

# Christian Growing Pains

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Part II

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In the last article, we examined various passages of Scripture and saw that God wants us, His children, to grow into full maturity. We looked at the doctrines which spiritual children and young men should experience and understand. For His spiritual children they were repentance, salvation, baptism, one's identity in Christ and prayer. For His young men we then examined the doctrines of justification, sanctification, faith, spiritual warfare, overcoming and praise. In this continuation of that lesson we will look at the doctrines and attributes of spiritual fathers. We will see more clearly what the Apostle John meant when he wrote, "I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning." (I John 2:13 NIV).

To ask the key question again, why does God want us to grow spiritually? The answer is because such maturity is necessary to enjoy the full fellowship God desires to have with His children. Additionally, full maturity of His children and His church are necessary for God to accomplish His work on earth. The spiritually immature believer cannot do the tasks necessary to complete His work.

Let us look again at the Apostle John's exhortation on the three stages of Christian growth:

"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).

In these verses John categorized three distinct stages of spiritual growth. These stages help us properly identify our own spiritual stature. Having observed the children and young men in the last article, let us now look at the spiritual father.

## THE SPIRITUAL FATHER

What about the spiritual father? What are the doctrines, or Biblical teachings, he should understand...experientially?

## **The Royal Priesthood**

The spiritual father learns very early in his fatherhood about the **royal priesthood**. He learns that being a priest is a selfless ministry. A priest speaks to God for man. Thus, the spiritual father's focus has turned from "I, me, my and mine" to the Heavenly Father and then to his earthly brothers, sisters and the spiritual children.

"He hath made us kings and **priests** unto God and his Father." (Rev 1:6 KJV - emphasis added). In the earlier stages of our growth our focus is very much on "me, my children, my household,"...and if we are **really** spiritual, our focus may elevate to "my church." But when we grow into full maturity and join the ranks of the royal priesthood, there is a concern for the lost, the captives, the maimed and the dying. We then have a vision of the Body of Christ reaching maturity. We see Jesus breathing His life into His body, producing the Divine energy that is essential to reach His goals. As our vision takes on the new scope of what it means to be a priest in the Body of Christ, the spiritual father gladly enters into that dimension with its responsibilities and blessings. In so doing our spiritual father enters into yet another realm of growth:

## **Righteousness**

Occasionally young Christians use their youthfulness in Christ as an excuse for sinful habits. They say, "I will indulge in this sin now. I'll deal with it later...besides, God hasn't spoken to me about this." This should not be. We need to understand that righteousness is just as incumbent on the child and the young man as it is on the father. God doesn't need to "speak" to us when the commandments are clearly written in His Word.

Yet we do need to understand that the moment we receive Christ in our hearts we are declared righteous before God the Father. It is a **legal** declaration. Often we look at such young believers and see the sinful dirt and grime that clings to them. To us they may not **look** very righteous. Yet the Father looks at them and says, "What are you talking about? He is spotless! For he has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus." That's God's means of covering uncleanness until such time that the Holy Spirit deals with the **source** of unrighteousness.

But the fathers know the meaning of true **righteousness**. By the time the believer reaches spiritual fatherhood, righteousness has become a reality. Those around him can see it. Even the world in it's critical scrutiny looks him over and says, "I would certainly like to

find something wrong with him...but I can't." True righteousness has become an inseparable part of his character and personality.

## Mercy

Then there is **mercy**. When someone has done wrong our old carnal nature says, "Let's give him his just deserts! Hang him!" But the spiritual father maintains restraint and boldly declares, "But our God is so full of mercy! Let's give him another chance." Spiritual fathers abound with mercy, almost to a fault. They seem to see redeeming value in most everyone. God said, "I desire **mercy** not sacrifice." (Hos. 6:6 NIV - emphasis added). Isn't it strange that mercy is one of the last things most of us seem to embrace - yet it is so close to the very heart of God?

## Suffering

The father has learned something else too. He has learned the true meaning of **suffering**...and it's invaluable benefit to the believer. By suffering I mean suffering for the cause of Christ - not suffering for one's own mistakes, blunders and pride. The Apostle John was exiled to the isle of Patmos for the **Gospel's sake** not because he was a belligerent old man. All true Christian suffering must ultimately be for the Gospel's sake. Some of us suffer because of our sin - then we erroneously call it "suffering for Christ!" When we truly suffer because we bear the message of Jesus in our hearts, then we are learning the true meaning of suffering for the cause of Christ.

