

Chapter 26

Growth and development

It is self-evident that we were all children once but with health and help most of us have, as was hoped, grown up. When my brother and I were children, our mother used to measure our annual growth in height with a little mark on a back room wall. Today paediatricians use more formal charts for measuring growth in both height and weight, checking results with the normal range for age. It can be harder to evaluate some other forms of growth although simple observation may show some of them, if only approximately. We could say that someone behaves very immaturely for her age, or that some great preacher is a spiritual giant, occasionally with the added comment that this is just like (or unlike) that person's corresponding parent.

Growing up takes time

It takes time to grow up physically and in the same way, spiritual maturity does not happen overnight. Those who watch the growth of young children know that much teaching and training are needed before they mature into adolescents and then adults. The saying, 'You can't put old heads onto young shoulders', is true for physical, emotional and mental growth, yet at each stage the inborn family characteristics may stand out. The same is true of spiritual growth. As soon as we put our trust and hope in Jesus as our Saviour and ask him to be Lord of our lives, his Spirit starts to change us. Although it will take a long time for the full *metamorphosis* to happen, others may soon start to notice that we have come under new management.

It is comforting that we have so many examples in the biblical records of people who eventually became famous and revered for their faith in God but had needed to grow up to get there. To name only a few, Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament and Mark, Peter and even Paul (when Saul) in the New had each fallen short of the behaviour expected of servants of God. Yet after saying a sincere

'Sorry', with the intention of doing better and learning from past mistakes, they continued to grow in experience and knowledge. We now think of them as not quite perfect but still giving us notable examples of godliness.

Of all of these great men, Paul and Peter most clearly put into writing the idea of growth. Peter compares to newborn babies those who are hungry for what he calls 'spiritual milk'.¹ In a similar phrase, Paul refers to 'mere infants in Christ', not yet ready to feed on anything more solid.² Milk is an excellent food for babies, but later on will not produce adequate growth on its own. Paul explained that by infants he meant those who had believed in Christ (were 'born again') but whose spiritual growth had scarcely begun. Their appetite for the right food was being spoiled by a preference for the junk food of the world they lived in. They argued like children about which leader to follow when the aim of all of them, leaders included, should be to grow up to be more like Christ.

Child development and spiritual growth

As children grow up they often want to match what they see others doing but may not get it exactly right. Copying from someone else's picture book onto the sitting-room wallpaper will cause big trouble, but some things matter more than others. For a nearly three year old to object to eating tomato is not worth a confrontation but she will need to be firmly told that a working computer is not a toy. Strong and even forceful expressions of self-will can mark a child's emerging independence (sometimes continuing to old age) but a persistent cry of 'I want' needs correction at any age, as does refusal to share. Well-informed youngsters often develop a heart for those worse off, both at home and abroad, but whether or not full maturity of thought is ever reached will depend on the standards set by teachers and the responsiveness of those taught. Some lessons are harder to take than others but will be more effective when explained patiently, not harshly hammered home.

There are parallel spiritual lessons. We are not told how well Peter and Paul knew young children, but the 'milk' they spoke of as being

essential to young believers is the pure word of God. When regularly read, inwardly digested and applied by the Holy Spirit, it brings growth in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.³ Just as a child's progress to greater understanding is taught stage by stage, so the indwelling Holy Spirit enlarges spiritual wisdom over time, producing an asset so very different from the wisdom of the world.⁴ James illustrates this when he says that the wisdom from God is humble, peace-loving and considerate, not boastful, envious or selfish.⁵ Early on in spiritual development the Spirit points out the universal tendency to 'look after number one first'. He will also clarify the not uncommon dilemma over which things are permissible and which are not.⁶ The twin goals should be to glorify God and do no harm to someone else, another expression of our love for God and neighbour.

