

Dynamic Christian Living

by

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CHAPTER THREE -

Growth in CHRIST

"Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18).

FAITH, - loyalty, - growth. He who truly believes in CHRIST as Saviour, soon finds loyalty to be the only fitting expression of his faith; and he who follows CHRIST in true devotion will find that in doing so he has grown up to spiritual manhood in Him.

Growth is a normal thing. We expect it of a child. When it fails to come we know something is wrong. We sometimes talk as though we would rather not have our children grow up. We feel they are so innocent and attractive that we would like to keep them as babies. But we do not really mean it. Dr. Olmstead tells of a statement made by his little boy when the children were small. He said, "I wish we could all stay just like we are now and not grow up at all. I think our family is just right." The father smiled and said, "Would you always want to stay in the sixth grade in school?" Well, the boy hadn't thought of that. He found that he, too, wanted to grow.

If a normal growth does not come, it is either because of illness or because artificial hindrance keeps it from its natural development. It is said that in Japan the evergreen is a small potted plant whereas in our land it reaches its full, magnificent normal growth. And yet it was originally the same tree.

The Japanese have arrested the development of a majestic tree and made it into a tiny house plant.

Somehow that idea just does not appeal to one who wants things to be normal.

The enemy of our souls, Satan, is interested in arresting the full development of Christians. He does not want them to grow up into manhood in CHRIST lest they be too strong for him to tempt and to hinder. He prefers the stunted variety.

We expect a child to grow and, as we have suggested, when that fails we know something is wrong. Just so, there is something very decidedly wrong in the life of the Christian who fails to grow.

When a child shows signs of not developing properly, we become alarmed and go to a doctor for

help. We begin to feed the youngster vitamins, we seek to correct any deficiency in diet, we arrange for proper rest and suitable exercise.

But what do we do when we find the child is not developing properly spiritually? Or, for that matter, when adults fail to grow spiritually in CHRIST?

We ought certainly to do as much for spiritual growth, in fact even more than we do for physical development. As a matter of fact, however, is it not true that we hardly notice cases of retarded spiritual development? If we do, we usually only express our regret, or perhaps we scold them a bit. There are some in the church who think that we ought not to say anything, they feel that it is their privilege to remain babes in CHRIST all through their Christian experience. That's their own business, and the preacher had better not be too critical about it.

When I think of such Christians I am reminded of an incident in the life of a friend of mine who many years ago was preaching one Sunday morning in a Philadelphia suburb. He was invited by one of the elders of the church to his home for dinner. When he reached the house he met a daughter, a fine young woman who was a school teacher, a son who was a professional man, a wife who was evidently a cultured and capable woman. Then, when they came to the table he thought at first that he saw a baby sitting in a high chair, but quickly he came to the realization that it was not a baby at all, although it acted like one, for here was a child of the household who had never grown up. The mother cared for him just as she would a baby, showing every sign of loving affection toward him. It was evident that here was the tragedy in that home - a boy who had never become a man.

After dinner the husband invited the preacher to take a walk, and then he told him that this was their oldest boy, their first-born child. In his coming they had had such tremendous joy, for him they had planned such fine things, but by some strange turn of things he had never developed. He told how the mother had lavished her love on the boy, and then he said with a deep sigh, "But Oh, the tragedy of never growing up!"

One wonders how the heart of GOD feels when He looks at all the spiritual babes, who, after five, and ten, and twenty, and thirty years of spiritual experience must still be fed from the bottle and must frequently be given the pacifier or they will create a disturbance that will upset the whole church.

How does GOD feel when He sees His ministers who ought to be busy winning new souls for the Lord, but have to spend their days and sometimes their nights running around trying to keep peace in the group of squalling infants who often make up so large a part of the membership of the church?

What a tragedy! And yet, what are we doing about it? Sometimes I fear that we are only doing our best to keep them pacified so as to avoid a disturbance, when perhaps we ought to face them candidly with their failure to grow spiritually for in this case they can grow if they want to do it. We need a revival of spiritual life, yes, and a revival of right thinking on this matter of growth in CHRIST.

We observe first then that:

I. Normal Children Will Grow (Luke 2:40 and 52)

We have before us here the Scripture concerning the development of our Lord when He was a child on earth.

While He was GOD manifest in the flesh, He was at the same time true man and, of course, in His childhood, a true boy. As a boy He developed and grew in a normal way and hence we may learn much by studying His life, which will be helpful to us in rearing and guiding our own children.

