



SPIRITUAL GROWTH



8



How not to Grow

1

Do not expect to grow automatically.

2

Do not get stuck with the foundation.

3

Do not grow disproportionately. (Part 1)

4

Do not grow disproportionately. (Part 2)

5

Do not avoid difficult areas.

6

Do not consider adversity an obstacle.

7

Do not ignore corporate growth.

8

Do not sacrifice quality for quantity.

9

Do not sidetrack.

10

Do not ever stop growing.



How not to Grow

Introduction

- No parents want their children remain as babies forever though childhood is exciting. So it is with our Heavenly Father. Perpetual infancy is an embarrassment to Him.

The Bible repeatedly says:

“Do not be children ...” (1 Cor 14:20; Eph 4:14a)

The writer of Hebrews lamented perpetual infancy —
Heb 5:12,13

God’s will for us is not just growth but full growth —
Eph 4:13 ... *till ... perfect ... fullness*
*“we **all**”* — i.e. every child of God

- The tragedy in the Church today is that there are simply too many spiritual dwarfs. They are not only dwarfs, but also mentally retarded—
i.e. they cannot think sane.

One main reason is that they are not taught the Biblical prescriptions for growth. Satan has taken advantage of this situation and led folks into stunted or twisted growth.

- Spiritual Growth

One side: our privilege

Other side: our responsibility

All that God has provided for our growth is our privilege; how we use them is our responsibility.

- God's part: Hos 11:1,3,4

"I taught Ephraim to walk ... fed them"

- Man's part: v12

"Ephraim ... lies ... Israel ... deceit ... But Judah"

- We don't grow to become God's children;
but as God's children we grow into adulthood.

We don't grow in justification;
but as justified thro' faith, we grow in sanctification.

We don't grow to become saints;
but as saints, we grow in saintliness.

i.e. Growth is only in our "state" (condition)
and not in our "standing." (position)

Our spiritual growth has nothing to do
with our acceptance before God;
but it does increase our usefulness to Him.

How not to Grow

1. Do not expect to grow automatically.

- Rebirth is a supernatural experience —

1 Pet 1:23

The Son of God saves us
thro' the Word of God
by the power of God.

Birth is a miracle from **God**;
but growth is **our** responsibility.

Just like we do physical exercises for building up our bodies,
we must do spiritual exercises for growing strong and healthy
in our inner man —

1 Tim 4:8 ... *Not only for life on earth*
but also for eternal life!
:9 ... *“a faithful saying”*

For getting “saved” Paul used the same language —

1 Tim 1:15 ... *“a faithful saying”*

The importance of spiritual exercise is hence clear.

- God has given glorious promises that
we will partake of the “*divine nature*” —

2 Pet 1:4

But we have to do lot of homework —

vv 5-8 ... *“For this reason add + + + + +”*
Only then we will *not be barren* (v8)

Just believing God’s promises is not enough.

We must lay brick over brick and bring up the structure.

- The Bible emphasizes this truth by some illustrations —
 - *Harvest* is from God,
but someone should *water* the plant —
1 Cor 3:6 ... *Apollos watered ...*
 - The *birth* of a baby is a miracle from God,
but the baby must be *fed* —
1 Pet 2:1-3 ... *milk ... grow thereby ...*
- Even though Timothy was a spiritual son of Apostle Paul
and he was closely tutored by him,
Paul stresses his individual responsibility to grow —
1 Tim 4:15 ... *your progress*
No half-heartedness/casualness —
“Give yourself entirely to these things”
- If growth is automatic, and we have no personal responsibility
for our growth, the Bible need not say, *GROW ... GROW ...*
 - 2 Pet 3:18 ... *Grow in grace and knowledge*
 - 2 Tim 2:1 ... *Be strong in grace ...*
i.e. Grow strong in grace.
 - Eph 6:10 ... *Be strong in His power ...*
i.e. God supplies His power;
but we are to appropriate it.
- **Ageing** also does not mean growth —
Heb 5:12 ... Though they had known the truth
and experienced God’s power so long (*“by this time”*),
the expected growth was absent — still *“babies.”*

■ An important truth:

Just like there is no “automatic” growth,
there’s no **“instant”** growth also —

- John the Baptist took so many years for growth even though he was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb — Lk 1:80
- Jesus took nearly 20 years for growth even though He had so much of Scripture knowledge even at 12 — Lk 2:52
- The disciples grew under Jesus for over 3 years.
- Timothy took so many years to grow from “*childhood*” to “*manhood*” — 2 Tim 3:15,17

■ Another wrong concept to be corrected:

God’s gifting does not produce instant growth —

The Corinthian believers had all the gifts,
but they were still babies —

1 Cor 1:7/3:1,2

There are several OT characters who had the gifts & power of the Holy Spirit in their ministries,
but they lacked spiritual growth and maturity and character development.

Gifts are received instantly;
but fruitbearing is associated with growth.

Gifts are received;
fruits are cultivated.

■ Inheriting ministries from parents does not guarantee instant growth —

Paul was against *novices* becoming leaders — 1 Tim 3:6,7

Yes, early popularity hinders growth —
“snare”

Pastors and Preachers must not bring their children
to leadership positions too early.

Unless these youngsters have a steady **walk** with God,
they would buckle under trying situations,
or begin to adopt worldly methods.

