

*"We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth."* (2.THESS 1:3). What a great compliment Paul paid the Thessalonian Christians! Here's the full essence of what he was saying: "It's incredible to see how much you've grown, both in your faith in Christ and in your love for one another. Everywhere I go, I brag to others about your spiritual growth. How I thank God for you!"

In this short passage, Paul gives us an amazing picture of a body of believers who were growing in unity and love. The Greek phrase Paul uses for "groweth exceedingly" means "growth over, above and beyond that of others." Both individually and corporately, the Thessalonians' faith and love outshone that of all other churches.

Obviously, these Thessalonian Christians weren't just trying to hang onto their faith till Jesus returned. They were learning, moving, growing - and their lives offered evidence to that fact. According to Paul, they were the talk of every church in Asia.

Apparently, the preaching these people heard was provoking them into an ever deeper walk with Christ. It was melting their fleshly ambitions and convicting them of un-Christlike habits. And the Holy Ghost in them was tearing down all ethnic barriers and color lines. They were discovering how to embrace any person, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated. And they offered great care to each other, preferring one another in love.

Moreover, the Thessalonian believers weren't easily drawn into error. They didn't allow false teachers to come into their midst and lead people away with fancy,

# What Every Christian Should Know About Spiritual Growth!

new religious fads. They highly honored and revered God's Word.

At the time, these Christians were under intense persecution. But that didn't stop other believers from visiting their extraordinary church. People descended on them by the droves. Yet these visitors didn't come to be dazzled by signs and wonders, or to be awed by powerful preaching. No, they came to witness the great miracle of a church moving together as one body in the love of Christ. They wanted to see firsthand how a strong, steadfast gathering of believers was growing in the grace and knowledge of God.

Now, if Paul can compliment the church at Thessalonica, I believe I'm allowed to compliment our congregation at Times Square Church. I see and hear things among our body of believers that make me truly believe we're growing in the Lord "exceedingly".

Our church is twelve years old, with some 103 nationalities worshipping among us. Yet there are no ethnic lines here. We all know we're one blood with Christ. And the love in our church is a marvelous thing to experience. Visitors tell me, "As soon as I walked through the door, I felt the love of Christ saturating this place."

At various times, I've seen the following expressions of Christ's love in our midst:

\* A black usher hugs a white usher, telling him, "I sure see Jesus in you, brother." The white

usher answers, "I'm so glad I know you, friend."

\* Before the services, our ushers meet together to sing, clap and worship together. Their bond of love is evident to all.

\* Our Rhodesian pastor, Neil, hugs our Filipino pastor, Cesar - fellow ministers who deeply love and respect one another.

\* Members of our choir - singers of immense talent - embrace the chosen soloists in true admiration and love. They tell them, "Your singing was truly anointed. I thank God for your gift - and for you."

Recently, our church body gathered in love around one of the women on our staff. This dear, faithful woman lost her son in a car accident. Yet she didn't have to grieve alone. Scores of believers from our church rallied around her at the funeral. People had to line up down the street just to get into the chapel. And they all came for a simple reason: they love their sister deeply.

Like Paul, I look upon our congregation and see people who are strong in the Lord. Yet, not too long ago, these same people sought counseling every week. They were constantly up and down in their walk with Christ. One week they were full of joy, singing praises to God. But the next week their spirits were so low, they couldn't even lift their heads.

Today, I see a steadfastness taking hold in them. They soak up

God's Word, letting it mold their lives from day to day. And their faith is slowly taking root. Like Paul, I believe their exceeding growth can be seen by everyone around them!

In my opinion, there are three important things every Christian should know about spiritual growth. I trust these three things will both challenge and edify you:

### **1. Every Christian Should Be Growing and Thriving Spiritually, If He's Filled With Holy Ghost Truth.**

If you're being watered and fed by God's Word, you should have continual spiritual growth in your life. It should be happening automatically.

Now, I don't know if everyone in our congregation is "growing exceedingly," as Paul knew about the church at Thessalonica. Yet I believe it is true for many of our people. Why? The anointed preaching of the pure Word of God always produces growth. And the apostle Peter says that all who desire the pure milk of the Word will grow.

Paul describes our spiritual growth as a work of the Holy Ghost. He says the Spirit is ever at work, changing us from glory to glory. He's constantly renewing our minds, mortifying our flesh and bringing forth purity in our inner man. He works in our hearts to put off anger, bitterness, resentment and evil of all kinds. And He produces in us kindness, tenderness and forgiveness toward one another. He's growing us up in Christ - teaching us that everything we say and do has to be worthy of our Lord!