Unless we meet the tragedy of arrested development, we need, ordinarily, have little concern about the growth of our children. They will grow physically, mentally and spiritually if we give them the proper opportunity and direction.

GOD has placed in the babe in his mother's arms all the potential qualities of the man or the woman who is to be. That is what makes a baby such a marvelous and precious possession. As a matter of fact, some of us whose children have begun to grow up almost envy the young mother or father the great privilege which is ahead - of guiding and nurturing the little life which has been entrusted to the home.

Oh yes, there are plenty of responsibilities, there are trials, sorrows, and burdens to bear, but they are nothing compared to the joy which comes to a father and mother. Bringing up a baby in the home should not be just a tiresome chore, it is a God-given opportunity and privilege.

Our chief responsibility toward the child then is to provide the opportunity for the development of those inherent abilities and qualities which he already has, of guiding that growth in the right direction, and of crowning it all by bringing the child to JESUS for His regenerating grace.

That is all a parent has to do; but when we say that is all, we also say that it is quite enough because it calls for all the wisdom, judgment, patience and skill of the best of us. Yes, and even that is not enough, for constantly we find that we need the wisdom and grace of GOD shed forth upon our minds and hearts and lives if we are to do this vital work as we ought to do it. How difficult it must be to try to be a good father or mother without the help of GOD. Why try it? He is ready to be your Saviour and your Friend!

Speaking of the word "**increased**" in verse 52, Dr. G. Campbell Morgan suggests that it literally means to "chop one's way through." It speaks of difficulties, dangers and oppositions to be overcome. He says, "From babyhood to twelve years of age all is passive development. Now in youth there is a difference. Advancement will be by strenuous endeavor. The forces and resources of personality must now be gathered up and compelled to advance." JESUS "**increased**." So may our girls and boys go forward hewing their way through the obstructions of life.

Those of us who are sharing the experiences of our boys and girls as they make their way through life to manhood and womanhood know by experience that what Dr. Morgan says is right. There is no easy way for a boy or girl to get through the maze of temptation and sin and disorder in the world. It is well-nigh impossible unless there is that grace of GOD upon them

which enables them to hew their way through the almost pathless jungle of life. CHRIST is the Way. They need Him.

This speaks to us of the necessity of much kindness and sympathy for our young people, of tactful consideration of their problems, and of the determination by the grace of GOD that we will do everything possible to give them instruction and encouragement - yes, and above all that the support of our ardent prayers and the example of a godly life - that they may be enabled to make their way through the wilderness of this world to the City of Gold. We want our fine boys and girls for the Lord JESUS and we will not let the enemy have them.

We must remember that the very qualities of character in a boy or girl which will count gloriously for GOD and the church may also be dreadfully effective for sin and Satan if we permit him to have control of our children. That means that we (and may GOD help us!) must be alert, intelligent and skillful in rearing our boys and girls for Him.

While it is true, as someone has suggested, that we can possibly do more for the guidance of the physical and mental growth of our children than for the spiritual, because the latter is a matter of the grace of GOD upon them, it is nonetheless true that we can lead the steps of a little child up to the house of GOD, we can teach him to pray, to trust GOD and to honor Him in daily life. We can set an example of godly, personal living before our growing young people. That is all we can do, but we can do that. It demands our best effort - and GOD will bless it.

Now and then GOD gives us the privilege of seeing a little of the fruits of our labors.

If I may be excused a personal reference, I should like to refer to the experience of our oldest daughter when she was a senior in high school. She made a decision for CHRIST a good many years ago in a summer conference. She has been interested and active in the church and we have sought to do what we could to encourage her along spiritual lines.

The graduating class was about to elect its officers, and she being popular among her fellow students, was nominated for one of the leading offices and practically assured of election. Her classmates and friends were delighted and were helping her to prepare the campaign material which was to be used before election.

It was a real honor and one which naturally would please any child. We were concerned, however, because we knew that the social life in any high school is such that a Christian cannot take full part in it. But we did not feel that we ought to forbid her to take this office. We felt that this was a decision she must make for herself. We soon noted that she began to be troubled in her heart about it. We then shared with her in counsel and prayer. The next day - and of her own accord - she decided that to take the office would mean that she would be subjected to pressure to attend the Senior Prom and other social occasions and would involve her in responsibilities which would conflict with her church work. So she decided to withdraw. Naturally her parents were greatly pleased with the evidence of spiritual growth which had enabled her to set aside what might well have been a coveted honor for the sake of CHRIST.