Steer clear

There are some activities that the people of God are told clearly not to do. Moses warned the Israelites not to follow the evil practices they had seen in Egypt and would see in Canaan. God said, 'Do not do as they do...You must obey my laws'.⁷ The Lord Jesus gave the same warning when speaking of the proper practice of prayer made improper by those who had turned it into a public show. 'Do not be like them'⁸ These two warnings were intended to steer away those who are his from copying the norms of the surrounding culture or sharing in what are only empty religious performances.

Each of us will need to examine ourselves to see how this applies to us, but being obedient to such instructions will often mean separation from activities that others regard as normal. Paul reminded the Romans (and us) that to set self aside in order to please God is the essence of true worship and will involve refusal to be moulded by worldly standards.⁹ We all need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to keep us out of these pitfalls. What has been called a 'Christian counter-culture' does not go with the flow and is prepared to be different, shining like a light in a dark place.¹⁰ Material idols of all kinds surround us, urging a consumer society to spend, spend, spend, acting out the childish cry of 'I want,' with the addition of, 'must have'.

We have the warning left us by Demas, once Paul's supporter in prison but led astray by his greater love of the world he left Paul behind.¹¹ Each of us is open to obvious temptation along these lines. We must be sure before God that we are not rationalising as a real need what is really the wish to keep up with other people or, at heart, simply greed. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet he was reminding them that it was by walking on the dusty earth that they had been soiled, and as we walk every day in a world contaminated by evil we constantly need him to make us clean again.

The young church in Philippi lived in a proud and prosperous city, but Paul needed to warn them to let the peace of God guard their hearts and monitor what they put into their minds.¹² Spiritual food is not usually to be found in popular diversions or many status symbols, and we are warned off any that disturb that peace.

There is need for patient endurance as we learn to grow up

Children sometimes have to learn painful lessons as they grow up, and we may find the same on our way towards spiritual maturity. Unless already mature, or blessed with a relaxed temperament, most of us know how badly we can react when upset, even by as small a matter as a rainy day. On a visit to Australia some years ago I learned that the British are known there as a nation of whingers, always complaining. This is far from Paul's state of contentment whatever the circumstances¹³ and even further from the maturity of the crucified Christ who so patiently bore insults, abuse and injustice as he entrusted himself to the most righteous judge of all, his Father.¹⁴ Yet his is the image that God wants to reproduce in us and to be realistic it is going to take time – a lifetime – to accomplish but what a wonderful prospect, to be made like him.

In Florence, there is a large and lifelike sculpture by Michelangelo of David, the shepherd king. It began as a big block of marble but when the sculptor studied it, he knew what he could create from it. Perhaps in the same way God can see what he wants to make of us and uses our many trials as his tools to chip away at our stubborn self-wills. He wants to bring out the beauty of Jesus in lives given to him but still not

yet mature. Some of those tools could be in action in the lesser stresses of life. How do we react to the intrusive ring of the telephone, the frustrating traffic jam, the cancelled train or an overbooked clinic? There are many other unfulfilled expectations of various kinds, known to us all. Do we take it patiently? If not, we are likely to be given lots more practice in exercising the endurance that will make us more like Jesus. Again, this is not natural to us, but comes as a fruit of his Spirit whose long-suffering will fortify our weakest points until they are weak no longer. Yet to arrive there takes conscious co-operation and repeated practice.

We are not asked to chase after suffering or to tolerate it in others

Victor Gollancz was a Jewish publisher who became a Christian. Writing to his young grandson he said: 'Suffering, though never to be sought, should be regarded, if it comes to ourselves, as an opportunity; but in the case of another we should...endeavour to experience the sum total of it, by a compassionate sympathy in our own person, and then, made active by imagination, struggle with all our power to relieve him of it.' The 'opportunity' he mentions is one of trusting God to use the upsetting circumstance as one of his tools for making us more like his image.

The stresses under discussion in this chapter are those that come to us without our wish or plan, but are allowed and used by God to develop his image in us. Our part is to trust him, even when we would prefer the lesson to end. Later, a more objective view may show what good things he had been doing in and around us that would probably not have arisen if life had been easier.

