

# THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It is a fact of nature that that which lives, grows. The converse of that is true as well. That is, that which does not grow dies. This is true with plant life. It is true in the animal kingdom, and it is true with humans as well. It is essential that people grow physically, mentally, and especially, spiritually.

The Bible emphasizes time and again the need for spiritual growth. The apostle Peter clarified that Christian growth is the antidote for apostasy. ***“You, therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ . . .” (2 Peter 3:17-18).*** Failure to grow and mature as Christians will lead to eternal destruction. The stagnation and stunted growth of the church at Laodicea drew the ire and condemnation of the Lord. To them He said, ***“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth” (Rev. 3:15-16).***

In the passage that has been assigned for this study, the author of The Book of Hebrews directs a pointed rebuke toward those to whom he is writing for their lack of spiritual growth and their willful immaturity. ***For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. (Heb. 5:12- 6:3).***

It is obvious that they had not made the kind of progress that God had expected of them. They failed to realize their place and purpose in the

kingdom of God. They had forgotten that they had been taught in order to teach others. They had been saved that they might save others. In order for us to be what God expects of us there is a need for spiritual growth. Our text reveals the need for Christian maturity by emphasizing what spiritual growth does.

## **Produces Teachers (5:12a)**

It is very obvious that these brethren had failed to reach their potential even though there had been sufficient time for them to do so. From the passage before us, it is plain that spiritual maturity is not simply a matter of time. Many who have been Christians many years may be in the condition of these Hebrew Christians. True spiritual growth is the result of prayer, study, meditation, faithfulness, diligence, exercise, and the successful struggle against temptations. (Coffman 107)

Sadly, there are scores of people that have been in the church for years with little spiritual progress to show for it. There are two things here that demand our attention.

***The Objective.*** The writer says, “...***by this time you ought to be teachers.***” Having been taught God’s saving plan, they should have been teaching it to others. The inherent objective of every new convert is to bring others to Christ. To the young man Timothy, the apostle Paul instructed, “***And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also***” (2 Tim. 2:2).

The Apostle does not mean by this, that the Hebrew brethren should all be teachers in a public and official sense; but simply that they should be able to explain the Gospel to others in their several places and relations, as parents, neighbors, and friends. The Church of Christ is a school for the improvement of all its members; and while it is certainly impossible for everyone to become an efficient Elder or Evangelist, it is nevertheless the duty of all to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). (Milligan 206)

***The Omission.*** They ought to have been teachers, but they were not, because they had omitted the spiritual nourishment that would have enabled them to do so. They were not properly feeding upon the word of God which left them ill-equipped for the work that the Lord expected

of them. They needed to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Spiritual growth produces teachers.

### ***Prevents Ignorance (5:12b)***

Their failure to properly feed upon God’s word left them woefully ignorant. That is a very dangerous condition. Israel was condemned for the same thing. “My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hos. 4:6). Their ignorance brought about two things.

***The Requirement.*** Instead of being teachers, the writer states, “you need someone to teach you.” Though they had shirked their responsibility to grow, they were not alleviated from the requirement of being taught.

***The Repetition.*** Just like the elementary school student who does not meet the class requirements and has to repeat the course, these brethren needed to be taught again. No wonder there is a teacher shortage in the church. There are far too many folks who need to be taught again, and again, and again, when they could be among those doing the teaching. Far too many church members are using the excuse that they do not know enough to be teachers. That is evidence of the need for spiritual growth which prevents ignorance.

### ***Properly Nourishes (5:12c)***

***Basic Fundamentals.*** That which they again needed to be taught was, “the first principles of the oracles of God.” First principles comes from **stoicheia** and refers to the very rudiments or elements of God’s word. What is being said is that they needed to go all the way back and learn again the ABC’s of Christianity.