David acknowledged this truth
in the case of his son Solomon—

1 Chr 29:1 ... *Chosen by God ...
but young and inexperienced*

- The ministers of God also should play an active role
in the growth of believers —

a) By praying for their growth

2 Cor 13:9b ... *“we pray that you may be complete”*

1 Thess 3:9,10 ... *“night & day praying to perfect your faith”*

Three excellent apostolic prayers for the growth of believers:

Eph 3:14-19

Phil 1:9-11

Col 1:9-12

b) By labouring for their growth

1 Cor 3:6 ... *Apollos watered*

Eph 4:11,12 ... *Apostles ... Prophets ... Evangelists ... equip*

Col 4:12 ... *Epaphras ... labouring ...*

Col 1:28,29 ... *teaching ... labouring ... striving*

Paul and his team literally poured themselves
into the lives of the believers —

1 Thess 2:7,8 ... *like a nursing mother...our own lives*

Phil 2:17 ... *as a drink offering ...*

- While we talk about the responsibility of the servants of God in the growth of believers, we must not forget the foundational work to be done by the parents —

Gen 18:19 ... *Abraham ... children ... family*

Eph 6:4 ... *bring them up in the training*

and admonition of the Lord.

2 Tim 1:5 ... *faith ... grandmother ... mother*

- Yes, spiritual growth is not automatic —

Every child of God must work for his growth.

The servants of God must work for believers' growth.

Parents must work for their children's spiritual growth.

How not to Grow

2. Do not get stuck with the foundation.

- Foundation for a building is extremely important; but we cannot be laying the foundation again and again! We must go on to the superstructure.

Same is the case in Christian life —

Heb 6:1,2 ... *Repentance ... Faith ... Baptism ...*

Laying on of hands...Resurrection...

Eternal Judgment —

These six are the most fundamental Christian doctrines; but we must not stay too long talking about these.

We must “*go on*” to “*perfection*”

perfection = maturity, growth

Otherwise we will start “backsliding” —

v 4-6, “*FOR ... fall away*”

- Christendom is so backslidden that it calls the “foundation” as the “building” —

i.e. it calls the 6 doctrines of Heb 6:1,2 as the “full” Gospel, whereas it’s only the “foundational” truths of the Gospel!

How does it happen?

Believers are listening to “evangelistic” sermons only again and again.

Even the Sunday morning Worship Services have become “evangelistic” meetings —

“Edification” messages for believers are rare.

Too many magazines and TV programmes also serve
“evangelistic” messages only.

But Jesus, even in His first recorded Sermon,
i.e. the Sermon on the Mount,

dealt with so many subjects — (Mt 5,6,7)

Anger, Adultery, Divorce, Loving the enemies, Charity,
Prayer, Forgiveness, Fasting, Money, Priorities,
False teachers & Prophets, and so on.

- The Apostles in their letters to the Churches did not keep on writing/speaking about evangelistic blessings:
 - *Romans* explains victorious life thro’ Christ.
 - *1 & 2 Corinthians* stress a life of sanctification.
 - *Galatians* warns us against falling from grace.
 - *Ephesians* lists out the blessings of being seated with Christ.
 - *Philippians* challenges us to be joyful in all situations.
 - *Colossians* reminds us of the preeminence of Christ.
 - *1 & 2 Thessalonians* teach us about the II Coming of Christ.
 - *1 & 2 Timothy* tell us how to behave in the Church of God.
 - *Titus* exhorts us to stick to sound doctrine.
 - *Hebrews* celebrates the Better Covenant.
 - *James* rebukes faith without works.
 - *1 & 2 Peter* warn us against false teachers.
 - *1 & 2 & 3 John* remind us about the oldest message of love.
 - *Jude* calls us to contend for the faith.
 - *Revelation* fills our hearts with eternal hope.

How do we compare the average and repeated sermons in our Churches with these subjects covered in the Epistles?

- Instead of going down to people's level, preachers must endeavour to lift people up to their level!
 - Did not John the Baptist preach hard things? (Jn 1 & Lk 3)
 - Did not Jesus teach hard things? (Jn 6:60)
 - Did not Paul write hard things? (2 Pet 3:15,16)

- Sadly, in many Churches the only spiritual food the members get is a 20-minute weekly sermon! How can they grow?

The early Apostles gave “enough” and “more” to their hearers—

- John the Baptist (Lk 3:18)
- Apostle Peter (Acts 2:40)
- Jude & Silas (Acts 15:32)
- Apostle Paul's all day preaching (Acts 28:23)

- God's call to Pharaoh: *“Let My people GO!”*
God's call to Pastors: *“Let My people GROW!”*

If you cannot grow where you are,
go where you can grow!

No one can stop you!

Jn 10:9 ... *I am the Door ... go in and out and find pasture*

Who said, You must listen to Pastor Peter only?

You must listen to Apostle Paul also!

Otherwise, where is the New Testament?

Too many restrictions will suffocate you!

- If your Pastor is spoonfeeding you,
you will never leave your milk stage.

What's spoonfeeding?

- Doing the prayers for you
instead of teaching you to pray.
- Simply preaching to you
without teaching you how to interpret the Scriptures.

In this set-up,

you will not be promoted to II Standard from I Standard,
but brought back to UKG & LKG!

You will keep on moving in circles ...
making no progress!

This is rocking-chair Christianity
which has motion but no progress!

- We cannot, at the same time, throw the entire blame
on Pastors and Preachers.

Many believers basically do not want to face up new challenges—

- 10 out of the 12 spies to Canaan (Num 13:26-14:10)
- Tribes of Gad & Reuben —
not ready to leave their comfort zone
but stay on *this side of Jordan* (Num 32:1-5)

Quite satisfied with the exit/exodus from Egypt;
not challenged enough for entry into Canaan.