We do not say, of course, that every young person in school must solve that same problem in the same way. That does not necessarily follow, but we do say that it is a delight when the Lord lets us see the spiritual principles which we have tried to inculcate into the lives of our children do

bear fruit. But whether we see results or not, let us keep on giving our best, knowing that in due season we shall reap the harvest, if we faint not.

But now, just as it is true that normal children will grow, we notice in our second point that

II. Normal Christians Will Grow (II Peter 1:1-8)

In CHRIST there are "**all things that pertain unto life and godliness.**" There is no need of some added experience or some new and striking endowment. For all the unbelievably great possibilities of Christian grace and growth are the present possession of the believer in Him. Since they are there, it is only for us to develop them. They are possibilities; let us make them actualities!

Recently, at a city-wide evangelistic service in Chicago, I was doing personal work when I came upon two fine-looking young men who told me that they were Christians but were not satisfied with their Christian faith. When I asked them to trust the Lord fully for all that He had for them, they told me that I was mistaken about the possibility of obtaining this until they had done certain things to rectify that which was wrong in their lives. They believed that they must make restitution, etc., before they could claim the full blessings of the Christian life. While I heartily agreed with them that it is true that Christians should make restitution wherein they have wronged someone else, and wherever it is possible to do it, yet I pointed out to them that all the Lord has for us is potentially there for us at the time we believe, we need not wait for some new experience or spiritual change. The only reason we do not have all that GOD wants us to have is because we do not take it by faith.

I urged them to go all the way with the Lord - and then go about the needed work of restitution with His full blessing and grace upon them.

So often it is true in the experience of Christian men and women that they go along for a number of years living a half hearted Christian life. Then suddenly they come to a place of dedication and consecration which completely transforms their spiritual experience. It is a blessed thing when this does happen. We thank GOD for it - but may I suggest that what they have now received was always there for them.

They might have had it immediately upon believing if they would have taken God at His word. All of the potentialities of spiritual maturity are present in the new born babe in CHRIST. We must permit GOD to make them actual, by faith in His promise.

Let us recognize that they are there and yield to CHRIST and to the indwelling HOLY SPIRIT so that there may be full development of Christian life and experience. Most of us come very far from attaining even a moderate degree of the fullness of our spiritual possibilities in CHRIST.

It is said that George Mueller, who had to raise tremendous sums of money to support his orphanages in Bristol, England, said near the close of his life that it was just as easy then for him to trust GOD for a great sum of money as it had been to trust Him for a postage stamp when he was a young Christian.

The point we make is that George Mueller had permitted GOD to develop his faith so that He could accomplish great things for him.

It is a matter of practice. We talk about our doctor practicing medicine, or the dentist practicing dentistry, or the lawyer practicing the law. We like to go to a man who has practiced successfully for some time because he has through his practice developed a skill and experience which we believe to be desirable. We as Christians need to practice what we have and are in CHRIST. Thus we will grow in usefulness as we grow in experience.

Unfortunately we have so far departed from the normal in Christian life that we can hardly believe that it is true that in CHRIST His followers do have all things. In place of the normal Christian life according to GOD's standard, we have established a standard based on the average Christian life, and it is rather a low average, too. We look around us and if we equal the general spiritual level of our community or our circle of acquaintanceship we are well satisfied.

If, perchance, we surpass the average, then we count ourselves among what we call "the more spiritual ones" in the church. Then, perchance, we develop a bit of spiritual pride- and then I fear we are no longer of the spiritual elite! And all the time the average standard by which we are measuring ourselves is far, far below the normal Christian life which GOD not only expects but is ready to enable us to live, yes, to empower us to live.

May I illustrate how unfortunately and foolishly this works out in life. A man in a certain church got under conviction about having the Sunday newspaper in his home. Perhaps GOD was speaking to him about it. Instead of seeking GOD's guidance for himself in that matter, he began to inquire whether other people in the church had the Sunday paper. Somehow finding that some did have it did not satisfy him. Then all at once he thought, "I wonder if the preacher has the Sunday paper. If he has it then I can feel free to use it in my own home." Being afraid to ask the minister, he found out by getting up before dawn one Sunday morning and hiding himself between the houses across the street to see whether the Sunday paper was delivered at his minister's home.

