

# A Spiritual Growth Check

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*‘But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen’ (2 Peter 3.18)*

This well-known command to grow in grace and knowledge was given by Peter as the essential antidote to backsliding and apostasy, the apostle having just written: ‘Beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness.’ From the second chapter of this epistle, Peter has warned of false teachers who claimed to know Christ, but later ceased to respect the Scriptures, twisting passages to give themselves licence to do whatever they wanted to do.

You find this today, even among Bible believers. There are many who justify their wholesale adoption of modern entertainment culture in their worship as well as in their personal lives, by twisting various passages of Scripture, and ignoring others. It is in the light of all this that Peter gives the final verse of the epistle: ‘But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’

The command is to grow, but this means much more than simply growing larger or increasing in knowledge. Growth illustrations in the Scripture are very full of meaning, such as that used by Peter when he speaks of growing like babies. Growth through infancy, childhood and youth is more than growth in size. A babe, for example, cannot speak, but slowly learns to do so in an increasingly sophisticated way. Constantly he acquires various skills and powers, becoming stronger all the time, and soon requires no help in feeding and dressing. Numerous skills are rapidly added, and ultimately the person becomes a productive adult, supporting others. Growth is far more than the enlargement of limbs; it is the appearance and refinement of many new factors.

Other growth illustrations (used by the apostle Paul) feature a tree or plant or building. The point about a tree is not so much that it becomes very large, but that it puts down roots, enabling it to thrive despite drought or tempest, to be hospitable to birds and insects, to produce flowers and fruit, and to propagate. Similarly, the Christian develops spiritual stability and endurance, with skills to refute and reject Satan, and to witness and minister to others.

Here we shall briefly set out five aspects of the Christian life in which we must consciously seek growth, but first we should note that growth in grace is mentioned before growth in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, and this is significant. It is not that one is more important than the other, because growth in grace and in knowledge go hand in hand. You cannot have growth in grace without growth in knowledge. However, you can have growth in knowledge without growth in grace. Perhaps this is why knowledge is placed second in this verse.

Sometimes believers run further ahead in knowledge than in grace. They want to argue, discuss and display their prowess in the learning process, but they are sometimes stunted in growth of grace, the great fruits of Christian character being small in their lives.

How shall we define growing in grace? It is the ongoing Christian walk of proving the free favour of God in daily forgiveness, answered prayer, help in holiness and progress in service. It includes advancing in obedience to the Lord and communion with him. Here are five vital aspects of growth to monitor.

## 1. Growing In Dependence Upon Grace

First, we should all be growing in dependence upon grace, for this is the basis of the life of faith. When we come to the Lord, we are made aware of the extent of our sin, and realise that we cannot secure the favour of God. We see that there is so much the matter with us that we deserve only rejection and punishment by God, and we therefore repent and trust wholly in the Christ of Calvary for redemption. However, as we grow in grace we gain an even keener awareness of our unworthiness and unfittedness, and an even deeper realisation of our need of Christ. Accordingly our gratitude to him overflows for what he has done.

The veteran saint, who you may think has made wonderful progress, will often be on his or her knees pleading with God for forgiveness, having seen even more clearly all that is wrong and unworthy within, and feeling increasingly dependent upon the Lord's atoning death.

The question is – do we also grow in dependence upon and appreciation of grace? Or do we tend to leave this dependence behind, so that we now take Calvary for granted? Do sin and failure now seldom hurt or shame us, leading to the loss of dependence on Christ, together with the overwhelming sense of gratitude that we once possessed?

Self-examination and reflection are essential in order that we may feel more keenly than ever how much we need Christ's great work in bearing our sin away.

One hears of objections made by some Christians to the grand old practice of dedicating a Sunday service to evangelistic preaching. They say they cannot see the point of attending such services as they have been saved for many years. However, believers who are growing in their dependence upon grace just love to hear the word of saving grace declared and unfolded. It means so much to them that it is almost their highest point of worship. They do not need it in the sense that they are already saved, but they constantly increase in their love and appreciation of redemption, for the reason expressed in the old hymn of Henry Twells:

*And none, O Lord, have perfect rest,  
For none are wholly free from sin;  
And they who fain would serve thee best  
Are conscious most of wrong within.*

So, do we grow in dependence upon grace?

## 2. Growing in Application of Grace

Secondly, do we grow in the application of grace to our own lives, for progress in holiness? Grace is an ongoing experience of the pardon and the power of God in holiness and service, and we must receive it by daily repentance and prayer for help. Where did I fail today? How did I sin? What duty or service did I shrink from? Not only must I repent, but I must also make my pledge to the Lord to do better, praying for a lively conscience and for help in responding to it. I especially need to pray for help over my more frequent sins, and for a greater awareness of the watching eye of the Lord. This is the application of grace to the walk of righteousness.

Do we daily review our walk, and seek the grace of God in improvement? Are we more patient today than we were a year ago? Are we more committed to the Lord's service; more self-controlled in word and deed; less selfish; less infected by pride; less covetous, and more considerate? Are we growing through the daily application of grace in our life?

