

Growing in Christ

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Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3:18

We will in all things grow into Him who is the Head, that is Christ. Ephesians 4:15

1. We were made to grow

We were made in the image of God.

Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... So God created man in His own image. Genesis 1:26,27.

God is the Creator and so is creative. Human beings, made in the image of God, are also creative. One of the central aspects of being human is that to be healthy we must always be creating, developing, growing, and moving forward in life.

- If we are growing we feel fulfilled, have a sense of purpose and our self image is enhanced.

- Our bodies stop growing and become more feeble as we get older. We can't help this. *You are dust, and to dust you will return.* Genesis 3:19. But our souls and spirits are not linked to this bodily decay. We feel as young as we always have on the inside, regardless of our age or of how our bodies are! If we are not growing in our souls and spirits, on the inside, we violate our very beings and feel unfulfilled, frustrated and unhappy.

- Lack of growth on the inside is the central cause of human unhappiness. If we are not creative, growing and developing we will have little joy and hope, and will probably feel that life has no meaning. This pervades every area of our lives souring even the things we enjoy and taking away most of life's pleasures.

- But if you are creative, growing and developing on the inside, as a person, and in your spiritual life, you will enjoy a central satisfaction in all areas of your life; regardless of what you are going through, whether it be positive or negative.

Elderly people who are still growing on the inside have so much to give! Their bodies may be worn out but they still have an inner spark that is infectious and powerfully blesses those they meet.



Elderly people who have stopped growing on the inside are not like this at all. Often they spend much of their time focusing on their problems, get depressed and lose their will to live.

Life is all about *"being alive as long as you live"*! H Overstreet.

Meaning, purpose and happiness, then, are by-products of being a creative, growing and productive person.

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him".

Psalm 92:12-15

Are you growing on the inside? Are you growing spiritually? Are you growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Are you feeling positive about yourself and the things that you have done and are doing? Are you fulfilling God's purpose for your life?

2. We live in a world that helps us grow

In the beginning God made the world perfect and gave man the responsibility for ruling over it. *God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.* Genesis 1:31. *You made him ruler over the works of your hands; You put everything under his feet.* Psalm 8:6. But now the world is not perfect! As a result of the fall and man's poor management we live in a world that is far from how God intended it to be.



But this is not necessarily a bad thing! An imperfect world is the ideal environment for growth! If everything was perfect we wouldn't need to grow. In seeking to improve the world we improve ourselves.

One common objection about God is *"If God is perfect how could He create an imperfect world - with snakes, weeds, sickness, evil, storms, disasters etc.? There's so much misery in the world, so what sort of a God is He?"* This misses the point. The goal of life is not human happiness - it is human growth. If there were no germs there would be no research; no medicines. Without weeds we wouldn't seek to improve our crops. Without sinful people around us we wouldn't be interested in evangelism, or be spurred on to holy living.

God has put us into an environment that makes growth possible and also stimulates it. If we don't grow it isn't because we don't have the opportunities. They are all around us, including many opportunities caused by imperfect people! If we stifle the developmental urges within us and don't grow it is because we decide not to or because we are so focused on ourselves and our particular situations.

Once we realise that life is all about growth, we can even rejoice in our difficulties, because they give us an opportunities to grow!

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. James 1:2-4,12

What were the main situations in your life that led to growth? How did you react in these situations? Did you recognise that growth was occurring while you were going through these situations? How did you grow as a result of these situations?

3. There are many opportunities for us to grow

There are opportunities for us to learn and grow in pretty well everything that happens!

Here are some of the main ways that we can grow. There are lots of other ways, though!

- **Spending time with the Lord**

As we spend time with the Lord we gradually take on aspects of His nature and become more and more like Him. As we fall at His feet in worship and wait on Him with open hearts, His light and love come in and we are changed. The Holy Spirit work reveals more of Jesus to us and He begins to control more of our lives so that He is more and more our Lord. Out of this we begin to demonstrate more of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:11, 29-31

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22,23

- **Making use of 'means of grace'**

There are many ways that God extends His grace towards us. Through them we can draw from His resources and grow. "Means of grace' are initiated by God. He decides to show His grace towards us and acts accordingly. We receive and are blessed. (As compared to spiritual disciplines where we carry out various actions in order to know more of God and to bring glory to Him).

