



GROWING UP IN CHRIST

QUEST LESSON D-8

The Problem: How does a newborn Christian grow spiritually? Observation reveals that some new Christians grow to become strong, immovable disciples of Jesus. Others retain their faith for a short time and then slip back into the kind of life they once knew. What makes some people grow dramatically so that what they become is so different from what they were, that we wonder if they are really the same people?

A young man who was a champion boxer lived to please himself. Since he had plenty of money, he wasted it and his time in partying and carousing. Then he heard the Gospel and responded to the love of Christ. His life was remarkably changed, but people wondered how long the change would last. Instead of going back to his old habits, he grew stronger and stronger in Christ. He became a very successful evangelist and won hundreds of people to Jesus.

A young lady in high school became a very heavy drug user. There wasn't much that the world did that she did not do. Her health began to fail very seriously and she wondered what the future had to offer. She began listening to radio preachers and soon turned to the study of the Scriptures. The truths of the Bible led her to Jesus Christ and she experienced the new birth. She was determined to make something worthwhile of her life. It almost seemed that there was no hope for her. But the more she prayed and read the Bible, trusting in Christ to heal her and give her power to overcome, the stronger she became. Her health improved, and her mind grew stronger. In a few years when she told her story, people marveled that such a lovely, healthy young lady could ever have had the problems she described. Jesus Christ completely transformed her life, and she grew into a mature Christian.

When the Apostle John first became a follower of Jesus, he and his brother were known as "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). They were confident, loud, intolerant, ambitious young men who were very anxious to be important in the eyes of others. On one occasion, when Jesus was explaining how God wants us to love and care for children, John informed Him that he and others had come across a man who was casting out devils in Christ's name. John added, "We forbade him, because he followeth not us" (Mark 9:38). Jesus gently corrected his mistake. On another occasion, Jesus and the disciples were passing through Samaria on the way to Jerusalem. They wanted to find lodging in a Samaritan village, but the prejudice of the Samaritans against Jews led them to refuse accommodation. James and John were very angry. They said, "Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?" (Luke 9:54). Jesus rebuked them. He had come to save not to destroy.

As John associated with Jesus, he became more gentle, more patient, a genuinely humble, loving Christian. In fact, he became known as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 21:7, 20, 24). What produced the change? Judas associated with the same Lord, but he became more selfish, more political, and more greedy. John drew ever closer to Christ and became a genuinely sanctified man. What is the secret of Christian growth? How does it happen? Why do some people become sweeter and more Christlike and others less so?

Let us turn to the Scriptures for the answers.

Objectives

First, we note the fact that it is God's will for new-born Christians to grow spiritually.

Second, we learn that it is life from God that produces spiritual growth.

Third, it will become clear that our efforts to make ourselves better people are not enough. Only a developing friendship with Jesus will make us the people he wants us to be.

Fourth, we shall see the importance of daily devotions.

Fifth, we discover how Christ progressively changes our lives, so that, as John did, we become like Him in character.

I. New-Born Christians Are To Grow Spiritually

The Bible likens new believers to babes, who grow naturally when given the right kind of nourishment and care. At first, the food is light and easy to digest. As they become stronger, the food becomes heavier, adapted to their new level of growth.

The Word

1. To what does Peter liken the spiritual growth of new believers? 1 Peter 2:2.
2. What kind of spiritual food is necessary for those who are mature in the faith? Hebrews 5:13 – 6:1
3. Into what experience does the Christian grow? Ephesians 4:15-16; 2 Peter 3:18,
4. To what may the mature Christian be likened? Isaiah 61:3.

Explanation: It is no disgrace to be a babe in Christ. Quite the contrary, to be a newly born-again Christian is a truly beautiful state to be in. Everyone loves a baby with its lovely white skin, it's perfectly formed body, and it's totally trusting dependence upon its mother. But no one would want that little one to stay like that for very long. We expect to see growth in our children, and we do all we can to encourage it. That is the way it is in the spiritual realm. At first, the new believer needs the simple truths of the word so that he will not be overcome with spiritual indigestion. In fact, jamming heavy theological truth down his throat all at once might choke him off completely. But as time goes on, and his understanding grows, he craves to know more and more of God's truth as taught in the scriptures. Then he digs more deeply and searches more diligently. And the result is that he grows more and more mature in Christ. He grows in love, in grace (power), in knowledge. He reflects the character of Jesus and becomes so staunch in the faith that the Bible likens him to "a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" (Psalm 1:3).