- There are still others who keep saying,
“**Roots** are important.”
Yes, roots are definitely important;
but they must show up by growing to fruitfulness —
Isa 37:31 ... *root downward ... fruit upward*

Roots are associated with fruits —

Eph 3:17 ... *rooted and grounded*

Eph 3:18,19 ... branching out in all directions for *fullness*

Col 2:7 ... *rooted in Christ **and** built up on Him*

Seed must not remain as seed;

it's not meant to be preserved,

but to be planted —

Mt 13:31,32 ... *a mustard seed ... sowed ... tree*

How not to Grow

3. Do not grow disproportionately.

(Part 1)

- Look at a classic passage on growth —

Eph 4:15 ... *growing up in **all** things ...*

We are to grow in “all” aspects.

There are so many areas of spiritual growth.

This is called “multidimensional” growth.

The lesson: We must not neglect any area.

The Apostles challenged the believers to grow in all aspects, neglecting nothing —

2 Cor 8:7 ... *as you abound in “everything,”
abound in “this grace” also.*

(liberal sharing with the poor)

Apostle Paul points out “God’s” promise

when we give attention to “all” areas —

2 Cor 9:8 ... *ALL grace ... ALL sufficiency ...
ALL things ... EVERY good work ...
ALWAYS ...*

What a promise! Hallelujah!

- This multidimensional growth is illustrated in the lives of several Bible characters —

- Boy Samuel (1 Sam 2:26)

... in favour both with the Lord and men ...

- Boy Jesus (Lk 2:52)

“stature”— physical growth

“wisdom”— intellectual growth

“favour with God” — spiritual growth

“favour with men” — social growth

■ The Bible speaks about growth in so many aspects —

□ *“grace upon grace”*

Jn 1:16 ... *grace for grace* ...

2 Tim 2:1 ... *grow in grace* ...

become strong in grace

2 Pet 3:18 ... *grow in grace* ... *knowledge*

□ *“faith to faith”*

Rom 1:17

Rom 4:20 ... *Abraham grew strong in faith*

2 Cor 10:15 ... *increase of faith*

Lk 17:5 ... *Increase our faith*

□ *“righteousness upon righteousness”*

Rev 22:11

Jn 17:19 ... *I (the Holy One) sanctify Myself*

□ *“declaration upon declaration”* (Referring to ministry)

Jn 17:26 ... *I have declared* ... *I will declare*

Having declared Christ’s Name in so many regions,
Paul’s urge to keep on declaring —

Rom 1:15 ... *in Rome also* ... (cf: 15:23)

□ *“Victory plus!”* Victory unto victory

Rom 8:37 ... *more than conquerors* ...

— In our fight, not just between “good & bad”

but “good & better!” (vv 33-39)

Not only “*death*” but also “*life*”

Not only evil “*powers*” but also “*angels*”

- Let us look at a few spiritual disciplines and see what it means to grow in them —
 - Growing in Biblical understanding
 - Bible: Law, History, Prophecy, Wisdom, Doctrine, etc.
 - In these there are —
 - Promises, Commandments, Warnings, Exhortations, etc.
 - It's childishness to look for booklets listing out only the "Promises" of God!
 - "Wholesome" growth not possible without the "whole" Bible
 - 2 Tim 3:16,17 ... *ALL Scripture ... profitable ...*
 - Growing in Prayer
 - Not simply asking God for whatever we want;
 - but asking according to His will —
 - 1 Jn 5:14 ... *according to His will*
 - 3:22 ... *ask ... walk ... pleases Him ...*
 - Growing in Worship
 - Worshipping for excitement and feeling good;
 - thanking God only for what He has **done** to us:
 - childishness
 - But, praising God for who He **is!**
 - i.e. His worth ... Rev 4:11 ... *worthy*
 - 5:9 ... *worthy*
 - 5:12 ... *worthy*
 - 5:13 ... *blessing & honour*
 - 7:12 ... *blessing & honour*
 - Growing in Holiness
 - To start with ... confessing sins of commission only
 - When we mature ... confessing sins of omission also

First, comparing with others (Pharisee/Publican) (Lk 18)

When we mature, comparing with God's holiness (Isa 6)

First, leaving the sins of the "*flesh*" (Gal 5:19-21)

Filthiness of not only the "*flesh*" but also the "*spirit*"

(2 Cor 7:1)

Then, growing the *fruits of the "Spirit"* (Gal 5:22,23)

□ Growing in Obedience

It's said about Jesus that He "*learnt*" *obedience!* (Heb 5:8)

He walked in obedience into the waters of baptism ...

He walked in obedience into the fire of suffering ...

He was always obedient and never yielded to

temptations to disobey God.

As far as we are concerned —

Originally *children of "disobedience"* (Eph 2:1-3)

Then reluctant obedience

Then choosy obedience

Then delayed obedience

To grow into: willing, wholehearted, delightsome,

instant obedience

□ Growing in Forgiveness

First — 7 times ...

Then — 70 x 7 times (Mt 18:21,22)

□ Growing in Patience

Children cannot wait; they want everything instantly.

eg) In Prayer —

Beginning ... Immediate answers

Growing ... Delayed answers

Further ... Different answers

□ Growing in humility

eg) Moses: 3 stages in his life —

First he thought he was somebody

Then he found out he was nobody

Finally he understood God was everything

eg) Paul

As a sinner: “*Chief of all sinners*” (1 Tim 1:15)

As a saint: “*Less than the least of saints*” (Eph 3:8)

As an apostle: “*Least of all the apostles*” (1 Cor 15:9)

■ We can capsule multidimensional growth like this —

It’s climbing *higher* in holiness.

It’s digging *deeper* into the Scriptures.

It’s drawing *nearer* to God in prayer.

It’s walking *softer* in behaviour.

It’s opening our hands *wider* in accepting people.

It’s working *harder* in work and ministry.

■ More on this subject of multidimensional growth in the next chapter.