Some will certainly say, "Brother, that's not a very popular teaching. I like the teaching better that says God wants me to prosper." Did the Apostle Paul say, 'Yea, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall enjoy **prosperity**'?" Or did he rather say, "Yea, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus **suffer persecution**"? (II Tim 3:12 KJV emphasis added). He also told the church at Antioch, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God..." (Acts 14:22 NIV). Indeed, the Scriptures makes it quite clear that we must share in Christ's sufferings if we are to share in His glory. (See Rom. 8:17).

## Grace

Another doctrine with which the father is very familiar is that of **grace**. Not only is he a recipient of God's grace, he in turn becomes a dispenser of God's grace to others. Grace is a most precious commodity. In fact, it is so precious that the Apostle Paul was actually **happy** to suffer physical affliction in order to receive God's grace! (See II Cor. 12:8-10). Obviously there is much more to grace than is generally understood by most of us. But the

spiritual father is experienced in the matter of grace and readily lavishes it upon those who are in need. He is truly the hand of Christ extended.

## Rest

The spiritual fathers are also acquainted experientially with another doctrine I call **rest**. The writer of Hebrews introduced us to rest when he spoke of God's Sabbath rest. The spiritual father comes to a place where he fully understands who he is in Christ. He realizes that nothing that this life offers is worth even one ounce of the glory that is to be revealed to those who rest in Christ Jesus. He rests **in spirit** above life's problems. Regardless of circumstances, he asks, "What can man do to me?" And he rests in Christ.

In appearance he seems as one who is a bit removed - because he knows that this life and this world are indeed a stage. The **real** life is the life eternal. The **real** world is yet to come. He simply settles back and rests. His theme is, "If I live or if I die, praise the Lord! Sudden death means sudden glory!" He rests in the Father. He is not shaken by the threats of man, the happenings of this world, or by the violent political winds that blow. He is not shaken for he is firmly settled on the Rock. Yes, he has entered into rest.

I have seen spiritual fathers move quietly and bravely into volatile situations with great peace...even though the circumstances were life-threatening. I have seen them go into the very jaws of hell - moving in the will of God, totally without fear, fully at rest every moment. Rest is not to be confused with passivity. Rest is not even being a co-laborer with God...it is letting God do the work **through** you. We then cease from our own labors. We are spiritually at rest.

## Worship

Our elated spiritual father joyfully and purposefully enters into the realm of worship. In the book of Genesis the patriarch Jacob, in his old age, moments before his death, leaned on his staff and worshipped God. Yes, the spiritual father knows a fullness of **worship**. He needs no reason or special occasion for he knows God is worthy. No one has to tell him to worship his Father. He worships daily, continually. Even while doing mundane tasks he is worshipping. Quietly in his heart he sings and makes melody to God the Father. He is continually praising and worshipping the Father. He has entered into a new joy, that of **being** a worshipper.

Yet the spiritual father is not a fool, life's problems are as real to him as they are to others. But because of his rest, worship and the closeness he has to the Heavenly Father the problems no longer have the same

power over him. Yes, the struggles and warfares do exist but they don't have the same effect on the fathers.

These doctrinal truths exist in bud form in the child or young man in varying degrees. But the full blossom of experiential understanding is going to be manifest only in the spiritual fathers. Figure 1 portrays a summary of the doctrinal experiences relative to spiritual father.

**FATHER'S DOCTRINES**

- Royal Priesthood
- Righteousness
- Mercy
- Suffering
- Grace
- Rest
- Worship

**FIGURE 1**

**FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT**

For the Christian there is another way to gauge spiritual growth: The King James Bible says that we are God's "husbandry." (See I Cor. 3:9). In today's language we would say "God's farm." In the Book of Galatians there is a list of spiritual virtues known as "the fruit of the spirit" (Gal 5:22-23). They are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Which of these fruits grow in the life of the spiritual child...young man...and father? Figure 2 illustrates this span.

CHILDREN'S FRUIT	YOUNG MEN'S FRUIT	FATHER'S FRUIT
Love	Love	Love
	Goodness	Goodness
	Faithfulness	Faithfulness
		Joy
		Peace
		Patience
		Kindness
		Gentleness
		Self-Control

**FIGURE 2**

Let's look first at the children. The only fruit that the child can produce with any degree of consistency is that of love. He doesn't know much about goodness,

faithfulness, joy, peace, etc. Have you ever seen a "self-controlled" child? "I want it and I want it now!" seems to be the common attribute of the child, does it not?