I never did find out whether the minister had the Sunday paper or not. In fact, it does not really concern me. That is his responsibility. The point I am making is this: What you do or I do, or how we live, is not to be determined by what other Christians do - no more even by what the preacher or the deacons or the elders may do. The question for us is - What is GOD's standard for me?

One of the problems which our young men and many of our young women have had to face on their return from the service of their country is that others who have been exempted from military service have been at home and have made advancement in life in the absence of those who have been on duty. This is true not only in temporal things, but also in the work of the church. It has sometimes been the case that a young man or a young woman who had been active in the Lord's work before going into the army, upon coming home has found someone who has not been away to serve the country is now in a place of leadership in the church. Some have rebelled against serving under such individuals.

One can readily understand the background of such a reaction, but that does not for a moment justify it.

We are not responsible for the lives of others; they will have to answer for their own deeds and misdeeds. We must live our own lives before the Lord and for His glory in such a way that we shall with gladness render account of our own stewardship to Him.

Peter tells us in this passage that the great and precious promises of GOD in CHRIST are not only given to enable us to escape the corruption of this sinful world but to go on to a place where we will be neither barren nor unfruitful Christians. What a picture that is!

Those who have orchards know how a tree will become barren and fruitless. After a time you can do nothing but cut it down, for it just cumberes the ground. Of course GOD will not cut down unfruitful Christians but how sad it must make Him to see a life which He intended to be rich and fully developed into great fruitfulness standing around barren and without fruit, just cumbering up the earth and serving no real purpose.

Verses 5 to 7 tell us how we are to go on in faith. Faith supplies in itself (if there is diligence or true Christian devotion) a number of other splendid qualities. Look at them - they are well worth your attention.

First we find *virtue*, and that means more than we commonly put into the word. It means moral courage or nobility of character. What a fine step forward! It means something to be strong in the Lord!

I read of a Chinese boy in Singapore years ago who had become a Christian and had arranged to be baptized in the church just after his graduation from school. To his surprise, he unexpectedly won a scholarship of \$500 a year for four years in the Hong Kong University. But one of the conditions was that "the winner must be a Confucianist."

What a temptation that was to put before the ambitious boy! But he refused to yield to it and duly came to the altar of the church at the appointed time to be baptized.

A friend of his who was a Confucianist stood next in line for the scholarship. But he was so impressed by his classmate's act that he, too, refused it, saying, "If Christianity is worth so much to my classmate, it cannot be worth less to me. I, too, will be a Christian." And he also made a confession of faith and was baptized. That Chinese boy had moral courage and it brought forth fruit for eternity.

But now note, next comes *knowledge*; that is, a discernment which will give practical skill in effective daily living for CHRIST. We are to grow not only in grace but in knowledge. May I ask you very candidly, my friend, have you grown in knowledge of GOD's Word, and of how to live a Christian life? Have you increased your discernment of spiritual things in recent months? Honest now, have you even read one good book on these matters in the last six months? If not, how do you expect to grow?

Our country is being flooded with books. People are buying more books than in any period in our nation's history. But what kind of books are they buying? And are they books which are being read with profit after they have been bought?

It is still true, however, that there are many families in our land who have practically no good books in their homes. I shall not soon forget how shocked my wife was at what a neighbor told her. Their family was moving into a new house which they had purchased. She told about the built-in bookcases, but she said, "I am going to have them torn out, because we haven't a single book to keep in them." Think of it! A family of children is growing up in that home - and how much they do need good books.

One wonders how many of our Christian homes are lacking good, sound, spiritual literature. Some may not even have one such book; some may have a few, but often poorly chosen and not even well read. Oh, Christian friends we are to grow in knowledge. Faith must reach out its searching hand along the line of what it knows, and the more it knows about GOD, the richer will be its experience of trusting Him.

Such spiritual discernment will naturally lead to self control and that indeed is something which is much needed by most (*temperance*) Christians. It is a sad lack in the life of many of us. Let me illustrate.

Peter the Great was one of the outstanding rulers of Russia in the ancient days. In the square in Leningrad there was, and there probably still is, a statue of Peter the Great seated on his horse with his hand uplifted pointing toward the sea, encouraging his people to victory and conquest. Peter is known as the Builder of Modern Russia, and in many respects he deserves the title of Peter the Great.

In one respect, however, he was far from a great man. We are told that he was subject to furious outbursts of anger, when he often became like a maniac. It was in one of these fits that he killed his own son. Toward the end of his reign, Peter the Great once remarked, "I have conquered an empire, but I was not able to conquer myself."

