

## *‘Living in the Light’*

A teaching series in 1 John by Rev. Robert Griffith

### ***Part 7: Growing up into Christ***

We have a couple of months to wait yet, but the coming of spring results in a transformation of life. Everywhere you turn, you see all of nature begin to come alive again. Flowers start to bloom. The landscape turns green where it once was dry or dormant. Life begins to reappear everywhere. Things begin to grow.

I have always admired those people who have a green thumb. There are those who seem to be able to get anything to grow. They are the people who are out in the yard cultivating the flowerbeds, planting the tomato plants, and applying the fertilizer. Now I have been quite successful in getting grass to grow and even more successful in getting weeds to grow. But I am a little jealous of those people who seem to have the knack of getting useful things to grow.

Spring reminds us that there is a principle of growth built into creation. Indeed, where there is life, there is growth. Living things grow. If they are not growing, there are only a couple of explanations. It might be a season of temporary dormancy. During the winter, growth slows to a standstill. You don't expect things to grow then. And some things do not grow at an even pace. There is a species of Chinese bamboo which does absolutely nothing – or so it seems – for the first four years. Then suddenly, during the fifth year, it shoots up ninety feet in sixty days. Now, would you say that the bamboo grew in sixty days or five years? There are good reasons why we might not observe growth. But when it is time for growth and growth does not occur, then we have to ask ourselves another question. What is blocking or stunting that growth? You see, living things naturally grow. If they do not, then something must be keeping them from growing. Well, so it is with Christians.

The Bible teaches us that the goal of every disciple of Christ is to grow. Indeed, we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and into the likeness of Jesus Himself. The Bible teaches very clearly that the goal of Christ's coming is not merely to bring people to salvation, the goal is to bring them into full Christian maturity. So my question today as we continue our journey through John's first letter is a simple one. Where are you in your quest for maturity in Christ? It's a question we could ask of the whole Church. If you examine the state of the Christian church in our society today, and you compare the Australian church to the Biblical standard, any honest person will come away with the conclusion that the single most pressing need in our churches is for Christians who are spiritually strong and spiritually mature. The Bible calls this discipleship.

In our text today, John points out three categories of believers. We see in these categories three stages of spiritual development in our quest for full spiritual maturity.

The three stages of Christian growth John highlights in our text are children, fathers, and young men. We should also point out that these categories have nothing to do with age or gender – John is just using this as an illustration. It is actually possible for someone to be sixty years old and still be a spiritual child and it is possible for a female to be a spiritual 'father' in the sense that those terms are used in this text. So forget the gender and age here – it's only an illustration.

Let's look at these three stages of growth more closely.

The first stage mentioned is children. In this passage John mentions each category twice, and so we will take the two references together. In verse 12 he says, *"I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name."* And in verse 14, toward the end, he writes, *"I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father."*

Let me begin by saying that being a child is not necessarily a bad thing. All of us come into the world as babies. As far as I can tell, there is simply no other way to do it. We start out as children. And children can be wonderful. But they can be a lot of trouble too. Someone described a baby as *"something with a loud noise at one end and no control at the other."* That's true, and babies also demand a lot of attention on our part because they have not yet learned to take care of themselves. This is a mark of childhood and immaturity. Indeed, the process of maturing is designed to teach children how to be more self-sustaining.

Children are characterized by new life. They are born. They are here. They are alive. And this is how John speaks of spiritual children. He says that one of the characteristics of spiritual children is their sins have been forgiven on account of Christ's name. They have been born again. They have experienced the forgiveness of sins. He also says about them that they have known the Father. In other words, spiritual children are alive and they know who their Heavenly Father is. And this is enough at the beginning.

Those of you who have had children know that as long as your baby is healthy and gives you a big smile of recognition when you pick them up, all is well. That's because you don't expect any more from babies. On the other hand, if you were to analyse them critically, you would find that they are not very hard working, they tend to lay around a lot, they are totally self-centred, they burp in your face and don't even apologize, they have no modesty, and they cry a lot. In fact, they act just like babies! There's a reason for that: they *are* babies!

We also enter into our spiritual life as babies. We are spiritual children. We know the forgiveness of God and we know who is our Father. It's great to have spiritual children around. But we don't want them to remain children. What is tragic is when someone has known the Lord for ten, twenty or fifty years and yet they are still spiritual babes. Our goal for children is always to have them grow up into the mature adult God created them to be. So too in our spiritual life.

