

WHERE ARE YOU GROWING?

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Are you ready for a great pep talk?!

2 Peter 1 (The Message)

³⁻⁴ *Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.*

⁵⁻⁹ *So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus. Without these qualities you can't see what's right before you, oblivious that your old sinful life has been wiped off the books.*

You Have What You Need

Hear it again:

³ *Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us...*

God has overlooked nothing, has left nothing out! All the ingredients of a God-pleasing life have been provided for you through Jesus Christ, who introduced you personally to God, our Creator. What is needed? The prayers of Christ. The powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. The truth of God's Word. The fellowship of the Church. Faith, hope, and love.

Whatever you may name as necessary, you will discover has already been provided. Whatever you may currently lack has been promised and assured.

The first thing God wants you to know is that *YOU CAN DO THIS!* You *can* know the Lord and do His will. You *can* overcome your flesh, little by little. You *can* do great things you have never even tried before!

The life of God is in you. This is your hope. Someone supernatural is now living inside of you. You are not alone. If you have invited Jesus Christ to take charge of your life, then you are already participating in the life of God—everlasting life.

The questions the Holy Spirit is putting before us today are these: What are you doing with the life God has given you? Where are you going? Are you growing in Christ? What have you done with the promises Jesus gave to you? Are you living like a new person? Like a child of God?

You've got to live what God gives.

Floorboards of Your Life

The New Living Translation renders verse 5 this way:

⁵ *In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises.*

Your Christian life is about responding to the promises of God. If you ignore His promises, or forget His promises, or discount His promises, then you're not living what God has given. You may call yourself a Christian and be gathering with the church, but the true measure is how you relate to the promises of God for your life.

When I speak of "His promises to you" I am not referring to the general category of words of promise that may be found in the Bible. I am referring to the specific promises that God has highlighted for you in Scripture, or whispered in your heart during prayer.

God is the Great Communicator and He has much to say to you about the life He has given and prepared for you to live.

God may whisper to you during prayer — with a portion of Scripture, or an illustration, or a vision. Take your impression back to the Bible and ask God to confirm and explain or apply it.

As you read the pages of the Bible, a passage may leap out at you to grip your attention or prod your conscience — with a lesson, or a warning, or a correction, or a command.

2 Timothy 3

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. (NLT)

This is the voice of God speaking to you in an understandable way — a way to which you may respond.

Such words of promise and direction form the foundation of your individual Christian life; they are the floorboards on which you may build your future.

How you build from that point is absolutely critical.

1 Corinthians 3

⁹ You are God's building.

¹⁰ Because of God's grace to me [Paul], I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.

¹² Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. ¹³ But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. ¹⁴ If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

The materials you use and the manner in which you build are crucial to your future.

Galatians 6

⁷ Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what he sows. ⁸ The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

With the specific words of direction that God has given to you as the platform for your life, you are ready to grow into all that God has created and designed you for.

To get started, all you need to do is trust what you have heard Him say. Where will you find faith for that? In the very promise you have received.

Romans 10

¹⁷ *So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*

When you hear God's voice with your heart (not just your head), faith, like a seed, is sown — the faith to trust God to fulfill that promise.

Step One: Faith

Faith alone (the kind that just sits inside your head) is fruitless. It achieves nothing real. It is illusory. Left untrained, it may become delusional.

James 1

²² *But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.*

Real faith is growing faith. And growing faith is active (not passive) faith.

James 2

¹⁴ *What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?*

¹⁷ *So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.*

You must actively trust the words that God has given you. You must act on them as the Holy Spirit directs you. When you mix your faith together with God's promise (with the intention to obey it), growth begins in that area!

Growing UP

Faith is at the heart of all other Christian traits. It is the first step in Christian growth. Thus, Peter wrote:

2 Peter 1

⁵ *Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.*

These are eight stages of spiritual growth associated with every promise, or word from God that you receive. For your growth in any particular area to continue beyond seedling to fruitfulness, you must grow through each of these stages. Each stage leads naturally to the next and supports the development of the next stage. *This means there are no shortcuts.* It does no good to try to jump past one or more stages, because you cannot sustain the higher level without the previous stages in place. Their order is God-designed (not arbitrary) and necessary.

Note also that these traits are not mere abstract concepts, nor inward attitudes alone. They are fundamentally behaviors. They describe how a growing Christian lives and relates with other people.

Step Two: Faith to Goodness

Good works are defined by God as those works He has invited you to do *with Him*. Nothing more; nothing less. What makes any work good is not its *impact* on the recipient (as is commonly assumed), but the *motive* of the doer. Imitating the works of Jesus is not the same as participating with Jesus in the work. What *He* does is good.

John 5

⁷⁹ *Jesus explained, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.*

When you follow His lead, trusting in His wisdom and power, your act of faith produces goodness.

Step Three: Goodness to Knowledge of God

Having head knowledge may be described as being informed *without* personal experience, while having heart knowledge is being assured *by* personal experience. When it comes to knowing a person, head knowledge is no substitute for heart knowledge. Head knowledge of God may be gained from many sources, but heart knowledge comes only one way: walking with Him (practicing your faith).