How not to Grow

4. Do not grow disproportionately.

(Part 2)

- The spiritual growth of a Christian after rebirth is comparable to the physical growth of a baby from birth. Such a comparison is frequently made in the Scriptures.
A baby is a miniature adult —
We don't add a hand in the 2nd year or a leg in the 3rd year!
The baby has all the organs at birth; and as such, from day one it must start growing in all the organs.
The same is true of a spiritual baby after rebirth.
i.e. from the beginning,
a child of God should grow in all aspects, proportionately.
If you talk all the time —
about Evangelism, only the legs are growing!
about Charity, only the hands are growing!
about Holiness: Why more than two kidneys?
about Worship: Even a paralysed man can have
a perfect "heart."
- In the previous chapter we looked at two individuals as examples of multidimensional growth: Boy Samuel
Boy Jesus
Now let's look at two congregations —
 - The Assembly of Israelites under Ezra & Nehemiah
Neh 9:3 ... Meditation (Word) & Adoration (Worship)
 - The early Church after Pentecost
Acts 2:42 ... *doctrine... fellowship... bread-breaking... prayers ...*

Most of our present-day Churches have lost this balance —

- A Church which emphasizes only WORSHIP
will end up with shallow believers without adequate teaching.
- A Church which emphasizes only WORD STUDY
will end up with dry believers without the joy of worship.
- A Church which emphasizes only WITNESSING
will end up with immature believers without doctrinal maturity or personal holiness.

- God has made ample provisions in the Church
for our “wholesome” growth —

*Eph 4:11-15 ... a perfect man ... measure of the stature
of Christ ... in all things*

In other words,

we must receive the ministries of all the 5 types of
gifted men —

Apostles ... Prophets ... Evangelists ... Pastors ... Teachers

You must not keep on listening to a Pastor only.

- Apostles will implant in you a pioneering missionary vision.
- Prophets will give you penetrating insight in God’s things.
- Evangelists will instill in you a passionate spirit for people.
- Teachers will bless you with a practical understanding
of God’s Word.

If you listen to a Pastor only,

you will grow as a “Churchian” rather than a “Christian!”

- There are so many spiritual disciplines God has prescribed
for our spiritual growth and strength —
eg) The spiritual armour (Eph 6:10-18)

A “work” that’s not backed by “walk” is faulty;
a “walk” that does not beget “work” is fruitless.

- When we talk about physiological growth and wellbeing,
we make references to certain deficiencies like —

Vitamin deficiency,
Calcium deficiency,
Iron deficiency, etc.

To make up these deficiencies we need to take supplements.

In the same way, for spiritual growth,
we must find out where we are weak and deficient,
and make it up —

eg) May be more of Bible meditation
May be more of prayertime
May be more of witnessing

This is what Jesus told the Church in Sardis —

Rev 3:2 ... *Strengthen that which is about to die!*

The strength of a chain is decided by its weakest link!

Strengthen the weak areas in your life
so your growth may be wholesome and proportional.

How not to Grow

5. Do not avoid difficult areas.

- The basic instinct in man is to find an easy road to accomplish anything.

The trend of the world is also to make everything easy and comfortable for man.

But this does not work so for spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth is like mountain-climbing;

it's not going up in a lift;

it's even more difficult than climbing on stairs,

or driving on an uphill road.

Someone said,

“Christian growth is not just exciting;

but it's exacting!”

- We've seen that we must *grow in “all” things*.

i.e. in all areas/aspects of Christian life

Growing in certain areas is more difficult than growing in others.

If we avoid difficult areas,

our growth will not be wholesome.

- Let us look at some examples —

a) Prayer

We have no problem in presenting

our list of needs before God.

But prayer involves so many other things also —

1 Tim 2:1 ... *supplications ... prayers ... intercessions*
... *thanksgiving*

The most difficult part is “*intercessions*.”

“Intercession” means identifying with the problems of others,
and observing seasons of waiting before the Lord,
if necessary with fasting.

eg) Daniel: Dan 7:28 ... entire personality affected
10:2,3 ... pleasures of life set aside

Seasons of waiting before the Lord with prayer
and fasting enhance our spiritual growth.
So, don't avoid “intercessions” in the prayer exercise.

b) Bible Meditation

Many believers stop with the routine of reading a Psalm
or one chapter in the Bible in the morning.

This is simply a “maintenance” dose!

Just to stay alive!

We must go for —

Extended hours of “meditation”

Unhurried hours of Bible “study” with study aids

Regular “memorisation” of Bible verses

This is what the writer of Hebrews refers to in Heb 5:13,14...

The Bible has got both “*milk*” and “*meat*” in it!

“Milk vs. Meat” — Don't avoid difficult passages;
consult Study aids.

c) Self-control

This is taught as a basic characteristic of a
Christian disciple,

as a “*fruit of the Spirit*” (Gal 5:23)

The most difficult area in self-control is “tongue-control”—

Js 3:7,8

i.e. The tongue cannot be “*tamed*” but to be kept under
constant “vigil” and “training!”

No maturity is possible without this —

v2 ... *perfect* (= mature) *man* ...

How to control the tongue:

A decision (Psa 39:1a)

A prayer (Psa 19:14)

An effort (1 Pet 3:10)

d) Second-mile religion

Jesus spoke about “perfection” in His Sermon
on the Mount (Mt 5:48)

In order to come to this perfection,

He gave some illustrative prescriptions:

... *right cheek* ... *left cheek* (v39)

... *undershirt* ... *overcoat* (v40)

... *one mile* ... *second mile* (v41)

(Roman soldiers sometimes demanded this from pedestrians.)