'Means of grace' include:

- the good news of the Gospel; salvation
- baptism, baptism in the Holy Spirit
- communion
- the anointing of the Holy Spirit
- the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit
- revelations from the Bible, 'rhemas', 'words' and other gifts of the Holy Spirit
- arrangement of circumstances
- angels, dreams, sensations, feelings
- forgiveness, encouragement, hope, love.....

"By the Means of Grace are meant those things by which God offers and gives His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation"
Luther
Romans 3:24, 5:15-17
Ephesians 1:7,8

When God sovereignly acts to bless us we must openly respond to Him with faith and trust, allowing Him to do whatever He wants in our lives. Grace is not earned or deserved. It is given to us because God loves us and wants the best for us.

He gives us more grace. That is why the Scripture says: "God opposed the proud but gives grace to the humble". James 4:6

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:8

- **Exercising the spiritual disciplines**

The spiritual disciplines are activities that we choose to carry out so that we can develop in our spiritual lives. Through these disciplines we open ourselves to God and allow Him to mould our lives. In doing this we come to know God better; are changed to become more like Jesus and, hopefully, glorify and please God more in all that we do. The spiritual disciplines include:

- prayer
- intercession
- meditation
- Bible reading
- fasting
- solitude
- worship
- silence
- consecration
- giving

All of these disciplines require discipline!! It's easy to start and then give up when the demands of other things press upon us. But the benefits of the spiritual disciplines are huge. They enable us to draw closer to God and help us open our hearts to Him. When our hearts are open He is then able to work in our lives to make us more like Jesus.

Watch for pride when you are exercising the spiritual disciplines. It's best not to tell others what you are doing so that you are not tempted to boast about it. Your boast should only be in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 1:31, Galatians 6:14. *For it is not the one who commends himself that the Lord approves; but the one whom the Lord commends. 2 Corinthians 10:18*

See Matthew 6:5-34.

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. James 4:7-10

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Galatians 6:7,8

- **Attending Church, study groups, conferences, seminars, Bible College**

When you get together with other Christians there are always opportunities to learn and grow. Sometimes these opportunities are specially designed to provide teaching and facilitate learning, and, hopefully, they will also provide opportunities for discussion, debate, deeper exploration of issues and practical applications. When you interact with the Bible and with other Christians in a deeper way the Holy Spirit is often able to help you understand God's nature and ways more clearly, and this helps to fashion you more into the image of Jesus Christ.

For when two or three come together in my name there am I with them. Matthew 18:20

We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. Colossians 1:28

- **Reading and studying the Bible, and other Bible resources**

There are many ways that you can approach the Bible. At the most basic level you can read it (hopefully every day), and perhaps use a daily resources like "The Word for Today" or "Every Day with Jesus".

You will get lots more from the Bible, though, if you study it. The most common approaches to Bible Study are to study whole Books (like Psalms or Romans); characters (like Peter, or John) or topics (like forgiveness, or prayer).

In each of these you will use a range of Bible resources like dictionaries; encyclopedias, concordances, commentaries and atlases. Most 'Study Bibles' bring all of these resources together for you! You can also access them on line using www.searchgodsword.com Then there are books, articles, periodicals, podcasts,the list goes on. There are just so many ways you can access information about the Bible and its truths.

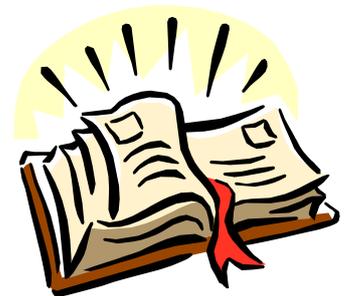
Study to show yourself approved unto God; a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

- **Using internet resources**

The internet is a vast resource. It contains an enormous amount of material that can be used to help us grow in Christ; (and lots of other stuff that can be pretty destructive!). You can find information on just about anything on the internet.