### **3. Growing in Privileges of Grace**

Thirdly, we should grow in the privileges of grace. The favour of God brings enormous privileges to believers, including the spiritual capacity to grasp, learn and explore the Word of God. We also have the privilege of proving the Lord day by day as we call upon his name for blessing in employment, witness, health and help for others, and the resolution of numerous problems. Further, we have the uplifting privilege of that certainty and assurance which fills the heart as we express our love to God in personal prayer – the grace of communion with him.

Do we constantly prove the privilege of prayer and its effectiveness and power? Have we experienced daily the privilege of making intercession for lost people? There is no greater privilege than that of being able to prevail with God on high through prayers which were heard before the foundation of the world by the God of all grace. Have we seen the people for whom we interceded become open to the Gospel through a surprising softening of heart, and a dawning sense of need?

Do we grow in our use of these privileges of grace, or do we fail to call upon the Lord in every trouble and distress? Do we fail to study precious truths which we have been given the power to understand? Do we listen only vaguely to ministry? Do we look for the sweet surprises of communion with the Lord? It is a wonderful development to be growing in the use of the privileges of grace.

### **4. Growing in Proclamation of Grace**

Fourthly, we should be growing also in the proclamation of grace. Every true convert has a testimony, and should be developing in skill to speak to others about the way of salvation. Some Christians have very little opportunity to witness to others in their place of business, but most would be able to participate in corporate witness, assisting their church in the various outreach endeavours. There is a place and need for every believer in the operation of Sunday Schools, Bible classes, neighbourhood visitation, literature distribution, and various other methods for reaching lost souls. Do we participate and steward to help such work? Are we growing in wisdom in speaking to others, and proclaiming the message of grace?

### **5. Growing in Defence of Grace**

Fifthly, we should be growing in the defence of grace. This is a tremendous responsibility for every believer, failure at this point having been the tragedy of the last hundred years. So much has been lost by evangelicals; so many churches; so much of the great legacy of past blessing. Are we sensitive to error? Do we recognise it? Would we, if we had to move to a new area, go placidly to a church which seemed to be Bible-believing on the surface, but had fallen into serious error in doctrine or practice? We should be growing in the defence of grace because there are so many destructive trends assailing churches in these days.

Satan's operations are always intensely cunning and deceptive. He sets up people in our churches who become famous as Bible-believing preachers, their books sell by the million, but on close examination their teaching shows they are not truly converted. They deny penal substitution, the very essence of the Gospel of Christ, together with other essentials of the faith, and they get away with it. By using biblical, evangelical language, they deceive undiscerning Christians, who go along with their errors, buy their books, and altogether fail to defend grace. Such Christians approve of the acceptable morsels in the teaching of popular heretics, but fail to notice what is missing, or what is twisted and opposed to the Word. Are we growing in the defence of grace? Do we detect the errors of false teachers? If Christian people who possess the benefits of grace would only be sensitive to error, churches would never fall into the hands of superficial, worldly so-called Christians, ultimately to close.

The 'grow in grace' picture of *2 Peter 3.18* is one of persistent growth. It is a tragedy to be spiritually stunted and immature. It is also a picture of uniform growth as believers grow in every Christian grace at the same time, with no glaring omissions. It should never be said of anyone, 'He is a good Christian man, and has grown in knowledge, but not in conquering the world in his life.' Or, 'She is a fine Christian woman, believing in Calvary and trusting the Lord, but she knows so little about doctrine, and never reads anything.'

Another person may have a pleasing manner and a good knowledge of doctrine, but you would never catch him engaged in witness or Christian service, or working with fellow believers in the great mission of Jesus Christ. What a disaster it is to be lop-sided in growth.

We should all want to grow uniformly in all respects, becoming like a great tree, stable, hospitable, beautiful, fruitful, and drawing life from great depths.

Growth in grace is to grow in dependence upon grace, in the application of grace, in the exercising of the privileges of grace, in the proclamation of grace, and in the defence of grace.

### **Growing in knowledge**

This brings us to the second part of the verse – 'Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' Growth in grace must take place alongside growth in knowledge, which clearly means biblical knowledge, and especially the great doctrines of the faith. Have we ever read a book of doctrine? Thomas Watson's *A Body of Divinity* is a superb 17th-century summary of all the major Christian doctrines so that the reader can see the entire system of doctrine, and how each component fits in with the whole. It is very sad if a long-standing Christian has never read a worthy doctrinal book.

Have we ever thoughtfully read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*? I remember at the age of about twelve that this was one of the books we had to study in English literature. I thought it was so boring as we pored over it line by line, paragraph by paragraph, noting its structure and literary devices. How we yawned and squirmed!

Later when I was converted as a late teenager, someone said to me, 'You must read *Pilgrim's Progress*.' Why should I read that book I remembered having to toil through, equal only to Homer's *Odyssey* for dreariness? However, I read it again, and soon thought to myself, 'This is not the book I read years ago. This is an entirely different book.'

