

# Christian Growing Pains

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Part I

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As we examine various passages of Scripture we see clearly that God wants us, His children, to grow into full maturity. Why does He want us to grow? Because such maturity is necessary to enjoy the full fellowship God desires to have with His children. Additionally, full maturity in His children and in His church is necessary for God to accomplish His work on earth. The spiritually immature cannot do the tasks necessary to complete His work.

If our goal is to make it to heaven, I have enough confidence in the Lord to say, "Relax. If you've invited Jesus into your heart, you've got heaven made. There is no place else to go."

But heaven must not be our objective, heaven is our destiny. The objective of our Christian walk must be much more than "to make it to heaven." God's objective for us in this life is to mature us so that the glory of Jesus Christ may be radiated from our hearts. He wants us to display to the world the nature of Christ by our lifestyle, by the words we speak, by the things we teach and say, and by our very existence. This objective is quite clearly stated in Romans 3:10: "His intent was that now [not off in the future] through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord..." God's plan is to show forth His grace, glory and power through the church!...that's us! If the glory of God is going to show forth through us, then we must grow up in Him, "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Eph 4:13).

## Stages Of Growth

Thus we ask, "What must I do to grow up in Christ?" The Apostle John provided some essential insight into the process of growth when he wrote,

"I write to you, dear children, because, your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you have

known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one." (I John 2:12-13 NIV).

By John's statements, he categorized three distinct stages of spiritual growth. These stages help us properly identify our own spiritual stature. Where do I fit? Which one do I most resemble?

Some think, "I've been saved for twelve years. I consider myself a spiritual father. I'm fairly mature." This thinking erroneously assumes that Christian longevity equates with spiritual maturity. Hopefully we are among the gentle, humble ones who say, "No, I'm only a child in Christ."

Regardless of how we see ourselves we must properly identify our stage of growth in order to understand the events occurring in our spiritual environment. Events are usually designed (or approved) by our Heavenly Father to force us into spiritual growth..."unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

In order to help identify the various stages of growth I will list some of the doctrinal experiences that portray (a) the child, (b) the young man (person) and (c) the spiritual fathers. As we look at the stages we may see some things with which we can identify, things that relate to our lives.

## STAGE 1: The Little Child

We are speaking of spiritual children now, it has nothing to do with age. If you are 50 years old and you were born again last week, you are a babe in Christ. If you are 50 years old and you have been born again since you can remember, you should not be a babe in Christ, you should be mature.

Looking at the spiritual child, quite frankly, there are not a great number of attributes that would draw one to Christ though there are a few. For example, in the natural, little children are often cuddly, cute and enthusiastic. So in the spiritual dimension, babes often warm our hearts with their enthusiasm and new life.

A child is easily identified by what he or she understands or comprehends which is limited. To help identify the child, let us look at some of the doctrines he understands. One of the first things a

child is going to learn are the doctrines of sin repentance.

### SIN, REPENTANCE AND SALVATION

A spiritually alert child will know when he or she has done wrong. A child knows when he has sinned. A spiritual child can recognize sin and experience repentance following the awareness of his sin. The child then receives salvation as a result of experiencing genuine repentance and an understanding that he needs a personal saviour, Jesus Christ. Without salvation the child will grow no further.

### BAPTISM AND IDENTITY WITH CHRIST

The spiritual child may also come to understand the need for baptism as an outward sign to the world of his spiritual rebirth and new life in Christ. He also soon comes to a place of beginning to learn his identity in Christ. Recently I observed our neighbor's little toddler. He is about two years old and has a long, multi-syllable last name which is very difficult to pronounce. "What's your name?" his mother would ask. And wow! He would proudly start spouting out the family name loud and clear! We should all be able to spout out our family name equally as well by saying, "I am a child of the living God! I have been born again! I belong to Jesus!" We believers do have an identity in Christ.

### PRAYER

The child should also become familiar with the doctrine of prayer. Every spiritual child should learn how to pray. That is one thing children can do as well as adults though they certainly will not pray with the wisdom and fervor an adult often does.