Here are some very helpful internet resources and links:

- 'Google' whatever you are interested in learning about or check it out on Wikipedia. www.wikipedia.org
- Read the Bible online. For the NIV Bible you can do this at <http://www.ibsstl.org/niv/> This site also provides an introduction to each book of the Bible; and allows you to look up specific verses and find occurrences of words.
- *Heartlight*, *Biblegateway* and *Crosswalk* are wonderful portals for Bible resources including devotionals, studies, sermons, blogs, commentaries, concordances, Greek and Hebrew words and the very comprehensive International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. You can also sign up for a daily devotionals by email, download the Bible to a mobile phone, and participate in forums on areas of interest. See <http://www.heartlight.org/> <http://www.searchgodsword.org/> <http://www.biblegateway.com/> www.crosswalk.com www.biblestudytools.net



- **Reflecting on situations**

Difficult situations are probably our greatest helpers for growth. The tougher the situation ... the bigger the problem ...the harder it is the greater the opportunity for us to grow! When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

When we go through a difficult situation it's not what happens to us that really matters; it's how we react and whether we learn and grow from the situation. We can become bitter or better; groan or grow!

We grow most in difficult environments; not *in spite of* these environments but *because of* them. Each difficulty is an opportunity for the life of Christ in us to be developed and expressed.

We .. rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God's has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He has given us. Romans 5:3-5

He knows the way that I take. When He has tried me I shall come forth like gold. Job 23:10

This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory. 2 Corinthians 4:17



Every situation in life is a learning opportunity!

When you go through a "situation" it is useful to reflect on aspects such as:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- How did I behave in the situation? How did I react?
- What did I do well? What did I do poorly?
- How could I behave or react better in the future?
- What do I learn from the situation about
 - myself?
 - my behaviours?
 - my reactions?
 - life?
 - God?

Reflecting on questions like these ones help you focus on your personal growth and development. It means that, regardless of whether the situation was negative or positive, you can gain something useful from it.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Psalm 1:1-3 See also Psalm 3, 4, 8, 10, 18. 1 Peter 1:6-9; 4:12-19;

- **Accepting rebuke, correction, encouragement, discipline**

Nobody likes having their weaknesses and sins pointed out! *Fools despise wisdom and discipline. Proverbs 1:7* The natural reaction when this happens is to justify yourself: "Yes, but" or try to turn it back on whoever is pointing the issue out. This is not helpful, because it cuts you off from accepting your need for change. Much better is to be open to the rebuke, correction, encouragement, discipline. Listen carefully to it and ask questions to get more information. Then evaluate it. Is it true? Is it valid? (But be aware that your old nature will be trying hard to defend your current state!). Once a 'development area' is exposed it means you can start the process of dealing with the issue by means of repentance, forgiveness, re-training, re-learning, accountability, change etc.

He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray. Proverbs 10:17 Bear with each and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:13 See also 1 Corinthians 10:13, 1 John 1:5-10

When giving correction it is important that your heart motives are open and loving, otherwise the correction will almost always be received negatively. *Correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. 2 Timothy 4:2 See also Matthew 5:23,24; 6:14,15; 7:1-5; 18:15-17; 18:21-35; 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12.*