... *friends* ... *enemies* (v44)

These are no doubt hard things;
but there’s no shortcut to spiritual growth.

e) Accepting personal corrections

We have no problem

in listening to **sermons** of rebuke and corrections;

but when someone corrects us **personally**,

we are too egoistic to accept it.

Examples of good attitude towards correction:

— Job (Job 6:24) ... *Teach me ... wherein I've erred.*

— David (Psa 141:5a) ... *oil for head ... reprove me...*
(not buffeting but anointing!)

Especially when it comes from younger people —

Eccl 4:13 ... *wise youth ... old foolish king*

f) Liberal giving

Giving to God or the poor “legalistically” is not that difficult;
but look at the apostolic challenge —

2 Cor 8:7,9 ... The other areas (*faith ... speech ...
knowledge*) are not as difficult as giving
to the extent of feeling the pinch!

Jesus became poor to make us rich!

This is where the rich young ruler got stuck —

Mt 19:16-22 ... *If you want to be “perfect” (= still grow)
... sell ... give ...*

Growing in “contentment” is a mark of maturity —

1 Tim 6:6 ... *contentment ... gain (= addition)
:11 ... “pursue” (= grow in)
righteousness ... patience ... etc.*

This is what chokes the growth of several believers —

Mt 13:22 ... *thorns ... deceitfulness of riches*
Prov 11:28 ... *riches ... fail ... righteous man flourishes!*

g) Difficult tasks

Whether it’s secular work or spiritual ministry,
there are definitely certain tasks which are more difficult
than the rest.

If we are not prepared to take up difficult tasks,
our growth will be stunted at some point.

eg) Caleb: Josh 14:10-12 ... *Give me this mountain... 85 years...*

Birthday gift: not a spongy cake but a hill terrain!

eg) William Carey:

“Expect great things from God!”

This everybody does; but who will do the other part?—

“Attempt great things for God!”

Growth is not possible without challenges.

Challenges actually stretch us!

Only when we attempt the so-called impossible things,
our spiritual muscles will be strengthened.

The “*grace*” of God is not a substitute for hard work —

1 Cor 15:10 ... *I “laboured” more abundantly ... grace*

No place for casualness

Committed to diligence and excellence

Laziness is an enemy of growth.

Risktakers reach new heights in spiritual growth.

eg) Priscilla & Aquila gave their “necks” —

Rom 16:3,4 ... *risked their necks ...*

How not to Grow

6. Do not consider adversity an obstacle.

- Someone said —

The Christian life is not an escape route **from** difficulty,
but a way **thro'** difficulty.

Yes, nothing strengthens us like adversity in life!

The apostles were careful enough to ingrain this truth
in the minds of believers at the very start of their
Christian life —

Acts 14:21,22 ... *strengthening ... many tribulations ...*
There's no shortcut to growth!

- The Bible abounds with examples as to how
adversity enhanced growth and increased strength —

- The people of Israel in Egypt

Ex 1:12 ... *taskmasters ... great burden ... increased*

- Joseph grew to fruitfulness in adversity

Stones will be pelted at fruitladen tree only!

கனி மரத்திற்குத்தான் கல்லெறி! (Tamil proverb)

Gen 49:22-24 ... *fruitful ... shot ... hated*

That gave him an occasion to let God's Word work
deeply in him —

Psa 105:17-19 ... *fetters ... irons ... Word tested*

- David's encounter with a lion and a bear gave him
faith and confidence before Goliath —

1 Sam 17:34-37

Growth or strengthening is always in stages.

One adversity helps us to grow stronger to face another.
— Also the invasion by Amalakites (1 Sam 30:1,6)
“*strengthened himself*”—must have meditated past victories

- Job — First he lost his wealth, health and children;
he withstood that test of adversity.
Later he was able to say,
“*Though He slay (kill) me ... trust Him*” (Job 13:15)

Having gone thro’ adversity in the worst form,
Job comes out with a lesson on growing strong —

Job 17:6-9 ... *byword ... spit ... sorrow*
... *stronger and stronger*

- Apostle Paul
Trouble in Asia strengthened his faith —
2 Cor 1:8-10 ... *trouble ... burden ... beyond measure*
i.e. Faith not just in God’s power to **save** from death,
but to **raise** from the dead!
- In my own life, significant growth has followed crises.

- The Bible not only gives us **examples**
but also solid **teaching** on this truth:

- Psa 84:4-7 ... Baca to Berakah ... “*strength to strength*”
- Isa 30:20,21 ... “*bread of adversity ... eyes ... teachers*”

Our Biblical understanding gets
brighter and better during times of adversity.

Yes, we see God’s ways more clearly
when our eyes are washed by tears!

- Rom 5:3,4
Tribulation ▶ *patience* ▶ *experience* ▶ *hope*
This is called “kneaded” character!

- 2 Cor 1:5 ... “*suffering abounds ... comfort abounds*”
As much as suffering abounds,
strengthening of our *inner man* also abounds.
- 2 Cor 4:16
Adversity may melt (burn up) our *outer man*,
but it will build up our *inner man* “*day by day!*”
- This is the purpose of God’s chastisement also
Heb 12:11 ... “*trained*” by it ...
“*fruit*” of righteousness

God “*prunes*” a fruitful branch so it might yield
“*more*” fruit—
Jn 15:2b
- 2 Thess 1:3,4
faith grows ... love abounds ... tribulation
- Js 1:2-4 ... *various trials* ► *patience* ► *perfect*
- Wise sayings—
 - Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910):
“If God sends us on stony paths
He will provide us with strong shoes!”
 - John Bunyan (1628-1688, Prince of Expository Preachers)
“Adversities can appear as the lion to Samson:
roaring and gnashing;
but when subdued, full of honey!”
- The adversity may be so intensive and extensive
that nothing in the tree is left but the root!
Isa 11:1 ... God causes *a Branch to grow out of the stem!*
53:2a ... “*root out of dry ground*”

■ **Conclusion**

It's the constant irritation for the oyster
that makes the pearl to form and grow.