Thus, the child's doctrinal experiences are summarized below.

#### "CHILDREN'S" DOCTRINES

Repentance  
Salvation  
Baptism  
Identity in Christ  
Prayer

### STAGE 2: The Young Man

After a period of growth and teaching the young man has left the little child stage and has

grown into young manhood or personhood. Now let us look at some of the doctrines he should know.

### JUSTIFICATION

One of the first doctrines he is going to learn is justification. In this stage he has learned that he makes mistakes and that he trips and stumbles in his Christian walk from time to time. But he goes back to his Bible and he finds out that Jesus still loves him... unconditionally so. He learns that "I stand before God the Father totally justified because of what **Jesus** did, not because of what I do or do not do. I am fully justified before God the Father. Yes, Jesus, I'm sorry that I failed. Jesus, please forgive me. I know my sin has nothing to do with my standing before God the Father because my standing depends on what **You** did. Hallelujah!"

On the other hand, the little child feels that every time he sins, he is no longer a child of God. He fears that he is now lost, undone before God. Imagine the yo-yo experience, the trauma and the fear that accompanies this ordeal. Question: If a Christian is continually going through the mental and emotional experience of being saved-lost, saved-lost, how effective is his portrayal of Christ before others? Not very I'm afraid. Why? Because the central focus of his total experience is keeping himself saved!

As "young men" then let us put that childhood fear aside. We are in God's hands... period. Let us get on with telling others about Jesus. Let us get on with letting the light of Jesus shine from our faces. Let us remove the veil of fear and trepidation and let the love of Jesus shine into the sphere in which we live and work. The young man learns that if he stumbles and falls, he gets up, repents and asks the Lord's forgiveness and gets on with life.

### SANCTIFICATION

The young man learns another doctrine...he begins to know what it's like to experience sanctification. When we first come to Jesus for salvation we bring all of our garbage along. Though our sins are fully forgiven, most likely we still have sinful attitudes and habits. Or perhaps sinful acts are still clinging stickily to us. A point of clarification: Before God we stand clean, spotless and white as snow immediately at our salvation experience. This is the result of the cleansing blood of Jesus. But the old

nature that causes us to sin is still lurking in the dark recesses of our heart. The object of sanctification is to drive the old unregenerate nature out.

I have heard people say, "I want to clean up my life before I come to Jesus." My answer to that is, "Forget it, you'll never do it. You don't have the proper cleaning materials. It's only through the cleansing agency of the blood of Jesus Christ and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit that one's life can be cleansed." I like what David DuPlessis said, "God catches His fish, then He cleans them." That's good doctrine! If we are to continue our walk with Jesus, we have to learn we are justified by the blood of Jesus, by what He did at Calvary...then the sanctification process will soon begin.

The cleansing or sanctification process as described in the Bible is a life-long process. The image in my mind is that soon after the salvation experience the Holy Spirit comes with a bucket of water and soap in one hand and a big scrub brush in the other and says, "Come here, boy, we're going to do a little cleansing. There are some areas in your life that I want to cleanse." I run the other way and shouting, "No! I don't like to get wet...and I don't like the looks of that rough brush you've got in your hand...."

In general we may expect the first thing the Holy Spirit is going to deal with is the overt - those things others can see. Then, after He has cleansed the overt down to a minimum, He is going to start with the covert, things like jealousy, envy, selfishness and all the foul things inside the heart. Sanctification is an ongoing cleansing, purging process. The young man is soon thoroughly acquainted with God's scrub brush!

## FAITH

The young man also begins to learn faith. He begins to walk in faith. He begins to take God's Word at face value. He begins to walk believing the Word and finding that it works. He begins to find that if Jesus said it, he can believe it and act on it. In other words, if it's God's Word, that settles it.

