

Spiritual Growth Lessons

LESSON 2 of 32

FOUR STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:"
(1 Peter 2:2).

". . . that we might arrive at really mature manhood--the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ's own perfection--the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found in Him.

So then, we may no longer be children . . .

Rather, let our lives lovingly express truth in all things--speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly. Enfolded in love, let us grow up in every way and in all things into Him, Who is the Head, even Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one" (Ephesians 4:13-15, Amplified Bible).

THE BABY STAGE:

When we are born into the kingdom of God by repentance, water baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and receiving the Holy Spirit (John 3:1-7), we are not automatically mature Christians. We are "babes in Christ."



It would not be normal for a baby to be born, and the same day begin to walk and talk. He must go through many stages of development before he is physically and mentally able to do these things. But a baby is expected to grow and develop. For instance, if a two-year-old child is still not walking, there is cause for concern.

As it is with the natural world, so is it with the spiritual world. When we come into the church of Jesus Christ, most of us have much to learn. We are not yet ready for the "meat" of God's Word. We must stick to our "milk bottle" for a while. Peter tells us that as "new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

Paul wrote the Hebrews:

"For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age (mature) . . ." (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Paul calls the "milk of the word" the "first principles of the oracles of God." Then he lists them in Hebrews 6:1-2:

1. repentance from dead works
2. faith toward God
3. doctrine of baptisms (water and Spirit)
4. laying on of hands
5. resurrection of the dead
6. eternal judgment

Paul refers to these six principles of the doctrine of Christ as the very foundation of our Christian experience and life. That is what a newborn babe needs--a good, solid foundation upon which he can build his life for Jesus!

The newborn babe does not need to understand all the mysteries connected with the books of Daniel and Revelation. He needs to understand and be persuaded of the truths that have brought him into his new relationship with Jesus Christ (faith toward God, repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit). He needs to have an understanding that there is life after death, and that some day all men will stand before the judgment throne of God.

Besides these truths, the new Christian needs to be taught important principles that lead to spiritual growth: prayer and fasting, faithfulness to God and His body, worship, giving, holiness, etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BABIES:

1. Natural: A newborn babe is totally dependent upon his parents for all his needs. He cannot sit, crawl, walk, nor run. He cannot feed himself, nor change his diapers. All his needs are met by other people. He often must make those needs known by crying, as he has no other way to express them.

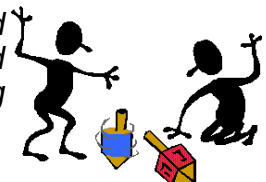
2. Spiritual: A new convert must be taught how to study and read the Bible. He does not have the ability to "feed himself." He must be taught how to communicate with God, just as a natural baby must be taught to communicate with people. He must be taught how to walk with God, the same as a natural baby must learn to sit up, stand, and eventually walk.

The natural baby will often fall, until its muscles are more fully developed. It is the same with the spiritual. Therefore the saints and leaders must have much patience as the new convert gradually develops his "spiritual muscles."

NOTE: Sometimes the saints bring people to church, and after they are converted, they expect the pastor to do all the "mothering." If you bring someone to Jesus, do not forsake them after they are in the body of Christ. They will still look to you for further guidance, help, and understanding. If it was love that compelled you to witness to them, then that same love should still manifest itself toward them after they are in the church!

THE CHILD STAGE:

"That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up . . ." (Ephesians 4:14-15).



CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN:

"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:2-4).

From the verses of Scripture in Ephesians and Matthew we can see that there are negative and positive things connected with the nature of a child. Jesus points out to us that children as a whole are humble, trusting, and obedient. They will normally do anything you ask them to, trusting that whatever you say is correct. They are not too proud to humble themselves before God and men. They have not yet learned (at least in most cases) to be stubborn, willful, and rebellious. In that way we can learn from them. That is the positive side of their nature.

On the negative side, because they do believe everything they hear and trust everybody without question, they are easily led astray. That is why Paul warns, "be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."

While children can walk, run, feed and dress themselves, and do many things, they still occasionally stumble. They still need others to guide them in many things. They are not aware of many dangers that exist "in the world," and must be constantly

warned. They have no idea what proper food is, and most of them would be happy with nothing but hamburgers and french fries, or perhaps cake and ice cream, if they always had their wish.

So it is with the spiritual! Guidance is still needed in the spiritual diet, also. Even much religious material that is available in bookstores can be harmful to the Christian who is not fully rooted and grounded in the truth. Some books may look very interesting, and yet be filled with false doctrines, and slander against the truth!

As it has always been, there are many false religions and false prophets who will lead people astray, if they can. Jesus and the apostles warned us concerning this. Read Matthew 24:11; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4.

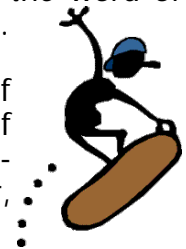
Just as natural children are full of energy, so is it with spiritual children. The energy must be channeled in the right directions. Zeal without knowledge is like a runaway horse! Knowledge is learned, not just by studying the Word of God, but also by walking with Jesus Christ over a period of time, and learning those things that are pleasing and displeasing to Him. It is attained, not only by "glorious experiences," but also by hardships, persecutions, temptations, and trials. All these help the "child" to grow up and become a mature Christian.

Also, Christians still in the "children stage," tend to rely on "the blessing" rather than "the Blessor, Jesus Christ! They have not learned that the greatest joy of being a Spirit-filled Christian is the relationship we have with Jesus Christ, whether there is any special feeling, or not!

THE YOUTH STAGE:

". . . I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:14).

This is the stage in which the Christian has perhaps reached the peak of his spiritual strength and faith in God. He has learned how to "take hold of God" by prayer and fasting. He knows how to assert and use his God-given authority over the enemy of his soul, the devil. There are, however, some dangers to avoid.



Young people tend to believe that they know more than their elders. They like their independence. It is often difficult for them to be subject to authority. Often they don't appreciate anybody correcting them.

Sometimes there is the same tendency with those in the "spiritual youth stage." They pray and fast much. They are spiritually strong. But they may still lack maturity. They may feel that because they hear from God and enjoy God's blessings, they do not need to submit themselves to authority, or even correction. This can be extremely dangerous, because the Bible admonishes us:

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

THE MATURE CHRISTIAN:

"And His gifts were (varied; He Himself appointed and gave men to us,) some to be apostles (special messengers), some evangelists (preachers of the Gospel, traveling missionaries), some pastors (shepherds of His flock) and teachers. His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints (His consecrated people), (that they should do) the work of ministering toward building up Christ's body (the church), (That it might develop) until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the full and accurate knowledge of the Son of God; that (we might arrive) at really mature manhood--the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found



in Him" (Ephesians 4:11-13, Amplified Bible).

Heaven is not our goal--it is our destiny. Our goal is to grow up and arrive at "really mature manhood"--to become more like Jesus Christ. This was what Paul was referring to when he wrote:

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14).

In all things, Paul seemed to be a mature Christian. He could write "for me to live is Christ . . ." How many of us could make such a statement. Paul also wrote: *"But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Despite his close walk with God, Paul was not satisfied! Had he lived in our day, he would probably have loved the old hymn:

"To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus,
On earth I long, to be like Him,
All through life's journey,
From earth to glory,
I only ask, to be like Him."

Some people remain in the "baby stage" year after year. There is no spiritual growth in their walk with God. They are in a spiritual rut. They are going nowhere. This is not the will of God for any of us. His will is: *"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, even as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:18). (ds)