Don't be alarmed or startled over the stumbling blocks in life!

Stumbling blocks ►► stepping stones & springboards!

Adversity, if rightly handled, will help growth, not hinder it!

■ A hymn by Frances R. Havergal (1836-1879):

*Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King's own army none can overthrow.
Round His standard ranging, vict'ry is secure,
For His truth unchanging makes the triumph sure!*

How not to Grow

7. Do not ignore corporate growth.

- We are living in a highly individualistic society.

It's dominated by a spirit of independence rather than interdependence.

But the Biblical admonition:

1 Cor 10:24 ... *not his own ... others' wellbeing*

- Consideration of corporate growth is not optional, because, “individual” growth and “corporate” growth are interrelated—

Especially individual growth can never become complete in itself.

— The Bible repeatedly speaks about the *growth of the “Body”* i.e. of Christ —

Eph 4:14-16 ... *no longer children ...*

whole body ... every joint ... every part ...

— Another analogy is a “building” —

Eph 2:19-22 ... *whole building ... **grows** into a temple*

— Apostle Paul illustrates this with a practical situation:

1 Cor 14:29-31 ... *all prophesy...*

all learn ...

all be encouraged ...

If this attitude is not maintained,

Apostle Paul calls it “childishness” —

1 Cor 14:18-20 ... *tongues ... yet in the Church*

... children

13:11 ... *When I was a child ...*

eg) Jesus used His gifts for the good of others —

He did not turn stones into bread for His hunger;
but He multiplied bread and fish for others.

- Individual growth is mostly relating to “*faith*”
Corporate growth is mostly relating to “*love*”

One is the vertical component;
the other horizontal.

We find the second one harder than the first.

The Bible repeatedly combines “*love*” with “*faith*” —

1 Thess 3:10,12 ... *perfect what's lacking in faith*
How? “*abound in love*” (v12)

2 Thess 1:3 ... *faith grows ... love abounds ...*

Without leaving “*guile ... malice,*”

growth not possible even with the milk of the Word —
1 Pet 2:1-3

- The NT Epistles were meant to help the new congregations
“grow” in the Lord.

They abound with “one-another” exhortations —

Honour one another (Rom 12:10).

Accept one another (Rom 15:7).

Be one-minded with one another (Rom 12:16).

Admonish one another (Rom 15:14).

Greet one another (Rom 16:16).

Serve one another (1 Pet 4:10).

Bear one another's burden (Gal 6:2).

Forebear one another (Eph 4:2).

Submit to one another (Eph 5:21).

Exhort one another (Heb 3:13).

Encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11).

Edify one another (Rom 14:19).

- Concern for corporate growth must be specially shown to the weak —

Rom 15:1,2 ... *bear ... weak ... please his neighbour*

eg) Wives are called “*weaker*” vessels (1 Pet 3:7);
the husbands must help them grow —

Eph 5:28,29 ... “*nourishes and cherishes*”

The Church is compared to a “*family*”—

Each family must work for the growth and betterment of each of its members —

Parents ↔ Children

Brothers ↔ Sisters

Husbands ↔ Wives

Elders ↔ Youngsters

Such a family will be an earlier Heaven!

An opportunity to grow in virtues like tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness, selflessness, yieldedness, oneness, peace, etc.

- Even the understanding of God’s love is better in corporate life —

Eph 3:18,19 ... ***with*** all the saints ...

“*width*” ... God’s embracing acceptance

“*length*” ... God’s amazing patience

“*depth*” ... God’s total forgiveness

“*height*” ... God’s supreme sacrifice

When we understand each of these 4 dimensions of God’s *love*, it challenges and encourages us to love others on these lines.

- The Psalmist captures both “individual” and “corporate” growth in a beautiful picture —

Psa 92:12 ... *palm tree* ... (individual)

:13 ... *flourishing in the courts...house...* (corporate)

- As much as “individual” Christians are to work for the “corporate” growth of “local” Churches, all local Churches must be concerned about the growth and wellbeing of the “universal” Church and the Kingdom of God.

That’s how local Churches can bless and learn from each other.

eg) Growth of a local Church: by neighbourhood evangelism

Growth of the universal Church: by frontier missions

- That will help the fulfillment of the desire of Jesus expressed in His High Priestly Prayer —

Jn 17:20-23 ... *oneness ... glory ... made perfect ...*

“for these” disciples — local

“for those who would believe” — translocal

“that the world may believe” — universal

(See also Pages 59-61, 350-351, 380-384, 517-519, 546-549, 642-646)

How not to Grow

8. Do not sacrifice quality for quantity.

- Whether it is “individual” growth or “corporate” growth, this is a fundamental lesson.

In our anxiety and enthusiasm for growth,
it’s natural to sacrifice quality.

We must watch against this trend.

- Let’s first apply this lesson to “**individual**” growth —

Even though growing in Christian life essentially means growing in the “knowledge of the Lord,” mere accumulation of knowledge without the fear of God is useless —

Eccl 12:12-14 ... *many books ... fear of God*

Prov 1:7a ... *fear of the Lord... beginning of knowledge*

This is the oldest error in the world —

Man preferred “knowledge” to a life of obedience to God—

Gen 2:9 ... **First**, *Tree of Life*

Then, *Tree of Knowledge*

But when man reversed the order,

he lost everything — Gen 3:24

- A desire to grow without a passion for godliness is warned against by several OT prophets —

Jer 12:2 ... *they grow ... but mind far away*

Mal 4:1 ... *wicked ... burn up*

:2 ... *but you who fear ... grow!*

That's why King Solomon gave this wise saying —

Prov 9:9b ... *Teach a **just** man ...*

increase in learning ...