***Baby Food.*** Here we find the real problem. The reason these folks had not matured properly is because they were malnourished **“and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”** Some parts of the Bible are meatier than others. Eventually, we have to move past the milk and feed on solid food. To the Corinthian church, Paul said, **“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with**

***solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able” (1 Cor. 3:1-2).***

If there is anything a child dislikes, it is to be called a baby. That is too degrading and goes against his innate desire: to grow up! He wants to become independent. He looks ahead and compares himself constantly with those children who are older and more mature.

The author of Hebrews calls the reader of his epistle “an infant.” To him it is incredible that adults in the faith are still nurtured on spiritual milk, not solid food. He uses the word infant to put his readers to shame.

(Kistemaker 149)

Christians certainly should be ashamed when they have not matured through the study of the Word of God. Proper nourishment produces spiritual growth.

### ***Perpetual Infancy (5:13)***

To partake only of milk is to be under nourished. Infants that never graduate from milk to solid food will eventually die of malnutrition. This same principle is true spiritually. The text also reveals that to partake only of milk is to be “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” Unskilled means without experience. Their perpetual infancy kept them from having any advanced experience achieved by those who had matured in the gospel. Paul said, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11). Neil Lightfoot simplified this by saying, “The general sense seems to be that the readers were amateurs in the word of righteousness (probably, God’s word that makes men upright) because they had been feeding on milk. They had turned to their second childhood” (113). Spiritual growth is the remedy for perpetual infancy.

### ***Practices Discernment (5:14)***

Babies must be under the constant watch and care of parents because they have no sense of danger. They do not yet have the experience or understanding that knives are sharp, and stoves are hot. Nor do they know that poisonous substances are harmful and could be fatal if swallowed.

These Jewish Christians were in the same predicament. Because they were unskilled in the word of righteousness and still spiritual babies, they were unable to see the difference between good and evil.

“The senses are sharpened by experience. As an adult does not need someone to stand over him, always reminding him what foods are good and bad to eat, so the adult Christian is able to distinguish good from evil. The latter expression does not refer to good and bad in morals but to good and bad in teaching. It is a mark of maturity to be able to discern truth from error, just as it is a mark of maturity to be able to teach. The two are linked inseparably”. (Lightfoot 113-14).

The spiritually immature will always have great difficulty discerning the difference between true teaching and error, and are in great danger of falling prey to the false teachers of the world. Paul assured the Ephesians that the Lord had provided everything necessary,

***“For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:12-14).***

Coffman has made a sobering assessment of the sad consequences of these things:

The great loss to the spiritual infant is that he may be misled, an eventuality that becomes certain unless he attains some degree of spiritual maturity. The church needs full-grown men, men who are not blown about by every wind of doctrine, men who have triumphed over the flesh, men of deep and loving personality, able to comfort the weak and the discouraged, and prepared to stand against all obstacles whatsoever. The pity of the present age of the church is seen in congregations of spiritual infants, uninstructed in the weightier things of the true faith, and indeed utterly ignorant of them, incapable of recognizing the most arrogant heresies, even those that deny the Lord, and still, after so many years, possessing only the most elementary knowledge of Christianity. (107)

The Lord’s church is in serious need of members who are given to deep study of the Bible and have devoted themselves to maturing into spiritual giants, carrying the banner of truth and beating back the waves of religious error. However, as Martel Pace has observed, “Our saddest problem in the church today is the vast number of Christians who are

unable to determine the dangers of false teaching” (210). Spiritual growth will enable Christians to practice discernment.

## **Perfects Individuals (6:1-2)**

There are plenty of things in life that can serve as hindrances to spiritual growth. However, if we are to mature as we should then we must constantly press on toward that goal. Paul declared that to be exactly what he did.

***“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you” (Philip. 3:12-15).***

***Leaving the First Principles (1a).*** As Hebrews chapter six begins, the writer continues the discussion of spiritual growth by saying, ***“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection. . . .”*** In this we see that he sets before his readers the goal for them to achieve, encouraged them to do it, and told them how to do it. Earlier he had told them that they must learn the first principles (5:12), now he instructs them to leave the first principles. Having sufficiently fed upon the milk of God’s Word, they now must move on to the meat.