Once one's heart is opened, and spiritual light has dawned, that old book springs to life, showing us the temptations, pitfalls and triumphs of the spiritual journey as no other book outside the Bible has ever done. Of course, the Bible is everything, but books that explain and illuminate the message of Scripture have helped thousands upon thousands of Christians.

Are we growing in the knowledge of Truth? In addition, do we have knowledge about the current dangers confronting the cause of Christ? What are the battles currently raging? What is the devil trying to do to us today? There are at least six major points of attack that Satan is launching against churches and individual Christians at this present time, but do we know what these are? Are we on the watch?

The Tabernacle's 'Read for the Lord' programme includes books which alert believers to the issues of today.

Moving beyond books, are we growing in the knowledge of the personal lessons we have received from the Lord? We have made great mistakes, but do we remember them, and the wonderful way

in which the Lord lifted us out of them, and taught us the right way? Are such lessons inscribed in our hearts? In addition, have we learned the way of seeking the guidance of God? All these matters are part of growing in knowledge.

If we are among those believers who have not grown in knowledge, but have stood still, then we will be easily brought into a backslidden state by Satan. The apostle's command is so essential – 'Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'

The reiteration of this text here leads us to explore further information on the kind of knowledge we need. Significantly, Peter employs the Lord's full name and offices, saying – 'our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. He means us to read his words this way: 'Grow in the knowledge of the Lord, and in the knowledge of the Saviour, and in the knowledge of Jesus, and in the knowledge of Christ.' He is one person, of course, presented under his different offices and names to teach us that we should advance in the knowledge of him in each respect.

### **Christ as Lord**

In other words, are we learning more about Christ as Lord? This comes first. Have we bowed to his lordship or rule over us and his providential overruling in our lives and circumstances? Have we yielded up every aspect of our lives to him? Have we, for instance, yielded up in recent times some coveted idol which we had put before Christ and his service, and which had blunted our obedience? To younger people I ask – have you in recent years thrown out all those worldly CDs you once possessed, or is your pleasure still the music and rhythm-drug of this world, the entertainment so intimately associated with self-rule, self-indulgence and immorality? You wanted it, needed it, and fed upon it, allowing it to corrupt and spoil your spiritual tastes, but at last you bowed entirely to Christ's lordship, and put it out of your lives.

There are young people who, sadly, have not increased in the knowledge of Christ as Lord, and still hang on to pursuits that are antagonistic to the faith and offensive to the Lord. Sometimes such young believers will get together with others in the same condition to enthuse about their remaining worldly delights. 'Have you heard this?' they will say, 'and what do you think of such-and-such?' They are not out-and-out for Christ, and do not realise that their chosen entertainments war against the life of the soul.

Are we in this position? To grow in the knowledge of our Lord, means that he becomes the Lord of our life in every aspect. We then gladly part company with everything which bears the indelible stamp of a fallen world, ordering our priorities for him.

### **Christ as Saviour**

To grow in the knowledge of Christ as Saviour means that we cast out undisturbed and perhaps secret sin, because we cannot any longer offend the one who went to Calvary for us. It may have gone unconfessed for years, blocking from us the full kindness and power of God.

Has there been, for example, something of the gossip resident in us, or some covetousness? To grow in the knowledge of Christ as Saviour means that we look to him as our continuing Saviour, who enables his people to cast out these sins. We have confessed them and heard in our hearts the voice of the Saviour saying, 'The Lord has put your sin away.'

### **Christ as Jesus**

To grow in the knowledge of Jesus, the Lord's personal name, surely refers to a growing sense of communion with him, and a growing love for him. We can use his personal name because we are



his and he is ours.

Do we continue to know devotions when we are lost in wonder, love and praise that we know him, and that the Saviour of the world has made himself ours? Have we known liberty in prayer, and in the expressing of love and devotion to him? Have we reflected on his person and ways, while reading the Word, and admired him? Such knowledge of him deepens increasingly, and especially as we catch the spirit of his love for the lost. May we grow in the knowledge of Jesus, that is, of his personal affection for us, and the closeness of that love.

### **Christ as Messiah**

To grow in the knowledge of Christ – the Messiah or anointed one – means to identify more with his entire messianic mission and timetable. He is now the rider on the white horse of *Revelation 6*, going forth conquering and to conquer over the hearts of his redeemed people, and soon he will return in power and glory. To grow in the knowledge of Christ, or Messiah, is to understand the whole picture of redemption and to look and work for his return. Do we meditate on the course and completion of his mission, and reflect on the great day of his appearing? Let us seek to know him more and more as Lord, then as Saviour, as Jesus, and as Christ.

This is both a searching and encouraging text, being both simple and rich, and referring to a form of growth which can never inflate the ego, because every aspect is humbling as well as uplifting. As if to mark this, the inspired verse concludes – ‘To him be glory both now and for ever.’

Let us grow, dear friends, no matter how long we may have been on this glorious journey, never standing still, so that we may be strong and much used of the Lord.