Paul further urges us, "Let a man examine himself..." (1.COR 11:28). "Examine yourselves... prove your own selves..." (2.COR 13:5). The Greek word for "examine" here means "scrutinize, test yourself." The apostle is saying, "Test yourself - see if you're walking according to God's Word." We're to constantly ask ourselves, "Am I changing? Am I becoming more loving and tenderhearted? Am I treating my family and friends with godly respect? Is my conversation becoming more righteous? Or am I still participating in dirty jokes? Am

I still complaining, or am I speaking edifying words of faith?"

I take this matter of self-examination very seriously. If you're a Christian, yet you're still apathetic about your spiritual growth, then you haven't allowed God's Spirit to do His work in you. Ask yourself - are you growing more excited about Jesus and His church each day? Or do you still hold onto grudges, resentments, roots of bitterness, despite God's warnings? Are you growing spiritually - or has your growth been stunted?

It's possible for us to experience "*exceeding growth*" in many areas of our lives, and yet remain childish in one area. Paul says, "*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*" (1.COR 13:11). Let me illustrate Paul's statement with a personal story.

Years ago, I was driving with my wife, Gwen, and her mother through the parking lot of a Dallas mall. Suddenly, a young woman zoomed her car out in front of us. I had to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. Immediately, I started fuming. When the driver looked up and saw my angry expression, she panicked and sped away.

At that point, I lost control. I hit the gas and sped after her. In seconds, I was way beyond the speed limit. I had no idea what I'd do if I caught up with her. All I knew was, I was angry!

Gwen was white with fear. She cried, "David, what are you doing? Stop the car!" I fumed, "Didn't you see what that woman just did? We could've had a wreck!" Gwen answered, "If you keep driving this way, you're going to have a bigger wreck!" Suddenly the fear of God came over me, and the Holy Ghost spoke clearly: "Stop now, David - while you still can!"

After that incident, I allowed God's Spirit to deal with my short temper. And I can honestly say I don't indulge in that kind of childish behavior anymore. Through the power of the Holy Ghost, I've striven to mortify all un-Christlike attitudes and impulses.

I believe most Christians are like me. Their lack of spiritual growth isn't due to some gross sin. More often, it's a character flaw - a predominate weakness they've

never dealt with. They may not think it's serious. But in reality, it's a huge obstruction to their spiritual growth.

I challenge you to finish the following sentence: "My single biggest problem is..." (I wonder how your spouse or co-workers might fill in that blank!) Is your weakness flying off the handle? Is it pouting when things don't go your way? Are you a touchy, nagging spouse? Do you have a hard time forgiving someone for a hurt he caused you? Or is your problem a besetting lust or habit? Show me a Christian who's always getting miffed... who's always complaining and murmuring... who's never thankful... who's unteachable, always having to be right... who's mean-spirited and cutting... and I'll show you someone whose spiritual life is stunted. That person is withering, becoming dry and barren. The precious life of Christ in him is dying!

### **2. Some Christians Are Growing, But They Don't Know It.**

Some believers can tell you all about their spiritual growth. And you can clearly see the changes in their lives. They testify to you about how the Holy Ghost has vanquished the enemy for them, and you rejoice with them in their victory.

Yet these kinds of Christians are the exception. Most believers are totally unaware of any spiritual progress in their lives. They're diligent to walk in holiness and in the fear of God. They pray, read the Bible and seek the Lord with all their hearts. And they've forsaken all besetting lusts and habits. There's no obstruction to spiritual growth in them. In short, the life of Christ is thriving in these saints.

But they can't discern any growth in themselves. They don't sense that anything spiritual is taking place at all. I'm an example of this type of Christian. I know I walk in the righteousness of Christ, yet I never feel holy. I never sense I'm making progress. In fact, I occasionally get down on myself whenever I do or say something un-Christlike. It causes me to wonder, "I've been a Christian for years. Why don't I ever learn?"

We all judge others to be so much purer and holier than ourselves.

Yet we aren't aware of the wonderful, exceeding spiritual growth that God is causing in us!

I think the Thessalonian Christians were stunned when they heard Paul's glowing assessment of them. They probably thought, "Me, growing exceedingly? Paul must be kidding. Doesn't he know I'm still far from what I ought to be? On most days, I struggle badly. He may see growth in me, but I certainly don't."