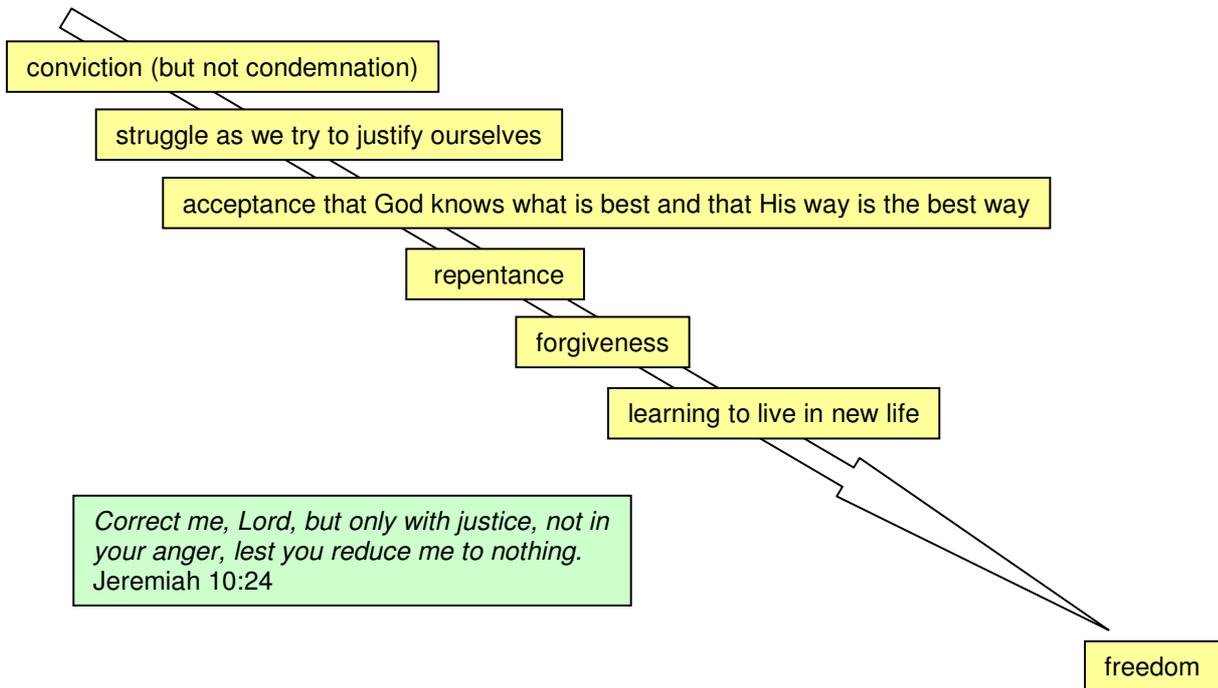
- **Allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives**

The Holy Spirit always glorifies Jesus. John 15:26; 16:14

He does this in many ways:

- by helping us John 14:16-21
- by teaching us John 14:26
- by pruning off areas of our lives so that they can be replaced by His life and so we can be more fruitful John 15:1-8
- by convicting us of sin, and helping us to repent John 16:7-10
- by guiding us into truth John 16:13-15

Often the work of the Holy Spirit in our life follows a pattern of:



This is a lifelong process! The Holy Spirit works in our lives to sanctify us so that we are more and more like Jesus; more and more set apart for Him. See Romans 8:1-39.

So God has provided all of the resources we need if we are to grow; no matter what the situation or how difficult the environment.

Ultimately, all of the resources that we need for life are found in Jesus Christ, and are made available to us by the Holy Spirit.

May God 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. Ephesians 1:17-19

In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:3



Are you growing spiritually? How do you measure whether or not you are growing spiritually? What helps you grow the most? What could you do to make better use of growth opportunities? How open are you to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life? Are you becoming more and more like Jesus?

4. The goal of our growth is to be like Jesus

The end product of our growth is that we will be like Jesus.

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 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

The Holy Spirit is working in our lives to remake us into the image of Jesus, so that we are Christlike in our personalities and actions. Jesus is our future possibility and our present way into that possibility! We are becoming more and more like Christ so we can be presented *holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.* Colossians 1:22 That's why Jesus said *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Matthew 5:48. (The word for 'perfect' here is *teleios* and means *complete, mature, fully formed*). *That you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.* James 1:4

Isn't that exciting? When we understand God's purposes for our lives it cancels our inferiorities and our sense of worthlessness, and gives us hope. With Paul we can say *For me is Christ, and to die is gain.* Philippians 1:21 *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone; the new has come.* 2 Corinthians 5:17 That's growth!

But wait there's more! God's purposes for growth are not just for us as individuals. He wants the whole Body of Christ to grow so that we can be a suitable Bride for the Lord Jesus Christ:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's people.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God." Revelation 19:6-9

So..... we were made to grow; we live in a world that helps us grow; there are many opportunities for us to grow, and we are growing to be like Jesus!

So let us say with Paul:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12-14