:10b ... *Knowledge of the **Holy** ...*

■ Even doctrinal knowledge

that does not affect personal life is useless —

1 Tim 6:3 ... *doctrine unto godliness*

2 Tim 3:10 ... *my doctrine ... manner of life*

This was the defect of the Church in Ephesus—

Rev 2:2-4 ... *Strong in activities and doctrine*

*but lost the **first love***

Apostle Paul sternly warns against knowledge

without love —

1 Cor 8:1c ... *knowledge puffs up!*

i.e. knowledge without love

This does not bless others (v11)

Yes, head knowledge without heart experience is

quantity without quality.

■ Getting additional blessings in life is not a mark of growth;
but learning to successfully handle plenty and poverty alike
is true “maturity” —

Phil 4:12,13 ... *abound ... abased ... I have learnt ...*

■ When we simply try to copy/imitate those who are successful
in life/work without studying and following the disciplines
of their lives,
we are in danger of outward show without inner reality/piety.

The many long years of walk of godly men
cannot be simply duplicated.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Bible Commentator:

“Spiritual growth consists most in the growth of the root,
which is out of sight.”

There are two things relating to growth:

- a) Hidden growth
- b) Apparent progress

Only when there's hidden growth, apparent progress is
genuine.

This kind of growth is both qualitative + quantitative.

Otherwise, “*clouds without rain...trees without fruit*”(Jude 12,13)

- Now let's apply this truth to “**corporate**” growth —

“Church growth” is the most popularly used term
in Christian circles today.

What's generally meant is “numerical” growth.

But the Book of Acts which is the textbook on Church Growth
combines both the “numerical” expansion as well as the
“spiritual” betterment —

- Acts 2:41 ... *3000 added*
:42 ... *continued steadfastly ...*
- Acts 4:4 ... *5000 ... multiplied*
:32 ... *one heart, one soul*
- Acts 6:1 ... *number of disciples multiplied*
:2-6 ... *problem sorted out*
:7 ... *ongoing multiplication*

■ **Conclusion**

Ultimate spiritual growth is not measured by
how many souls we have won,
how many sermons we have preached,
how many books we have written, and
how many Churches we have planted,
but how much have we become like Jesus!

Eph 4:13 ... *full stature of Christ*

2 Cor 3:18 ... *image to image ...*

■ A hymn by Thomas O. Chisholm (1866-1960):

*O to be like Thee! Blessed Redeemer.
This is my constant longing and prayer;
Gladly I'll forfeit all of earth's treasures,
Jesus, Thy perfect likeness to wear.*

How not to Grow

9. Do not sidetrack.

- As much as God is interested in our growth,
the devil opposes it by bringing in so many
distractions and deviations.

This is beautifully illustrated in —

Zech 3:1-5

...Satan opposes the cleansing of Joshua the High Priest.

Practically speaking —

Satan tempts us to be lenient towards the sins which we hated
and abhorred vehemently at the start of our Christian life.

If we are not careful here,
we cannot “*perfect*” our *holiness* — 2 Cor 7:1

We can explain this from agriculture —

Before sowing, we plough the field and remove the “stones.”
While the seedlings are growing, we must remove the “weeds.”

i.e. ploughing before sowing;
weeding while growing!

- If we are caught up again in the old **sins** and **lusts**,
we will not grow to maturity —
 - 2 Tim 3:6,7 ... *always learning but never coming
to mature understanding*
 - These are the “*little foxes*” which spoil the vine —
SS 2:15 ... *tender grapes* ...
 - We are repeatedly warned against returning to the
“old sins” —

Num 11:4,5 ... *Egypt ... fish ... onion ... garlic ...*

God was not against desiring some “non-vegetarian” food;
but that they were not satisfied with His provision of
“*manna*” (v6) ... They got bored!

This is spiritually interpreted in —

1 Cor 10:6 ... *not to lust as they lusted ...*

This is illustrated by dog’s vomit and pig’s mire —

2 Pet 2:20-22 ... *“beginning vs. end”*

□ Growth stops in this condition of backsliding.

But if we repent (Hos 14:1a),

God promises “*flourishing*” growth again —

Hos 14:4-7 ... *dew ... grow ... lengthen ... spread*

□ If we are not careful here, our ministry perhaps may expand,
but we will not experience personal growth.

One sincere servant of God set aside his ministry
for a while, confessing,

“My ministry has outgrown my character.”

Ministerial success oftentimes blinds our eyes
from seeing the need for further growth.

■ Another area where we may sidetrack is sliding into
worldliness from spiritual-mindedness —

□ Apostle Paul warned the Philippian believers
very specifically against this:

Phil 3:13-16 ... *reaching forward ... pressing upward*

... mature ... same mind ...

“If you think otherwise” (v15)

i.e. earthly-mindedness (vv 18,19)

... our citizenship ... glorious body

He calls us to “heavenly-mindedness” (vv 20,21)

Those who are caught up in the Prosperity or Health & Wealth Gospel normally don't grow further.

eg) Demas (2 Tim 4:10) ... *"present world"*

He could not go on further with Paul.