***Listing the First Principles (1b-2).*** After instructing them to learn the first principles and leave the first principles, he now lists the first principles so there would be no doubt about what he was instructing them to do. ***“. . . [N]ot laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”***

A good foundation only needs to be laid once. He lists six elementary principles that serve as a foundation upon which they should build: First, ***“repentance from dead works.”*** Repentance is certainly a part of the foundation because it is the first thing commanded of believers who seek God’s forgiveness (Acts 2:37-38). It is also required of

Christians who sin (Acts 8:22). Repentance involves a change of mind and turning from evil (2 Cor. 7:10).

Second, ***“faith toward God.”*** It does not get any more basic than faith toward God. There is no salvation for those who do not believe. ***“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).*** Salvation is only for those who believe in God and obey His Word. Jesus said to the disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16).

Third, ***“the doctrine of baptisms.”*** Coffman documents seven different baptisms that are recorded in the New Testament:

The use of the plural “baptisms” doubtless sprang from the fact that no less than seven baptisms are mentioned in the NT, these being: (1) the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11), (2) the baptism of fire (Matt. 3:11), (3) the baptism of John (Matt. 3:16), (4) the baptism unto Moses (1 Cor. 10:2), (5) the baptism of suffering (Luke 15:30), (6) the baptism for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29), and (7) the baptism of the great commission (Matt. 28:18-20). The seventh of these is beyond question the “one” baptism of Ephesians 4:5; and the knowledge of these things was most certainly part of the elementary things that one had to know in order to become a Christian. (111)

Gospel baptism is an immersion (Col. 2:11-12) in water (Acts 8:39-40) for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

Fourth, ***“of laying on of hands.”*** Dan Winkler provides a wonderfully concise explanation of this biblical practice:

We need to know that the ***“laying on of hands”*** was done to:

- (a) transfer guilt (Ex. 29:10-24)
- (b) transfer a miraculous gift (Acts 8:14-19; 19:1-6; cf. 1 Cor. 12:7-11) or
- (c) commission and encourage (Num. 8:10-11; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3). We also need to know that, whereas miraculous gifts have ceased (1 Cor. 13:8-10), there is still a need to encourage the non-Christian (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-22; 2 Cor. 5:11) as well as the Christian (Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13). (54).

Fifth, ***“of resurrection of the dead.”*** The resurrection of Christ was the central theme of the preaching of the apostles. ***“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins***

**according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).** Paul had earlier declared, **“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-2).** This was certainly a subject frequently addressed by Jesus Himself. In **John 5:28-29** He said, **“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”** This doctrine provides great comfort and hope in this life.

Sixth, **“and of eternal judgment.”** Among the great and fundamental Christian doctrines is that of eternal judgment of all men by the Lord. The Hebrews writer declared, **“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (9:27).** To the Athenians, Paul said, **“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man who He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30- 31).**

All men should live each day in view of that grand event. That judgment will reveal the eternal destiny of all men (**Matt. 25:31- 46**). Spiritual growth leads to the perfection of individuals. Those individuals who learn these fundamentals of the Christian faith can go on to perfection.

### **Pursues God’s Will (6:3)**

In all of our plans and desires we must consider the will of God and desire that to be accomplished. The writer has just provided a list of fundamentals of the Christian faith that was intended to serve as a foundation upon which he could lead his readers toward spiritual maturity.

This he intended, with the permission of God, to do. Pace stated, **“The writer must have meant, ‘We will go on to maturity with God’s help and permission’” (219).**

### **In conclusion:**

Spiritual growth leads us to pursue God’s will. The need for spiritual growth can easily be seen in the positive things that result from it. We

have observed just from this text that spiritual growth produces teachers, prevents ignorance, properly nourishes, hinders perpetual infancy, practices discernment, perfects individuals and pursues God's will.

On the other hand, **Hebrews 6:4-8** shows that a lack of spiritual growth leads to apostasy and eternal destruction. Spiritual growth is not something that is bestowed upon us, it is the result of daily effort to draw closer to God through the study of His Word and the practice of His will.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20-21)

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