The next category of maturity is fathers. In verse 13 we read, *"I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning."* Again, in verse 14 we read the identical words. He says the exact same thing twice about fathers. It seems as if that is all that needs to be said about those who are fully spiritually mature. And what is it that he says? What is the mark of this spiritual maturity? It is this – they have known Him Who is from the beginning. Who is this Him? This obviously refers to our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember what John said in the very first verse of this letter: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."* Spiritual fathers have come to know Jesus Christ.

When he speaks of the fact that these fathers have known Jesus Christ, he uses a Greek word which indicates that they 'know by experience.' In other words, one who is spiritually mature has developed a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. A spiritual father is one who walks with Christ. One who is spiritually mature has had his or her life seasoned by maintaining a close and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of their walk with Christ, these are the people who reflect His nature and character in their lives. They are wise with His wisdom. They are steadfast and stable in His peace. They are merciful and kind because His love abides in their hearts.

They have been through the fire and come out still trusting in God's goodness and grace. This is the goal for every one of us as believers. Our call is to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ by following Him consistently and faithfully.

The third category of maturity is young men. In verse 13 we read, *"I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one."* And again in verse 14 we read, *"I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."*

Young men are energetic – they are strong. As we move in our development from being children, we grow into young men. John indicates that these young men are strong and in their strength they have overcome the evil one. Young men are characterized by their energy and strength. Young men do the work. Young men fight the battles. Young men make a difference. They are alive.

But why does John put young men third in the order? If you were talking about stages of growth, the order should be children, young men, and fathers. But John's order is children, fathers, and young men. I think we must remember that John's purpose was not to give us a logical presentation. John's purpose was to make a point about growth. And I believe that the reason why he put the young men last was to share what is the most important principle of growth. John wants to share with us the means or instrument of growth. And these young men are his illustration.

What was the key to the growth of these young men? What was the key to their becoming strong? What was the key to them overcoming the evil one? We find in these young men the key to all spiritual growth. The key to spiritual growth is the Word of God. These young men were strong because of the Word of God lives in them. If we are to grow in spiritual maturity, the Word of God must live in us as well.

I said before that discipleship is desperately lacking in many churches today. The reason for this is that the Word of God is not read, studied, and applied like it once was. People are led astray by false teaching or they dry up on the vine because of no teaching. They don't know the Word. People have the wrong priorities in their lives because they don't live in and through and by the Word. People justify all kinds of wrong theology, wrong behaviour, wrong attitudes, and wrong decisions on the basis of worldly wisdom instead of on the basis of clear Biblical teaching. Why? Because the Word of God is neglected or crowded out by more 'modern' priorities and pursuits.

In 2 Peter 3:18 we are told, *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."* We are not only to grow in grace but also in knowledge. When Paul was leaving the church in Ephesus, not knowing if he would be able to come back, his closing words were this: *"Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."* (Acts 20:32) The Word of God is the instrument of growth. It is the word that builds us up. Listen to what Paul wrote to Timothy, his son in the faith: *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16)

Where are you in your quest for maturity in Christ? This is the question I asked earlier. Where you are is probably directly related to where the Word of God is in your life. Firstly, I need to remind us that the term 'the Word of God' means more than one thing when we use it today. Ultimately, the Word of God is Jesus Christ. *"In the beginning was the Word,"* refers to Christ. But we also refer to the Bible as the Word of God because the whole purpose of the written word is to reveal Christ to us. So let me hone in on the primary way we can be exposed to and filled with the Word of God – through the Bible. Nobody is going to grow and mature in Christ if the Bible is not a huge part of their life.

So let me share with you four ways we must relate to the Bible in order to grow. These are not rocket science and it won't be the first time you have heard this and it certainly won't be the last.

**1. We must read it.** Do you read the Bible? I don't mean read it occasionally or on the screen on Sundays when someone else is reading it for us. I mean do you read the Bible for yourself? Are you constantly searching for the living Word in the written word? If you are not, then you will not mature in your faith. I can't say it any clearer than that. Make whatever excuse you like, you are just fooling yourself to think that you are growing without constant exposure to the Word of God in the Bible. The more time you devote to reading the Bible the more you will begin to think and reason from a Biblical perspective and the Bible will become a part of the fabric of your thinking. This is essential to Christian maturity. The truths of the Scriptures are not just information, they contain the power of the Holy Spirit Who inspired their writing and will also inspire and empower their reading. That's what the Bible will do – but only if we read it.