- Apostle Paul served a similar warning to the Corinthian believers also —

1 Cor 15:33 ... *Evil company corrupts good habits.*

i.e. Fellowship with the worldlings —

v32 ... *beasts at Ephesus*

The "most pitiable" condition —

v19 ... *If in this life only ...*

- The plant grows well only if it is not choked by thorns —

Mt 13:22 ... *cares of the world ...*

deceitfulness of riches

That's why the Book of Psalms begins with this warning—

Psa 1:1 ... *ungodly ... sinners ... scornful ...*

:3 ... *tree by the rivers ... fruit ... leaves ...*

- The third reason for sidetracking is **doctrinal deviation** —

- Gal 5:7 ... *you ran well ... who hindered?*

Context: Those who came from Law to grace

go back to the Law —

vv1,4 ... *yoke ... fallen from grace*

This was thro' false teachers (2:4)

— Beware of strange & novel doctrines!

— Beware of questionable practices & experiences!

— Beware of extra-Biblical revelations!

This is the last warning served by Peter —

2 Pet 3:17,18 ... *“led away with the error ... **grow** in grace”*

- Not only doctrinal deviations within Christendom,
but also cheating philosophies of the world —

Col 2:6-8 ... *rooted ... built up ...*

“not according to Christ” —

philosophies which exclude Christ

All the *fullness of God “in Him”* only (v9)

- Eccentric emphasis of any one doctrine also affects growth—

Col 2:19 ... *holding fast to the Head ...*

eg) All the time talking about water baptism,

or speaking in tongues,

or divine healing,

or separation from sinners leading to

seclusion, and so on.

All growth should be *into “Christ the Head”*

and not into “something” — Eph 4:15,16

- Inquisitiveness into *“hidden”* things also sidetracks us
from the straight path to progress + growth —

Col 2:18,19 ... *intruding into the unseen ... grows*

Secret things belong to God —

Dt 29:29

Beware of getting into the *“depths of Satan”* —

Rev 2:24 ... Church in Thyatira

- God’s promise to protect us from sidetracking —

Isa 30:21 ... *When you turn to left or right ...*

By the voice of the Holy Spirit

By the Word of the Holy Scriptures

How not to Grow

10. Do not ever stop growing.

- Satisfaction in our Christian life invariably results in stagnation.

Someone said:

“The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement!”

That’s why the Bible calls us

*“to show the same diligence till the **end**”*

Heb 6:11,12 ... Tendency to become “*sluggish*” especially in the “middle” of the race!

That’s why the Bible says,

The “*end*” of a matter more important than “*beginning*”
(Eccl 7:8)

- Apostle Paul comes here as a great challenge —

Phil 3:12-16

“... not as though attained ...”

This was almost towards the end of his life.

Philippians written from Rome during his 2-year house arrest!

He even had a *desire to “depart”* —

Phil 1:23

Even at this point of time,

he kept growing: *“behind ... forward ... upward”*

- This kind of growth is hinted by Apostle John also—

1 Jn 2:12-14

Childhood ... youthhood ... fatherhood
(forgiveness) (victory) (knowledge)

As we get older and older, we must not lose our enthusiasm of youthfulness —

Psa 92:12-15 ... *old age ... they shall **still** ...
... fruitful ... fresh ... flourishing ...*

■ Let's look at the commonest reasons why folks stop growing—

□ Satisfaction with the average:

A.W. Tozer: "Refuse to be average!"

We must always strive for excellence.

eg) Paul: At every stage of his life,
his mind was on excellence:

— Training in Jewish religion

Gal 1:14 ... *beyond my contemporaries ...*

— Realisation of unworthiness

1 Tim 1:15 ... *chief of all sinners ...*

— Emptying of self-righteousness

Phil 3:4 (7,8) ... *confidence in flesh ... more so ...*

— In the fellowship of saints

Eph 3:8 ... *less than the least of saints ...*

— In exercising spiritual gifts

1 Cor 14:18 ... *tongues more than you all ...*

— In labouring for the Lord

1 Cor 15:9,10 ... *least of apostles ...*

but laboured more ...

Hymn: "Give of your best to the Master!"

Another reason —

- Comparison with others 2 Cor 10:12
 Rabbit & Tortoise story!

That's why Jesus said —

Lk 13:30 ... *last become first* and vice versa

Context: unrepentant Jerusalemites boasting
of their heritage (vv 26-29)

This was the problem of the Pharisee who compared himself
with the Publican — (Lk 18:11)

Also, we should not take shelter under the failures
of Bible characters, asking,

- Did not Abraham lie?
- Did not Moses lose temper?
- Did not David commit adultery?
- Did not Elijah run out of fear?
- Did not Peter deny and curse Jesus?
- Did not Paul fight over a petty issue?
- Did not John worship an angel?

The failures of all these Bible characters are not to be taken
as **excuses** for us but as **warnings** (1 Cor 10:11).

The only person we can follow 100% is Jesus!
We are to compare our lives with His alone.

Another reason why we stop growing —

- Depression with failures:
 Prov 24:16 ... *fall ... seven times ... rise*
 No failure is final;
 and there's no one who never fails!

Apostle Paul's formula for growth:

Phil 3:13 ... *forgetting ... behind ...*
reaching ... forward ... ahead

Some people grow fast; but not so with others.

Even if the growth is slow, don't stop.

A Chinese proverb:

Be not afraid of growing slowly;
be afraid only of standing still!

The slow and steady win the race!

The measure of spiritual growth is by the steady changes
in life.

Don't be disappointed if nothing dramatic happens.

An overall assessment is what's necessary —

2 Cor 13:5 ... When Christ is in you,
you will definitely be growing.

- Let's complete this Topic looking at certain promises of God
for our growth —

Dt 33:25b ... *As your days so your strength*

Job 8:7 ... *small beginning ... glorious end.*

(Jesus endorsed this: "*mustard seed*")

Prov 4:18 ... *Brighter and brighter*

Better Everyday & Brighter Everyday

Phil 1:6 ... *What God has begun ... complete*