One of the outgrowths of a life of faith should be, and is, self-control. No matter how violent the spirit, nor how uncontrolled the tongue, the HOLY SPIRIT can and will take control if permitted so to do.

As He controls - He gives self-control.

Then observe that the self-controlled one will have *patience*; that is, he will have the endurance to stand hardship and trial.

We need to be more patient not only with others but also with ourselves. In fact, we need to be patient about this very matter of Christian growth of which we are speaking. Growth which is worthwhile takes time. A weed will grow quickly - a vine which the frost destroys will grow rapidly - but the great tree which will stand against the mighty winds of winter takes time to grow.

It was A. C. Dixon, the great preacher of a generation ago who said that church members could be divided into two groups - the saved and the unsaved. The saved he likened to trees and the unsaved to posts. They might look very much alike when they were planted but the tree will grow and the post will only stand and eventually decay. It is not important how you plant posts, except that they be set in straight and firm and in proper rows. You can use the post right away.

But the tree needs good soil, water, care and trimming, and we may wait years to benefit from it. In fact, our children may be the first to truly enjoy it. But a tree is worth waiting for! Have patience with yourself - and with others - in this matter of spiritual growth!

Going on with our Scripture portion, we note that a life that is one of *godliness* will blossom out into real *brotherly kindness*. There isn't too much of that in the world today even among Christians. Let's revive it.

This matter needs special attention among the brethren in the Lord. We who ought to love one another deeply because of CHRIST's love for us, so often set a bad example before the world in our strife with one another. One sometimes wonders whether there are any worse expressions of an unkind and unlovely spirit than that which is so common between Christians.

Then, when one thinks about how little brotherly kindness there is in the world in general it is almost appalling.

Every now and then it does show up, and we are deeply moved by the expression of one human being's spirit of affection for another. But all too often men are short-tempered, unkind, and always seeking to get ahead of one another.

To the writer's mind, an outstanding example of this is the attitude of people toward one another in the public markets. Every now and then he feels that on his afternoon off he ought to share with his wife the burden of shopping for the household. When he sees the awful selfishness, the pushing and grasping, the willingness to do anything to get ahead of someone else for some article which may be in demand, and the lying and cheating which goes on, he is almost ready to lose his faith in his fellow men. It is a certain thing that we do need a revival of brotherly kindness.

Then what? The one who loves his brother will come to love the whole world. The word "**charity**" in verse 8 is, as we know, love, and here it is a love without limitation. Well, why not? Why should we not love the whole world? Are we not all brethren, we who know CHRIST, regardless of race, position or creed?

Mr. T. Z. Koo, the great political leader and statesman of China who is at the same time an outstanding Christian man, thought during the great World War II about what his attitude should be toward the Japanese. He made this interesting statement: "The international situation today confronts every religious person with one spiritual issue of paramount importance, namely, does GOD or the nation come first in his life? When I meet a Japanese today I face this issue concretely . . . I have caught myself asking the question: 'Will my religion be strong enough to stand the strain or will it break when I stand before a Japanese?' The answer always is this: 'It will break if in my life my nation claims my first loyalty and love. It will stand if in my life my faith in and obedience to GOD come first.'" A bit of sound common sense and spiritual discernment from our Chinese brother. Could "Christian" America do as well?

We read in verse 8 that such virtues as we have been naming are to abound, that is, they are not only to exist, they are to exist in abundance in the life of the Christian. Surely no Christian life need, therefore, lack rich fruitfulness for GOD in CHRIST. If Christian people would let the new

life within them grow, I am sure it would surprise them, what GOD would and could do through them for His own glory.

By the way, that is one of the delightful things about being associated with a Christian training school. Here young men and women come by the hundreds year after year to prepare for Christian service. Many of them have been professing Christians for some time but they have not always permitted GOD to have His way in their lives. Some of them will go along for weeks and months after coming to school before they reach a place of spiritual growth. Then all at once by the grace of GOD they begin to move forward for Him.

What a thrilling experience that is for them and for us! Of course; that delightful phenomenon is not limited to a school, it can happen in your church, in your community, yes, in your own home and in your own heart.

Babes in CHRIST - how about starting to grow up to the full stature of Christian manhood and womanhood? Teachers and preachers - add to the assurance of salvation, and the loyalty to CHRIST we have talked about in our two previous messages - the cultivation of an eagerness to grow with CHRIST. It will help someone on the way to glorious and successful living for Him.

~ end of chapter 3 ~