## SPIRITUAL WARFARE

The young man also begins to learn a new, often unwanted, unpleasant lesson: spiritual warfare. In fact, he may say, "Had I known that God's army

was going to be like this, I'm not so sure I would have joined! I always thought that the devil was a figment of some medieval theologian's imagination!"

A very stark, very real part of a Christian's growth is spiritual warfare. There are times in spiritual warfare that you may call other believers crying out, "Pray for me. I'm really in the middle of battle." That's part of waging spiritual warfare. But there are also times when you don't know a soul on whom you may call. God says, "You've got this one yourself - you and Me." It's then time for you to call out to God in prayer, entering His very throne room, for your situation. Sometimes we fight in concert with others, sometimes we fight alone...but fight we must and will if we are going to grow.

You may ask, "Why does the young man need to learn spiritual warfare?" The Apostle John said you have "overcome the wicked one." If we cannot learn to overcome him, he will overcome us, defeating us in our Christian walk.

Some will murmur "It's not fair for God to stick us out here all by ourselves with our little sword, shield, helmet, breastplate, belt, and sandals of salvation and say, 'You're own your own.'" No, from our human viewpoint, it's not fair. But the only way we are really ever going to learn spiritual warfare is by His thrusting us out into battle. As we do battle we learn who we are in Christ. When we take the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith and go as conquerors into the enemy's territory spiritual growth occurs. We then learn to say, "Hallelujah! There's power in the Name of Jesus! No longer can the enemy intimidate me in that area of my life. I have overcome the wicked one!"...a fact we never learn until we actually fight the battle! Had God fought the enemy for us we would always remain fearful and easily intimidated by the devil.

Remember, the enemy has only two weapons: intimidation and the lie. Shame on us if we allow him to successfully use either of these weapons on us. If we allow him to succeed, we then live a substandard Christian life - a life of defeat.

Furthermore, only in the midst of warfare do we truly learn of God's faithfulness. It is good and refreshing to read the Psalms and hear David praise God for His faithfulness. But those Psalms have a new reality and meaning after you have been doing

battle and found Jesus standing at your side time after time, faithfully leading you to victory! Then we say, "Oh, Jesus is faithful! Hallelujah! My God never fails! He never lets me down!" Now there is a real difference. The spiritual child cannot truly experience that. He hasn't the spiritual environment yet which allows him to experience the real faithfulness of God. Yes, he can enjoy God's faithful provision and the like, but the faithfulness that grows along with the muscle toning of spiritual warfare the spiritual babe cannot experience.

### OVERCOMING

Then one day our spiritual young man realizes he has become an overcomer. It is one thing to do warfare and occasionally win. But it is quite another to be an overcomer. Doing warfare simply means you are in a battle. The title "Overcomer" tells who won! The overcomer enters into a new revelation. He knows first hand what the Scripture means when it says, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." (Luke 10:19 NIV).

### PRAISE

Possibly as a result of the previous lessons our young man also learns to praise God. King David penned Psalms after his victories. His joy, praises and his exaltation of God are full because of his overcoming. David knew that his overcoming was through the power of God not through his own power. Therefore he naturally turns to the praise and

exaltation of God.

I find it very difficult to imagine people who have experienced spiritual warfare and victory in their lives without such victory resulting in praise. Praise is necessarily robust. Our western conservatism says, "Well, let's not get too excited now." Have we conservatives never read about the "tabernacle of David"? Have we never read where King David sang, shouted and jumped before the Lord? That must have been exciting! It had to be. Old Testament praise was noisy. The rattling of tambourines, the clanging of cymbals, loud vocalization and shouts of praise to God were heard by all for a great distance! That kind of praise is noisy by its very nature.

We see then that the "young man" has a completely different set of doctrinal experiences that separate him from the "little children." Here is a summary of the young man's doctrines:

#### YOUNG MAN'S DOCTRINES

Justification  
Sanctification  
Faith  
Spiritual Warfare  
Overcomer  
Praise

(In Part II we will examine the next glorious state, that of a spiritual father or mother with the attendant attributes and doctrines.)

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