Relevance: Hearty congratulations if you are a newly born Christian! And welcome to the fellowship of believers around the world! Now you have the thrill of growing stronger in Christ as you pray, study, and witness for Him. Don't make the mistake of looking to self or to other people. God is not responsible for the weaknesses of His professed people! Look to the Lord as you did when you first found Him, and nothing will be able to separate you from the love of Christ (See Romans 8:35-39).

II. Life From God Produces Spiritual Growth

The Bible constantly compares the natural world with the spiritual world. As nature depends on sunshine and rain, which God provides bountifully, so Christian believers must depend on the spiritual nourishment that flows so generously from His heart of love.

The Word

5. What lesson from the natural world explains our dependence on God for spiritual growth? Mark 4:26-29; (compare Hosea 14:5-7).
6. Why is God likened to the sun? Psalm 84:11; 27:1; 36:9.
7. To what other natural resource may spiritual life from God be likened? Psalm 72:6.
8. Of what kind of bread must we partake to grow spiritually? John 6:33.

Explanation: Jesus likened the Kingdom of heaven to seeds being planted, germinating, and growing up into healthy fruit-producing plants. The farmer does not know how it happens because God produces the growth. Man does all he can to cooperate with divine agencies, but, in the final analysis, he knows that whether he will receive an abundant harvest depends on God's blessing. So it is in our spiritual lives. We are totally dependent for power to grow and mature on the life that comes from God. We must cooperate with Him by allowing His life-giving forces to pour into our souls. But we know that it is God who produces the harvest of character. He provides the sun, the rain, and the bread of life. The message is one of total dependence upon the Lord. As a newborn babe depends upon its mother, as nature depends on nourishment from the sky, so we depend on God. He has surrounded our world with an atmosphere of grace, and as we partake of it, our lives are strengthened and matured.

Relevance: Your life comes from God. You can achieve your greatest potential as a character and a personality as long as you maintain your relationship with him. Turn to him naturally as plants turn toward the sun, and you will live an increasingly enriched spiritual life.

III. You Don't Grow Without Christ

Some new Christians feel that, since Christ has given them the new-birth experience, now it is up to them to do good as He wants them to and fight their own way through the difficulties that lie ahead. That is a program bound to fail.

The Word

9. Why can't our own unaided efforts produce spiritual growth? John 15:4-7.
10. How do we grow in our relationship with Christ? Colossians 2:6-7; Hebrews 10:38.
11. How important is it that Christ should live within us? Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:16-19; Philippians 2:13.

Explanation: Christ paid the price for our sins, runs our errands as our High Priest and Mediator in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 8:1-2), and lives in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Without His constant presence in our lives, we are helpless in the battle with sin. It is no more possible for us to live good lives without Christ than it was for us to be initially born-again without Him. Spiritual growth is a matter of drawing nourishment from the parent Vine. We grow as we began, by allowing the miraculous power of Christ to transform us. He convicts, we believe, and He empowers. The mystery of Christ's indwelling in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is one of the central teachings of the New Testament. It cannot be explained biologically, or psychologically, or any other way. The simple fact is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are mysteriously one God, even though they are separate personalities. Hence, when the Spirit dwells in your heart, that is the presence of Christ and the Father. John chapter 14 makes that point thoroughly clear. Having just promised the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "If a man loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). The point is that the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart is the Deity in your heart. It is a divine indwelling that is absolutely vital to spiritual life and growth. Christ lives within the believing Christian (Colossians 1:27), and as long as He remains there, no power on earth or in hell can separate that Christian from Him. The daily choice to have Jesus dwell in the life by the Holy Spirit is the Christian's. If he chooses to sever his union with Christ, even temporarily, the Holy Spirit will be driven away, and Satan and his demons will provoke him to sin. The secret of consistency in Christian life is that uninterrupted indwelling of the Spirit of Christ.

Relevance: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Spiritual growth is summed up very effectively in that sentence. We cannot make ourselves holy. Sanctification (holiness) is always the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (see 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Romans 15:16). Our human effort to overcome and live for Christ demonstrates our faith (James 4:7-8). But we must always realize that without Christ in our hearts by the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. That negative implies a glorious positive! "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me" (Philippians 4:13). Christ is yours, you are Christ's, and as long as that union is maintained, you are spiritually invincible!

IV. The Importance Of Daily Devotions

How do we maintain our relationship with Jesus? The Bible has some very practical answers. They are so simple that some people can't accept them. They are looking for more complex answers to their complex problems. What they should understand is that our part in maintaining a union with Christ is very simple; His part in unraveling our problems is very complex. But for Him it is no trouble at all because He is all-knowing and all-powerful.

