

The Process of Spiritual Growth (Part 2)

We learned in [Part 1](#) that progressive sanctification is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through us. To the extent a child of God submits to the process, he will grow spiritually. According to [2 Peter 3:18](#), the agents of spiritual growth are 1) the engrafted Word, the Holy Spirit, who imparts to us the mind of Christ through the written Word; and 2) grace, which the Holy Spirit dispenses, as needed. How do we access the agent of grace?

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into his grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God ([Rom. 5:1-2](#)).

Learning to Access Grace

I have a key that gives entrance to my home. If I lose my key, and no one else is home, I will never get access to the house until I find the key. I can look in the windows. I can imagine everything inside. I can wish I were inside. I can protest my situation and demand that I be given entrance, because I am the rightful owner of the house. But none of these things will gain me entrance. I must have the key!

So it is in the spiritual life with respect to grace. It is freely mine ([2 Cor. 12:9](#); [James 4:6](#)). I stand upon it ([Rom. 5:2](#)). Nevertheless, I will never experience its application in my life without the key. I can wish for it. I can demand it. I can even cry and bemoan the fact that grace is not at my disposal. But, like my house, I will never get access without the key.

What is the key that unlocks (accesses) grace? It is faith – dependence on God, as opposed to self-dependence. Faith, in this context, is a choice to rely upon God to appropriate His grace in any given situation, whether victory over sin or endurance amid trials, etc. It is trusting in the Lord with all the heart rather than leaning to our own understanding. It is asking for God's enablement, in any given situation, and then believing He has *already* given it.

When we learn to unlock God's storehouse of grace through the key of dependence on the Holy Spirit, we will be rejoicing in hope (i.e., confident expectation) that God is being glorified in our lives. How is He being glorified? By Christ living His life through us.

In vs. 3-5 we find the process by which we grow spiritually, or we could say, the means by which we are progressively sanctified.

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us ([Rom. 5:3-5](#)).

Learning Endurance Through Trials

God teaches us greater dependence on Himself via *tribulations*, or we could say *trials*. Critical to spiritual growth is leaning to respond rightly to trials. God calls it *glorying in tribulations*.

The word *tribulations* encompasses a range of troubles: trials, afflictions, suffering, persecution, even daily pressures – traffic pressures, workplace pressures, family pressures, etc. Spiritual growth results when we learn to glory in our troubles. That certainly does not come naturally. Our tendency is to sing the blues rather than sing praise to God amid troubles. Indeed, the only way a Christian can genuinely rejoice in troubles is by accessing God's grace through dependence on the Holy Spirit. Only then will Jesus live His life through us – and He always responds rightly amid troubles!

Interestingly, the word *glory* in v.3 is entirely different than *glory* in v.2. The Greek word *doxa* is used in v.2, from which we get the English word *doxology* – an ascription of praise. When you are responding to God in complete dependence amid trials, you are rejoicing with confident expectation that God is being glorified – praised and honored – by your life.

However, the word *glory* in v.3 is a different Greek word with an entirely different meaning. It is the idea of boasting in a good sense, or we could say *rejoicing*. In fact, in v.2 the same Greek word is translated *rejoicing*. Thus, glorying in your tribulations is the idea of rejoicing in your troubles. [James 1:4](#) puts it this way: *count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations* (various trials).

There is no way in the world we can do that of ourselves. Our natural tendency is to chafe at our troubles and to do everything in our power to escape them or sidestep the pain. But a growing Christian will learn (in ever-increasing intensity) to rejoice in his troubles as he depends upon God's grace amid the troubles.

Is rejoicing in troubles an end in itself? Absolutely not! God tells us why we should rejoice in troubles at the end of v.3 – *knowing that tribulation worketh patience*. Troubles – to the extent we learn to rejoice in the midst of them – will produce patience in our lives. What good is that? Patience is endurance; it is durative faith, faith that never lets up; faith that keeps trusting; dependence that bears up under the pressure. Our problem, typically, is that we trust God here and there, but we don't trust Him completely and at all times. Troubles help us learn to trust God at all times!

Learning Confidence Through Experience

A Christian who is regularly depending on God's grace to bear up under the pressure of troubles, is growing. Jesus is living His life through that person. Incidentally, learning patience (endurance) takes time – one trial at a time. That's why in v.3 God says that patience works (i.e., produces) experience.

Experience is knowledge that is accumulated by participating in something repeatedly, over time. In this case, it's over a lifetime. God doesn't expect us to learn to endure under pressure perfectly in the first few months of the Christian life. It takes years of troubles of varying types for us to learn to trust Him in all things. Thankfully, God is patient with us as we are learning. But we should be learning through trials, not chafing at them, and our learning should be producing an experience and maturity that is invaluable. When we chafe and do not progress, He brings discipline into our lives to help to bring us to the place where we will progress.

Notice in v.3 where this wonderful experience leads. As you are experiencing God's enabling power to give victory in your troubles, time after time again, you will become a person of hope. Hope is not wishful thinking. As stated earlier, in a biblical sense, hope is confident expectation – not confidence in self, but confidence in God.

Think about it. If you have experienced God giving you grace to respond with joy in trouble after trouble, you are going to become a person who *confidently expects* God to work all the time – not only in your life, but also in the lives of others. You will be consistently joyful; you will be consistently optimistic. The optimism is not merely a positive mental attitude. It is a confident spirit, based on God, Whom you know to be true *all the time!*

People who live in the realm of hope are not ashamed. In fact, hope is so confident in the Lord that it is bold; it does not cower in fear. This is not a mere personality boldness; it is boldness that only the Holy Spirit can produce. It is the kind of boldness that endures under the most intense form of troubles – persecution, even death for Christ. The Christian who has learned through experience to rejoice amidst troubles by depending on God's grace will be ready to meet the persecution with boldness.

Learning to Love as Jesus Loves

The climax of the passage – the ultimate end of spiritual growth – is found in v.5, *the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit*. God wants us all to mature to the point of becoming genuinely loving Christians, but agape-type love is rarely found in the lives of most Christians. It is only seen in those who are described as being like Jesus, because Jesus is living His life through them.

Love (as a way of life – not merely a burst here or there) is characteristic only in the lives of those Christians who have learned to depend upon God's grace to enable them to rejoice in their troubles, over a period of time, so

that it becomes their experience. Because they have so experienced God's deliverance for victory over and over again, they are confident people in the Lord, expecting God to do great things all the time. After living in that realm of life for some period of time, hope graduates to love, the ultimate.

Three of the key words in this passage are *faith* (v.2), *hope* (v.4), and *love* (v.5) – the very three words the apostle Paul uses to sum up the Christian life at the end of [1 Cor. 13](#). These are the three things that matter, no doubt the three things that will survive God's fire at the Judgment Seat. Everything else that is accomplished in life apart from faith or hope or love will be burned up!

The most basic element of this triplet is *faith* – dependence on God – the very thing that unlocks God's grace. Ironically, it is the starting point of a sanctified life, yet so few Christians seem to grasp the concept of depending on the Lord for a rejoicing spirit amid their troubles.

No wonder Christians do not bear up under pressure. No wonder Christians are lacking in confident expectation, the divine optimism that results in boldness that is eager to suffer and die for Jesus. No wonder Christianity is bereft of self-sacrificing, unconditional love. The problem is that so many, despite being saved for decades, have never really progressed in sanctification because they have never learned to appropriate God's grace by faith. Oh, may we see our great need and learn to grow in grace!