

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!

[The Process of Spiritual Growth \(Part 1\)](#)

As a pastor, I am most concerned about the ongoing sanctification of the congregation God has entrusted to my care. The bottom line: I want those dear folks to be prepared to give a good account at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

What, then, is sanctification (i.e., *progressive* sanctification)? It is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through mine. I used to say it is the process of becoming more like Christ. I don't say that any more, because it is confusing and, therefore, easily misunderstood. Some have abused the meaning of "becoming more like Christ," by mistakenly putting the emphasis on what man must do in the process, rather than focusing on the object – Jesus – and what we must let Him do in us. There is a difference, and it's not as subtle as it seems.

To be sure, sanctification is a process, but we need to yield to God's process, not superimpose our own ideas as to what the process should be. For example, Thomas a Kempis wrote a book in the fifteenth century called, *The Imitation of Christ*, that essentially says we need to learn to imitate the life of Christ. That is a focus on what we must *do*. It is not possible for us

to imitate Christ, no matter how hard we try. Indeed, by “trying” we are injecting self-dependence.

Another example is the book *In His Steps*, written by the liberal theologian, Charles Sheldon. Many Christians have no idea that Sheldon did not hold to the fundamentals of the faith but rather promoted a social gospel; he was quite liberal. Yet, how many walk around quoting his statement, “What would Jesus do?” which has been popularized in modern culture by marketing experts who want to make a buck off the WWJD cliché, selling bracelets, necklaces, and other paraphernalia. Never mind that Sheldon was totally off base in his theology.

Sheldon’s question is dangerous, for it puts man in the driver’s seat (rather than the Scriptures), encouraging him to play a sort of spiritual situation ethics. Even a lost man can attempt to play this game. It is really no more than a modern spin on the old “imitation” model of sanctification as proposed by Thomas a Kempis. Both of these books, as noble as they sound, actually promote flesh-dependence.

Again, biblical sanctification is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through us. It is summed up well in [Galatians 2:20](#). As one submits to the process, he grows spiritually. If one does not understand the process correctly or refuses to yield to the Holy Spirit’s working in his life, growth will be stunted. Ongoing, experiential sanctification and spiritual growth are, therefore, closely related concepts.

Incidentally, spiritual growth is not instantaneous. It happens over time. While I doubt any Christian would dispute that statement (after all, the word *growth* implies a continuing process), some *essentially* argue the opposite. How? By looking to past, life-changing events (a decision during an invitation, a spiritual crisis that precipitated an “I surrender all” moment) as the building blocks of spiritual growth. Others equate participation in religious activities (Bible-reading, prayer, church attendance, etc.) with spiritual growth.

While events and religious activities may be catalysts toward change and growth, they certainly don’t guarantee growth. Too often decisions are based on emotion and tend to fade in short time. In the case of religious activities, they can become ritualistic, and tend to salve one’s conscience with thoughts such as “this activity makes me spiritual.” That is, of course, wrong thinking, and is a deadening form of legalism.

As Americans, we want it now, and we expect it now. The ninety-second turn-around time guaranteed by some fast-food restaurants is classic evidence of our cultural impatience. Unfortunately, we often carry our cultural expectations into our Christianity.

We want spiritual maturity now, and we expect it now. Oh, how our eternal God, who is not bound by time, must sigh at our impatience! He is the epitome of patience, and for that we should be truly grateful, because His eternal patience results in His not giving up on us.

Spiritual growth is actually a life-long process that starts when we are saved, and continues over time throughout the Christian life. It is gradual and incremental. The Scriptures beautifully define and describe the two key agents of spiritual growth in [2 Peter 3:18](#) and the process of spiritual growth in [Romans 5:1-5](#) (to be examined in a future article).

The Agents of Spiritual Growth

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ([2 Peter 3:18](#)).

The First Agent: The Engrafted Word

Growth comes, in part, through knowledge of Christ. However, it is not merely knowledge *about* Him. It is *His* knowledge! We already have the mind of Christ, according to [1 Cor. 2:16](#). How, then, do we appropriate it? By His Spirit Whom He has given us. *Now we have received ... the Spirit which is of God; that we might KNOW the things that are freely given to us of God ([1 Cor. 2:12](#)).* Of course, the Holy Spirit uses the written Word of God to open up for us the mind of Christ.

I believe the Holy Spirit is the engrafted (implanted) Word, referred to in [James 1:21](#), *receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.* The phrase "save your souls," in this context, does not mean to save from eternal condemnation. It means to sanctify. Thus the child of God is commanded to receive (i.e, accept) the engrafted Word – the Holy Spirit – Who teaches us the written Word and impresses upon our heart truths that we need in order to grow. In other words, He sanctifies us through the Word. Jesus prayed, *Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth ([John 17:17](#)).* So the first agent of spiritual growth is the Spirit of God, the engrafted Word, who imparts unto us the mind of Christ through the written Word. Faith comes by hearing the word of God ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

The Second Agent: Grace

Grace is a marvelous spiritual concept. It is a priceless commodity, yet it is entirely free, given to us by God. Ironically, grace is the very thing we most desperately need but most often spurn.

The classic theological definition says grace is God's unmerited favor, and that is certainly true. But let's get more practical. Grace is God's divine enablement to do what He wants me to do. Grace is God giving me what I need to win in every situation – to win over temptation to sin; to win in how I respond to my trials; to win in my responses to people; etc.

We need grace every moment of every day. If the righteousness of Christ is our *provision* to win, grace is God's tailor-made *application* of it in every particular situation. He always gives a big dose – *he giveth more grace ([James 4:6](#)).* His promise to every Christian: *My grace is sufficient ([2 Cor. 12:9](#)).* The well of grace never runs dry!

If that is not your experience, then you have one of two problems

(incidentally, the problem is NEVER God; it is always man). The first possible problem is that you may be spurning God's grace. How do we spurn His grace? By our pride. *God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble* ([James 4:6](#)). Pride comes in many forms, of course, but the kind that typically spurns God's grace is the kind that thinks, "I can do this" or "I will try harder." Any attitude of self-sufficiency or self-dependence will result in spurning God's grace.

The second possible problem is not knowing how to access God's grace, even though the answer is plainly given in the Scriptures. So you must learn the hard way, in the spiritual "school or hard knocks," so to speak. You get into a situation – a trial, a temptation, and you are failing because you have been depending on self. Indeed, you have fallen numerous times in the past, and you are tired of it. Perhaps by being overwhelmed with pressure and sorrow, you finally come to the end of your rope. In desperation, you cry out: "Help me, Lord!" Our gracious God, in His Providence, has allowed you to stumble upon the secret to victory: realizing the utter folly of self-reliance that always fails; turning in complete reliance on Christ Who always wins.

The most basic aspect of spiritual growth is learning to depend on the Lord, specifically, the Holy Spirit who lives within. He guides us in all truth, through the Word of God and dispenses grace as needed, to the extent we depend on Him. If only we would learn to continue depending! Is that not the essence of abiding in the vine?

In the next article we will explore the spiritual growth process as outlined in [Romans 5:1-5](#).