The young man does somewhat better. He also produces in addition to love a measurable degree of goodness and faithfulness.

However, in all honesty, as we look at the other six virtues on the list of fruit, we must attribute the remainder of them to the spiritual fathers alone. In addition to love, goodness and faithfulness, we add joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. Some may imagine that the spiritual father has it all bad because of his "suffering." Don't be deceived. He has entered into a realm of joy that the younger believers have not tasted. And **peace**? Peace is flowing like a river in his life. It flows in spite of the raging battles. Vicious attacks and the like may surround our spiritual father, but deep down inside he enjoys peace.

He bears the fruit of **patience**. He has learned that God always keeps His word. He sees that Abraham waited 25 years for his promise. He knows that if God says it, it is surely going to come to pass. He is the embodiment of **kindness** - he is the epitome of **gentleness** and he possesses the last, and most difficult of all fruit to produce - **self-control**.

The believer who is experienced and versed in all of these forementioned doctrines and who manifests all of these fruit of the Spirit is truly a "father (or mother) in Israel!"

Notice I have not listed spiritual gifts (See I Cor. 12:8-12). Gifts of the Spirit can be **given** to the child, though God rarely does that. Giving such power to a child is not only unwise, but could well be dangerous. I have not listed gifts because gifts are **given**, fruit is **grown**. Growth takes time. Does the apple producer put an apple seed in the ground, pour water on it, then come with a basket to gather the apples? No, he can't do that. Perhaps he can in 6 or 7 years. So it is with every believer's growth in Christ. God wants us to produce fruit. And fruit is going to be produced in proportion to our knowledge of Him, our experience and our obedience.

**TRAITS OF THE LITTLE CHILD, YOUNG MAN AND FATHER**

Finally, to help us more properly identify ourselves in spiritual growth, Figure 3 lists some additional personality traits, or "identifiers" that are applicable to the various stages of spiritual growth. Some of the traits are desirable and some are not. If we find ourselves overly encumbered with the undesirable characteristics on the list, that information provides a clue as to our stage of spiritual growth. Examine Figure 3

carefully...and prayerfully.

#### IDENTIFYING ATTRIBUTES OF:

Children	Young Men	Fathers
Needs Milk	Needs Solid Food	Is Steadfast
Is Jealous	Knows Good from Evil	Seated in Heavens
Quarrels	In Constant Training	From Glory to Glory
Subject to Factions	Subject to Anger	Is Forgiving
Is Worldly	Worries	Has Authority
Acts as "Mere Men"	Often is Unforgiving	Has Power
Subject to Anger	Has Pride	Has Humility
Has Pride	Is Self-Centered	
Worries		
Is Unforgiving		
Is Self-Centered		

**FIGURE 3**

Here are some questions to ponder:

1. Where am I on the list? If each of us properly identified our place in growth it would make it much easier for the Lord to instruct us in further growth needs.
2. Is it possible to be in two stages simultaneously? I believe so. We may be 60 percent in one and 40 in the other, or 50/50 and so on. The transition between stages seems to be progressive. We don't wake up one morning and hear a voice from heaven saying, "Thou art now a father." Growth is progressive. It is

indeed a joy to know there is a goal - a reason for the struggles of life - that the love of God may be shed abroad in our hearts to the lost, the maimed and the dying of the world. Such love radiates from the spiritual fathers.

3. Do we ever "move backwards"? Yes, I believe there are those who decide that the price of growth is too much to pay. Such believers have focused their vision on the problems, selfish ambitions or the world and not on the final goal of attaining spiritual fatherhood. But once one has, "...tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age,..." (Heb 6:4-5 NIV.) it is difficult to imagine wanting to go back or be satisfied with anything less. The focus here is the vacillation that the child often experiences. Many spiritual children go from hot, to cold, to hot, to cold but eventually they cling firmly to obedience to the Lord. Once the child of God begins to comprehend these truths, his backsliding days should be gone forever. There then should be a progressive growth through young manhood and into spiritual fatherhood - in which he is a real overcomer and Father pleaser. Lord, let it be so!

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