**2. We must study it.** You not only need to read the Bible daily you also need to dig deeper. There are many ways to do this. Joining with others in a Bible Study is one of the best ways. And there are now multitude Bible study aids available for the Christian today. In fact, today we have more study aids than at any other time in history. If you are not studying the Bible in a serious way, it is not because of a lack of tools. It is a lack of desire. There are many opportunities available to disciples to study the Bible at a deeper level. But you also need to spend time studying it on your own with no tools or aids – just the Bible and the Holy Spirit. You will be amazed by what God will reveal to you alone with the Bible. The Spirit will draw you deeper and deeper and your desire to really study the Bible will intensify. But reading and studying the Bible is only part of the story.

**3. We must apply it.** Diligent study of the Bible does little good unless you apply the truths you find there. You must ask the serious and hard questions that come out of your study. You must not only ask what does this means but also what does this means to me - here and now? Is God saying something in this passage that I can apply to my life today? How does my life measure up to what I have discovered in God's Word about being a disciple? Where are the areas that I need to adjust in my life so the Word of God can mould me and shape me? The Bible is a living book. It is not just an academic study. God speaks to us from the pages of the Bible. That is why we call it His Word. It is a Word of life. It is a Word of truth. It is a Word for today. It is a Word for living.

**4. We must live it.** Not only must you ask the right questions, you must also do something about it. You must live out the lessons you learn from the Scriptures. This is where so many people fall down. All the reading and studying and questioning is an exercise in futility if you do not live out what you learn. At the end of every session reading the Bible and every sermon you hear or Christian book you read, you need to be asking the simple question, "How then shall I live?" You see, once we begin to understand what the Bible teaches, we must let the truth transform our thoughts, our attitudes and our actions. Almost every decision we make can be decided from a Biblical perspective or not ... and this can be a struggle. This is where the rubber meets the road. But this is also where the greatest growth occurs. You see, growth is change. If we are going to grow into the image of Jesus Christ, we must change. That much is for certain - and the instrument of growth is the Word of God.

As the written Word is read, studied, applied, and lived ... the living Word, Jesus Christ, will then manifest His transforming presence in every area of our lives. Maturity never comes overnight - it is a process. There are no shortcuts. You can't go from a 4 year old to a 14 year old to a 24 year old in a few days. To become a mature, well adjusted 24 year old adult, you have to make sure every moment of that whole 24 years is spent intentionally growing, learning and being transformed into something better, stronger, wiser and more mature. You also can't put the head and heart of a 64 year old person into that 24 year old young adult. They have to get there over time like we all do.

So many Christians today want a quick fix because everything else in our modern world comes to us faster than ever. I remember when I was a child my mother would need to start preparing dinner many hours ahead of time. In fact, the night before, if she needed something from the freezer to thaw in time to cook the next day. There were no microwaves or instant dinners back then ... just hours of loving preparation and work. How times have changed with fast food at our finger tips.

This instant culture has impacted millions of Christians in their spiritual lives as well. They want somehow to be zapped by God and instantly changed from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. It doesn't happen that way and it never will. Growth is gradual, not instantaneous and the quality of the end product is so much greater when it is formed over time.

So I believe God is calling us today again to recommit ourselves to be people of the Word ... people who are committed to growing up into Christ. No matter how long you have been walking with God, you are never too old to learn and grow and mature in your faith. You can have 70 years experience in Christ ... or you can have one year's experience 70 times over and still be a spiritual infant drinking spiritual milk. The choice is yours and mine every day we draw breath. Are we intentionally growing up into Christ or are we at the same place we were twenty years ago, living like we already know all that is needed and we have arrived at some spiritual destination already?

As George Wallace Briggs wrote in his great old hymn, *"God is speaking by His Spirit, speaking to the hearts of men. In the age-long Word declaring God's own message, now as then."* The question is, are we listening? Are we growing? Is that age-long Word transforming us daily into the image of Christ? May those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to us right now and have the courage to respond.