Followers of a popular Eastern religion say that 'Life is suffering', as though all we can do is to bear it. There is even a misguided school of Christian thought that says, 'If God uses our sufferings for good, let's bring them on'. Some may even tell those in the depths of misery that their trouble is doing them good. Paul had a better approach in his second letter to the Corinthian church. God himself will comfort us in all our troubles so that later we can share that comfort with others.¹⁵

Theory followed by practical experience

Many of us will remember student days when a lecture explaining a theory, say in physics, was followed by a practical session. It was so when writing this, as after theorising about God's possible use of our trials and his support in them, plenty of opportunities arose that put theory to the test. Within the space of a few days important telephones were found to be out of order, a key worker resigned without warning or replacement, I was handed round to various other people in turn who did not hold the information I needed (so tempting to call them 'clueless') and it had all come about when trying to help someone else. As the week wore on, 'You have need of patience' (or perseverance) became abbreviated to YHNOP¹⁶ and at times was (regrettably) muttered very *impatently*.

Then in our midweek communion service we read Psalm 116 – a good meditation for those bothered by troubles great and small as well as a necessary reminder that the Bible, the word of God, is there for our continued comfort and learning. We suffer when we neglect it, for it holds just what we need to hear. A few hours later, there was a breakthrough as a particularly clued up young man answered my queries and the way ahead became clearer, though not all the problems were completely solved. For the present, though, 'Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you'.¹⁷ Such peace is one part of the Spirit's fruit, often following a storm but also present as it rages.¹⁸

Compared with the major setbacks, hardships and life-threatening events faced by so many others worldwide this is but a tiny, though not unusual, example of how patience is regularly tested in ordinary life but grace, peace and strength are on offer as we learn to develop Christ-like endurance. Refresher courses, or further tests, may well follow to ensure that the earlier lesson has been well learned.

Effect on bystanders

Following Jesus' example, persecuted believers, too, can – and do – learn to entrust themselves to the one who judges justly, but who alone sees the desired end product. By witnessing hardships patiently borne,

others may dimly see something of the Lord's own likeness. I wonder whether the fanatical heart of Saul had been somewhat stirred as he watched the stoning of Stephen. Perhaps on the Damascus Road, before he met the risen Lord Jesus for himself, Saul (later Paul) had tried to blot out the memory of hearing the dying man pray so movingly for his murderers to be forgiven before he committed his spirit into the hands of his Lord.^{19, 20} Stephen still died but his suffering bore fruit. Paul would soon be challenged that in his enmity towards Christians he was in fact persecuting their Lord, and with that insight the fight went out of him. He became as intense a follower as he had been an opponent. Sometimes this same effect on their persecutors has followed more recent martyrdoms.

Each experience of God's grace gives more assurance that he will be there to support us through the next trial. We will find fresh encouragement to keep going as we look to the Lord Jesus Christ, God-made-man: 'Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.'²¹

For further thought

- Over the last year do you think that your spiritual development has advanced at all? Had you realised that God may use life's little annoyances to train you in patience?
- Do you pray for persecuted Christians and their witness to their persecutors?

Further resources

- Stott J. *The message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian counter-culture*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992
- Gollancz V. *My dear Timothy*. Harmondsworth. Penguin Books. 1969.

References

1. 1 Peter 2:2
2. 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, 11
3. 2 Peter 3:18
4. 1 Corinthians 2:12-16
5. James 3:13-18
6. 1 Corinthians 10:23-26, 31-33
7. Leviticus 18:3-5
8. Matthew 6:7-8
9. Romans 12:1-2
10. Matthew 5:14-16
11. 2 Timothy 4:10
12. Philippians 4:7-9
13. Philippians 4:11-13
14. 1 Peter 2:21-23
15. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
16. Hebrews 10:36
17. Psalm 116:7
18. Mark 4:37-39
19. Acts 7: 54- 8:1
20. Acts 9:3-5
21. Hebrews 12:1-3