

GRACE NOTES

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Baby Steps for Growth

Books abound telling believers what they need to do in order to grow. Probably the most common formula is “read your Bible pray every day and you’ll grow ...”. Somewhere in there we usually find a charge to get out and get busy for God, to start telling others about Christ. But is this the way the spiritual life starts? Is this what it takes for growth?

To begin with most first century Christians, in fact most Christians during the history of the church, have not had the luxury of owning a copy of the Scriptures, not even a small portion. So, for many centuries, Christians could not possibly fulfill the first part, “read your Bible”. For many believers during the history of the Church, and this is still true in parts of the world today, believers gather, are taught and then must remember what they have been taught.

Concerning prayer, we read in 1 John 5:14, “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything **according to His will**, He hears us.” Growing up in church, this “according to His will” was a riddle. What does it mean? I mean, the question usually is, if I knew God’s will, why would I be asking? The point of the verse is, God hears when you ask in that manner. When you don’t, He doesn’t hear. OK, He does hear if we are talking about perceiving some form of communication, because God is omniscient, but that is not what John is writing about. John’s point is, God doesn’t listen, He doesn’t acknowledge asking communication which is not according to His will. It is as though our asking falls on deaf ears. How does a newly saved individual know God’s will so he can ask, accordingly? So we have two problems both of which run contrary to the above popular formula. So what do the Scriptures say?

In James 1:2-4, we have a little sketch of the growing or maturing process. Many of us have read and memorized these verses, but have missed James’ point because our English Bibles have used the word “perfect” instead of “maturing”. The Greek word *telios* means a person or thing which is coming to its designed end. It or he is arriving at the point at which it is intended to arrive. If I make cookies, at any step in the process while mixing ingredients, the dough is “maturing” or coming closer to the form I ultimately intend it to have. If I build a house, each step in the construction process, brings that house closer to being complete or perfect. So we speak of this process as maturing and the end as “perfection” or “maturity”.

James writes, “Count it all joy, brothers whenever you fall into a variety of temptations, knowing experientially, that the approving of your faith renders patience. But let patience have its maturing work, in order that you might be mature and whole, deprived of nothing.” (1:2-4).

James is writing about “temptation”. Many expositors have referred to this words as being “trials”. But if you fail to maintain proper character while enduring a trial, what is the result? If you are ill and grouse about your illness, you are failing to maintain proper character. You could even blame God and that could be blasphemy. James is referring to temptations. This is the same word so translated in verses 12ff. Temptations can involve a large variety of circumstances and are therefore referred to as a “variety”.

The believer is to count it joy. In light of the potential maturing the believer is to make an estimation of the circumstances that it is joy. Joy is a part of the fruit from the Spirit. This is a good contrast to the more frequent response, “Why me?!” or “Not now!” We grump and grouse when we face these temptations. We don’t want to have to make difficult choices or face a spiritual enemy. But our response is to be one of joy. We are to count it joy because we realize this

isn't some random event. 1 Corinthians 10:13 informs us that God allows us to experience temptation. God also provides a means of escape, a means of bearing the temptation, so that we never face a temptation God knows we are unable to bear. If a temptation is too great, God will not allow it. Apply this to our temptation. If I am being tempted, I can know that God knows I am able to bear that temptation or He would not have allowed the temptation. Have you ever thought about that when your being tempted? This is a reason you can count it all joy.

Why does God allow temptation at all? If you understand 1 Corinthians 10:13, this is a natural question. Why would God allow me to experience temptations? The remainder of James 1:2-4 explains. God wants you and I to grow up. He desires that we mature. He does not want us to remain spiritual babies. According to James 1:4, maturing takes place when we endure temptations. So, if we desire to mature, we will have to endure temptation.

What is endurance? Its simply another translation for the word patience. Patience should not be confused with forbearance or longsuffering. Forbearance is the act of putting up with another person's habits that are not unrighteous, but may be annoying. A person who sniffs or snorts often may annoy me, but they are doing nothing unrighteous. This is forbearance. Those inaccurately translated in Galatians 5:22 in the NIV and NASB, patience is not longsuffering. Longsuffering is a long temper rather than a short one. It is not being easily angered. As with the other eight parts of the Fruit from the Spirit, longsuffering deals primarily with other people. When another persons treats me in a manner which is unpleasant, perhaps harsh, vicious, etc. if I am spiritual, I can direct longsuffering to their actions and attitudes towards me. Longsuffering keeps me from lashing out at them or striking back, in a sort of tit for tat. Patience, however is primarily circumstances related. It isn't suffering long. It deals with remaining under pressure (Romans 5:3-4) and maintaining the character God desires me to exhibit despite the the adverse circumstances. It takes a literal dependence upon God in our position in Christ, where we are graced (Romans 5:1). If we do not take advantage of our position in grace in Christ, then we are just toughing it out by our own strength. Such an effort, usually ends in frustration leaving the believer "wiped out" and disgruntled. But being strengthened by the grace in which we stand, we can endure [be patient] by the strength God provides.

But there is more than just having patience. Patience involves different provisions under different circumstances. Since this involves temptation, it means the believer is being attacked by own of his three spiritual enemies. Those three enemies are Satan, the world system, the flesh or sin nature. Each enemy is distinct and has a distinct set of lusts by which a believer is attacked. Satan attacks with disappointment, discouragement, doubt, independence from God, pride, lying, stealing, bitterness, having an unforgiving spirit, being a busying body, gossip, spiritual laziness, spiritual cowardice and rotten [hurtful] speech. Satan does not use the flesh or its lusts. The works of the flesh are found in Galatians 5:19ff. The world system distracts the believer with a love for things pertaining to the eyes, things pertaining to our flesh [creature comforts], and the empty boast of things pertaining to this physical life (1 John 2:15-16). To patiently endure temptation, the believer must be able to identify which enemy the attack is coming from. He must do this, because he does not defend himself against each enemy in the same manner.

The believer resists Satan (James 4:7) by mentally putting on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). The believer doesn't fight the sin nature. He reckons himself dead to it with Christ and alive to God in his position in Christ (Romans 6:10-11). He essentially puts its deeds to death through the Spirit by reckoning on his position in Christ (Romans 8:13). The believer is simply to say no to [A.V. "deny"] the lusts from the world system (Titus 2:13). There exists a dis-

tinct defense against each enemy. A believer can switch defenses from God's design. He does it this way, or he will likely fail. He will not be able to endure temptation and he will not mature.

So, as James, wrote, let patience have its maturing work, so you might become mature and whole, lacking in nothing. God's decision to allow you to face a temptation is His decision to allow you and opportunity to mature. By facing whatever enemy is attacking in the manner which God has revealed, the believer matures. He has learned in his experience to practice the truth which is revealed in God's word. He has learned in his experience to depend on God in the manner which God has revealed. He does not depend by simply saying he is depending, but by doing what God revealed for him to do. This also provides him with experiential knowledge of God and God's provision for him. He is maturing. This whole scenario will continue to be played out for the duration of the believers life, allowing him to go on maturing more and more.