The Word

12. Why is daily communion with Christ so vital for spiritual growth? John 11:9-13; 16:23-24.
13. As we come to Christ daily, what two things does He give us by the Holy Spirit? Matthew 11:27-30.
14. What does regular study of the Scriptures make it possible for Christ to do for you? Psalm 119:9; John 15:3; (compare John 17:17; Ephesians 5:26).

Explanation: It is always Christ's will to impart the Holy Spirit to us when we ask. But the condition is asking! When we neglect to pray, we cannot expect to have the blessing. The power is infinite; the least we can do is to humbly ask for it. Our act of asking is an exercise of faith. God wants us to believe and to trust Him.

Jesus promised that when we come to Him, He will give us rest and work (the yoke). We have rest of soul, peace of mind, freedom from tension, fear, passion, hate, and all other negative, soul-destroying forces. And we also have a yoke to bear, a work to do, a challenge to meet. Christ does not want us to be long on receiving and short on giving. He wants us to be willing to work for Him and for our lost brothers and sisters in the world. Bearing the yoke without having Christ live within by the Holy Spirit is impossible. The burden would crush us. But when Jesus is living out His life through us, the specific work He gives each of us to do is more satisfying than anything else could be. We are not living for self, enriching ourselves so that we can live in ease. Nor are we striving to become famous so that we can enjoy the accolades of the multitudes. We are taking upon ourselves the specific yoke that Christ has given us, and every day happily bearing it by faith in Him.

Regular study of the Scriptures provides nourishment for the soul. Prayer is the breath of the soul, Bible study is the food. As we study the Word, the Holy Spirit uses the divine knowledge that we gain to purify and strengthen us. The principles of the Word of God take on flesh and blood as they become an inseparable part of our existence. But always we must seek for the Lord's explanation of the Scriptures. The Bible does not teach that great scholars reveal the truth to us, even though they sometimes have a very valuable contribution to make. Jesus taught: "He [the Holy Spirit] will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). The Word must be explained to our minds by the Holy Spirit. Then we have life-giving truth that contributes to our spiritual growth.

Relevance: It is a Biblical axiom that Christian life and growth depend on daily prayer and Bible study. If you do not have daily devotions, it is inevitable that you will lose your union with Jesus. If you do have your daily prayer and study time, it is just as inevitable that you will grow stronger and stronger to meet the challenges of daily life, and you will become more like Jesus in character.

V. We Become More Like Jesus

To be like Christ in heart and in lifestyle is the aim of every surrendered Christian. That is why Jesus came to live here on our earth and to die for our sins, so that we might through His grace and by His indwelling, emulate His character.

The Word

15. What made the prophets and apostles such spiritual giants? Acts 4:13; James 5:17.
16. Into whose likeness are we progressively changed as we allow the Holy Spirit to live in our hearts? 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10-11.

Explanation: Christ was everything to Peter and the rest of the apostles. And the same Lord was the Master of the Old Testament prophets. People who came in contact with them knew that there was a power in their lives that could not be explained in any human way. Peter had been with Jesus, and it showed!

The progressive spiritual growth of the believer in Christ, so that his life too will constantly reveal the characteristics of Jesus, is made possible by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18 is one of the great tests in the Bible. The Revised Standard Version translation is closer to the Greek text: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding [the Greek word also means "reflecting"] the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." When the veil of unbelief is taken away from our faces, and we behold Christ's glory, we become reflectors of His character. By beholding, we become changed. The Holy Spirit produces the change as we turn our eyes upon Jesus. The Lord of Glory changes us from one level of spiritual growth to another, until we truly reflect His likeness.

Relevance: Despite our human limitations, you and I can be reflectors of the love and purity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not have to remain on the foothills of spiritual achievement. By the grace of our indwelling Lord, we can rise higher and higher in spiritual development until, like Enoch, we will be ready to leave this old world of sin and take our place with Christ in His Kingdom.

Are you allowing Christ to be the source of your spiritual growth? Are you willing to pray and study the Scriptures daily so that His Spirit can do a progressive sanctifying work in your heart?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. We make ourselves grow spiritually by the work we do for Christ.
 - b. Mysteriously Christ dwells in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
 - c. Bible study earns God's favor.
 - d. The Holy Spirit within our hearts makes us more like Jesus daily.
2. Discuss: Christ was an infinitely perfect character. His work for the salvation of humanity could never be matched by any other human being. That being so, we cannot equal Christ's character. But we can copy it and, by relying upon Him, overcome sin as He did, and serve others to the best of our ability.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, Chapter 8.