and our feeling of it, so as to look on ourselves as most vile, to renounce ourselves and all that we can do for ourselves, and to look wholly and immediately to Christ for relief and strength are growth in grace, and a most certain evidence of it." How little is the natural man capable of understanding that! Having no experience of the same it sounds to him like a doleful delusion. And how the believer needs to beg God to teach him the truth about this! As we know nothing whatever about the new birth save what God has revealed in His Word, so we can form no correct comprehension about spiritual growth except from the same source. Our Subject Is Also a Difficult One

This is due in part to Satan's having confused the issue by inventing such plausible imitations that multitudes are deceived thereby, and knowing this the conscientious soul is troubled. Under certain influences and from various motives people are induced suddenly and radically to reform their lives; and their absence from the grosser forms of sin accompanied by a zealous performance of the common duties of religion is often mistaken for genuine conversion and progress in the Christian life. These are the "tares" which so closely resemble the "wheat" that they are often indistinguishable until the harvest. Moreover, there is a work of the law, quite distinct from the saving effects wrought by the gospel, which in its fruits both external and internal cannot be distinguished from a work of grace except by the light of Scripture and the teaching of the Spirit. The terrors of the law have come in power to the conscience of many a one, producing poignant convictions of sin and horrors of the wrath to come, issuing in much activity in the works of righteousness, but resulting in no faith in Christ, and no love for Him. Again: spiritual progress is difficult to discern because growth in grace is often not nearly so apparent as first conversion. In many cases conversion is a radical experience of which we are personally conscious at the time and of which a vivid memory remains with us. It is marked by revolutionary change in our life. It was when we were relieved of the intolerable burden of guilt and the peace of God which passeth all understanding possessed our souls. It was being brought out of the awful and total spiritual darkness of nature into God's marvellous light, whereas spiritual growth is but the enjoying further degrees of that light. It was that tremendous change from having no grace at all to the beginnings of grace within us, whereas that which follows is the receiving of additions of grace. It was a spiritual resurrection, a being brought from death unto life, but the subsequent experience is only renewings of the life then received. For Joseph suddenly to be translated out of prison to sit upon the throne of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, would affect him far more powerfully than to have any new kingdoms added to him later, such as Alexander had. At first everything in the spiritual life is new to the Christian; later he learns more perfectly what was then discovered to him, yet the effect made is not so perceptible and entrancing. Further: the spiritual life or nature communicated at regeneration is not the only thing in the Christian: the principle of sin still remains in the soul after the principle of grace as been imparted. Those two principles are at direct variance with each other, engaged in a ceaseless warfare as long as the saint is left in this world. "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). That fearful conflict is apt to confuse the issue in the mind of its subject; yea, it is certain to lead the believer to draw a false inference from it unless he clearly apprehends the teaching of Scripture thereon. The discovery of so much opposition within, the thwarting of his aspirations and endeavors, his felt inability to wage the warfare successfully, makes him seriously to doubt whether holiness has been imparted to his heart. The ragings of indwelling sin, the discovery of unsuspected corruptions, the consciousness of unbelief, the defeats experienced, all appear to give the lie direct to any spiritual progress. That presents an acute problem to a conscientious soul. Our Subject Is Both a Complex and Comprehensive One By this we mean that this is a tree with many branches, which bears a different manner of fruits according to the season. It is a subject into which various elements enter, one that needs to be viewed from many angles. Spiritual growth is both upward and downward, and it is both inward and outward. An increased knowledge of God leads to an increased knowledge of self, and as one results in higher adoration of its Object, the other brings deeper humiliation in its subject. These issue in more and more inward denials of self and abounding more and more outwardly in good works. Yet this spiritual growth needs to be most carefully stated lest we repudiate the completeness of regeneration. In the strictest sense, spiritual growth consists of the Spirit's drawing out what He wrought in the soul when He quickened it. When a babe is born into this world it is complete in parts though not in development: no new members can be added to its body nor any additional faculties to its mind. There is a