Yet Paul knew that spiritual growth is a secret, hidden thing. Scripture likens it to the unseen growth of flowers and trees: *"I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon."* (HOS 14:5-6).

God is telling us, "Go to the lilies! Just try to watch them grow. Take your watch, and be prepared to stay all day long. I'm telling you, by day's end you won't be able to see any growth whatsoever. But know this: I water the lily every morning with the dew I send - and it's going to grow.

"Or, try to measure the growth of the cedar tree. Camp under it for a month, and tell me how far you see it grow. Even after six months, you probably won't notice any growth. Yet that tree is putting down deep roots! You see, I water the tree with my rain. And any tree that's watered properly is going to grow. Yet such growth is not discernible to the human eye. It grows, but in secret!"

The same is true of most spiritual growth. It's imperceptible to the human eye!

Some Christians may object, "I've been a believer for ten years, and I still don't feel like I've grown spiritually." To those people, I point to the book of Isaiah. God promises, *"I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground..."* (ISA 44:3). *He also calls His repentant people "trees of righteousness"* (ISA 61:3). The Lord Himself says we're His trees and flowers, His carefully tended plants. And He sends down His dew and rain upon us daily!

Let me give you an easy test that will reveal whether spiritual growth is taking place in you. Simply ask yourself, "Am I thirsty? Do I want

more of Jesus and His holiness?" If the answer is yes, you can know you're growing. Why? He promises to pour out His living water on all who thirst for Him: *"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."* (MATT 5:6). Simply put, God judges your spiritual growth by how much you hunger and thirst for Him. So, if you're sincere about your walk with Christ, and you're open to His leading and correction, you mustn't be discouraged by any perceived lack of growth. True spiritual growth is taking place in you, whether you can see it or not!

I received a pitiful letter recently from the godly wife of a minister. She suspected something was wrong in her husband's life, because he suddenly grew distant from her. In fact, over the course of a few months, he totally changed into another man.

This man's preaching lost all its life, and his sermons grew increasingly permissive. His mind wandered in the pulpit, until finally he made no sense at all. The congregation could tell something in him had changed. Their shepherd was no longer growing spiritually. In fact, he was dying before their eyes!

His wife prayed for God to give her a clue about what was happening. Soon, she noticed her husband was spending hours shut in his office. He had forbidden her to bother him while he was supposedly studying. But finally, with the Spirit's leading, she pushed open the door to see what he was doing.

What she saw shocked her. Her husband sat drooling over internet pornography! When he turned and saw her, he said without emotion, "I'm hooked - addicted to this stuff." There was no sign of sorrow in him, no hint of remorse, no plea for help. He was totally given over to his lust!

I know a young minister who had worked with this man in a former pastorate. I called up the young man to find out what the pastor had been like in his earlier ministry. The young man told me, "In all honesty, that dear brother never had a hunger for the Lord. He had a lot of other interests, but he didn't care much about the things of God. And he was a legalist. To him, everything was about works. Yet what I remember most was that he

was incredibly mean to his wife. She could never do enough to please him."

In twenty years' time, there hadn't been any spiritual growth in this man. He was still a selfish, pouting child! The water he drank wasn't from heaven at all - but from the devil's poisonous cesspool!

Yet God promises that all who hunger and thirst after Him will be filled by His own hand. He'll water us from heaven. And he'll feed us all the nutrients needed to produce abundant life in us - whether we see it happening or not!

### 3. Many Christians Who Are Growing Think They're Failing.

When some people get saved, they never again struggle with a besetting sin. They testify, "The moment I came to Jesus, the Lord took that temptation out of me. And I've been free ever since." I know many former drug addicts who've had this experience. They were saved in our ministry over the past thirty-five years, and they haven't had an addiction problem since. In fact, some serve as ministers and social workers today.

But for multitudes of Christians, it's a different story. Years after their conversion, they still battle a powerful, perplexing temptation. An old corruption has broken loose in them - something they hated and never wanted to see again. And that bondage is the one thing that's kept them from fullness in God. It brings guilt and reproach into their life. And if it were to be exposed, it could ruin them. Yet no matter how hard they struggle, that one remaining lust simply won't let go. Over time they grow discouraged. Their soul cries out, "How long, Lord? When will this chain ever be broken?"

And eventually the devil comes to them, saying, "You'll never make it. Your sin is in you for good! You've struggled with this thing for years now. You know there's no way you could grow spiritually in this kind of condition."