growth of the natural child, a development of its members an expansion of its faculties with a fuller expression and clearer manifestation of the latter, but nothing more. The analogy holds good with a babe in Christ. "Though there are innumerable circumstantial differences in the cases and experience of the called people of God, and though there is a growth suited to them, considered as 'babes, young men and fathers,' yet there is but one common life in the various stages and degrees of the same life carried on to its perfection by the Holy Spirit until it issues in glory eternal. The work of God the Spirit in regeneration is eternally complete. It admits of no increase nor decrease. It is one and the same in all believers. There will not be the least addition to it in Heaven: not one grace, holy affection, desire or disposition then, which is not in it now. The whole of the Spirit's work therefore from the moment of regeneration to our glorification is to draw out those graces into act and exercise which He hath wrought within us. And though one believer may abound in the fruits of righteousness more than another, yet there is not one of them more regenerated than another." (S. E. Pierce) The complexity of our subject is due in part to both the Divine and the human elements entering into it, and who is competent to explain or set forth their meeting-point! Yet the analogy supplied from the physical realm again affords us some help. Absolutely considered, all growth is due to the Divine operations, yet relatively there are certain conditions which we must meet or there will be no growth—to name no other, the partaking of suitable food is an essential prerequisite; nevertheless that will not nourish unless God be pleased to bless the same. To insist that there are certain conditions which we must meet, certain means which we must use in our spiritual progress is not to divide the honors with God, but is simply pointing out the order He has established and the connection He has appointed between one thing and another. In like manner there are certain hindrances which we must avoid or growth will inevitably be arrested and spiritual progress retarded. Nor does that imply that we are thwarting God, but only disregarding His warnings and paying the penalty of breaking those laws which He has instituted. The Difficulty of Expounding Our Subject The very complexity of our subject increases the difficulty before the one attempting to expound it, for as is the case with so many other problems presented to our limited intelligence, it involves the matter of seeking to preserve a due balance between the Divine and the human elements. The operations of Divine grace and the discharge of our responsibility must each be insisted upon, and the concurring of the latter with the former, as well as the superabounding of the former over the latter must be proportionately set forth. In like manner our contemplation of spiritual growth upward must not be allowed to crowd out that of our growth downward, nor must our deeper loathing of self be suffered to hinder an increasing living upon Christ. The more sensible we are of our emptiness the more we must draw upon His fulness. Nor is our task rendered easier when we remember what we write will fall into the hands of very different types of readers who sit under varied kinds of ministry—the one needing emphasis upon a different note from another. That there is such a thing as spiritual growth is abundantly clear from the Scriptures. In addition to the passages alluded to in the opening paragraph we may quote the following. "They go from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7). "The path of the just is as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18). "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord" (Hos. 6:3). "But unto you that fear the Lord shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings, and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall" (Mal. 4:2). "And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16). "Every branch in me that beareth fruit he purgeth it that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:2). "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). "Increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). "As ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye abound more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1). "He giveth more grace" (James 4:6). The above list might be extended considerably but sufficient references have been given to show that not only is such a thing as spiritual growth clearly revealed in the

Scriptures, but that it is given a prominent place therein. Let the reader duly observe the variety of expressions which are employed by the Spirit to set forth this progress or development—thereby preserving us from too circumscribed a conception by showing us the many-sidedness of the same. Some of them relate to what is internal, others to what is external. Some of them describe the Divine operations, others the necessary acts and exercises of the Christian. Some of them make mention of increased light and knowledge, others of increased grace and strength, and yet others of increased conformity to Christ and fruitfulness. It is thus that the Holy Spirit has preserved the balance and it is by our carefully noting the same that we shall be kept from a narrow and one-sided idea of what spiritual growth consists. If due attention be paid to this varied description we shall be kept from painful mistakes, and the better enabled to test or measure ourselves and discover what spiritual stature we have attained unto. This is an intensely practical subject. From what has been pointed out in the last few paragraphs it will be seen that this is an intensely practical subject. It is no small matter that we should be able to arrive at the clear apprehension of what spiritual growth actually consists of, and thereby be delivered from mistaking it for mere fantasy. If there be conditions which we have to comply with in order to the making of progress, it is most desirable that we should acquaint ourselves with the same and then translate such knowledge into prayer. If God has appointed certain means and aids, the sooner we learn what they are and make diligent use of them the better for us. And if there be other things which act as deterrents and are inimical to our welfare, the more we are placed upon our guard the less likely we are to be hindered by them. And if Christian growth has many sides to it this should govern our thinking and acting thereon, that we may strive after a fitly-proportioned and well-rounded Christian character, and grow up into Christ not merely in one or two respects but "in all things" that our development may be uniform and symmetrical.

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