Take heart, friend - I've got good news for you. You're growing in the midst of your struggle! In fact, you may be growing by leaps and bounds because of your struggle.

Ask any sailor who's had to navigate through hurricanes and great storms. The waves may toss his

ship around like a cork. The winds may shake the masts. And the storm may even seem to push the ship backward. But even the most skilled sailor often can't discern whether his ship is making any headway. The same winds that threaten to take the ship down may actually be speeding it on its way!

Rest assured - if you have the fear of God in your heart, you're going to emerge from the storm much stronger. You see, when you're doing battle with the enemy, you're exercising and calling forth all the graces and powers of God. And even though you may feel weakened, those graces and powers are strengthening you. For one, you're becoming more urgent in your praying. And, second, you're being stripped of all pride. So, the storm is actually putting you on "spiritual guard" in every area of your life!

**When You Cooperate With the Holy Spirit in the Battle to Mortify Your Sin, You're Growing in Your Knowledge of the Spirit's Work!**

Whenever opposition arises, God's grace thrives in us. Think about what happens to a tree when a great storm beats violently against it. The wind threatens to uproot the tree and carry it away. It breaks off its branches and blows away its leaves. It loosens its roots and blows off its buds. And when the storm is over, things look utterly hopeless.

Yet, look closer: the same storm that opened crevices in the earth around the trunk of the tree has helped the roots to go deeper. The tree now has access to new, deeper sources of nutrition and water. And it has been purged of all its dead branches. The buds may be gone, but others will grow back more fully. I tell you, that tree is now stronger, growing in unseen ways. And just wait till harvest - because it's going to bear much fruit!

Maybe you're in a storm right now. The wind is blowing hard, shaking you violently, and you think you're going down. Beloved, don't panic! You've got to know that in the midst of the tempest, you're putting down deep spiritual roots. God is developing in you a deepening humility, a greater mourning and sorrow for sin, a heightened hunger for His righteousness.

Other Christians who haven't known spiritual warfare may look down their noses at their brothers and sisters who struggle in ways they don't. But you no longer have that attitude. Now, because of your own struggles, you're more tenderhearted toward the weaknesses and failings of others.

Though you haven't been aware of it, the Lord has used the storm to deepen in you the roots of Christ's compassion.

In short, God is making you a seasoned soldier of the cross - battle-scarred, but battle-smart and courageous. You may get down on yourself at times - but the Lord never does. The fact is, He could have acted sovereignly at any time to pluck out your struggle. But He didn't - because He saw it producing in you a greater thirst for Him!

Think about it all: Your new humility, your new sorrow for sin, your new hunger for Christ - none of these things was present in you when you weren't engaged in spiritual warfare. And now you're growing ever stronger, in spite of your ongoing battle. You've resisted by faith alone. And although you've stumbled, you always get back up and return to the cross. You're holding onto a promise of covenant power. And in the process, you're growing holier, more humble - more like Jesus!

Yet the devil wants to convince you that your sin-struggle proves you're wicked and hell-bound. No - he's a liar! And he has trapped countless Christians with this hellish lie!

Just a few weeks ago our ministry received a call from a pastor's wife who was obviously inebriated when she called. With a shaky voice she said, "I just want to let you know there are thousands of pastors' wives out there who drink to cover their pain. That's what I do. I drink in secret to dull the ache. I also want to thank you for your lovely messages. Good day."

My heart goes out to this woman and to countless other ministers' wives like her. Some endure cold marriages that are slowly destroying their souls. And they secretly turn to drugs and alcohol to dull their inner pain. Yet they're only descending further into the depths and torments of hell.

Scripture says God will not break a bruised reed. And that's what this poor minister's wife is right now - a reed that's been battered and bruised. I believe God's Spirit is going to reach her and minister to her.

The Bible also says God won't quench a smoking flax. This word applies particularly to the pastor who's hooked on internet pornography. God is saying, "Wherever I see even a small spark remaining, I won't extinguish it. In fact, I'll continue to fan that spark until it catches fire and flames up again!"

Do you want to grow spiritually? If so, ask the Holy Ghost to shine His light on your one area of weakness or sin. And cry out to Him, "Lord, I want to measure up to Your Word. And I know only You have the power to accomplish that in me. Please - help me to grasp by faith that You're at work in me, growing me up spiritually!"

God wants you to know that right now, in the midst of your storm, He stands beside you. He's watering your spirit, feeding your soul, putting down His strong roots in you. So, let the winds of struggle blow hard. Your Father is preparing you for a great harvest!

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