Philippians 3

¹⁰ *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

Because God is good, practicing goodness increases your knowledge of Him at the heart level. Through your acts of service, you gain a heightened awareness of God — confidence in God, fear of God, and hope in God. The more you know Him, the more you love Him and want to do only what pleases Him.

Step Four: Knowledge of God to Self-Control

Biblical self-control is not the same as what is popularly termed self-control. Christian self-control is something the Holy Spirit produces in our lives.

Galatians 5

²² *The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.*

This is not control *by* self, but control *of* self by the Holy Spirit who lives in you.

The need for self-control is underscored by the persistent battle between your flesh and your spirit. If self is *in control*, your flesh leads the way. If self is *under control*, your spirit (led by the Holy Spirit) directs your way.

Faith is dependence on God. Therefore, the essence of all sin is independence from God. It is the thought, "I don't need any help." Or, "I can handle it on my own." Independence from God is dependence on self. This is why your self must be controlled *by the Holy Spirit*. Controlling your behavior *by yourself* only strengthens the stronghold of self in your life, pushing God away. Yielding to the influence of the Spirit subdues self (your flesh), gradually revealing the likeness of Jesus.

Step Five: Self-Control to Perseverance

Have you ever felt as if God had thrown you a “curve ball”? Many new believers imagine that once faith has come troubles will vanish. In fact, the opposite is true, because your faith demands testing.

In actual practice, God gives you faith *before* He gives you the test (otherwise, of what use is your faith?). That means that faith arrives *untested*. It must be tested in order to bear fruit.

James 1

³ *You know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.*

Mature faith requires forging in the crucible of experience. The fuel that fires that crucible? Trouble.

John 16

³³ *[Jesus said:] I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*

You may think of trials and troubles as the frame of the canvas on which we paint our life with faith. Just as the frame provides tension for the canvas to receive the paint, so hardships provide the necessary tension for our lives to grow and develop in faith.

The colors with which we paint our lives come not from our circumstances but from our *faith-response* to life's circumstances. Your troubles will either make you bitter or make you better, depending on your faith-response.

Why is patient endurance such an important step in our faith journey? Because patience is the expression of hope. Perhaps the hope of an anticipated blessing, or the hope of eventual release from a difficulty. The Bible tells of many others who have pressed ahead in hope, urging us to draw courage from their example:

Hebrews 6

¹² *Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

We demonstrate our confidence in God by patiently trusting Christ, no matter what.

Step Six: Perseverance to Godly Devotion

The Amplified Bible offers as a synonym, *piety*, which describes reverent devotion to God. In other words, godliness describes the practical character of devotion in one who is sincere about the life of faith.

A godly person is one who continuously moves *toward* God — does not usually wander or turn away. We all encounter obstacles and threats and temptations, but godliness is a matter of training. In case we fall, we have already planned to get back up.

Proverbs 24

¹⁶ *The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again.*

1 Timothy 4

⁷ *Train yourself to be godly.* ⁸ *“Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.”* ⁹ *This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it.*

This discipline must come from the inside, but it always starts from the outside, the result of an external force (a parent, a teacher, a coach, a friend, a spouse, or a difficulty). Now, perhaps you can understand why I have said that the patient (faithful) endurance of hardships has the effect of increasing devotion toward God (godliness).

Like farming, spiritual discipline yields a good harvest over the long haul, but in the short term, you may be disappointed and tempted to give up. Do you know what it will take to see a real harvest from your spiritual disciplines? Persistence. Faithful perseverance. And this increases your focus on God.

Step Seven: Godly Devotion to Brotherliness

The human family was originally (and still is) God’s idea.

Ephesians 1

⁵ *God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*

Galatians 3

²⁶ *For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

God has made us brothers and sisters through our faith-relationship with Jesus. Now, He wants us to live like the family of God that we are.

Typically, siblings play one of four roles with their brothers and sisters: coaches, protectors, oppressors, or rivals. The same are also found in the family of God. Sometimes, spiritual siblings find it difficult to love one another.

If you search for the phrase “one another” or “each other” in the New Testament, you will find many Christian relational guidelines. Here is a sampling:

- Take delight in honoring each other. (Romans 12:10)
- Live in harmony with each other. (Romans 12:16)
- Stop condemning each other. (Romans 14:13)
- Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you. (Romans 15:7)
- Wait for each other. (1 Corinthians 11:33)
- Serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)
- Be patient with each other. (Ephesians 4:2)
- Be kind to each other. (Ephesians 4:32)
- Forgive one another. (Ephesians 4:32)
- Make allowance for each other’s faults. (Colossians 3:13)
- Encourage each other. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- Don’t speak evil of one another. (James 4:11)
- Don’t grumble about each other. (James 5:9)
- Pray for each other. (James 5:16)

All of these are examples of “brotherly kindness,” which comes from the Greek root *phileo*. It is a word that expresses companionship and the love of close friends — shared interests, shared values, and shared experiences.

Because of our common “heritage” in Christ and shared life of faith, we are to learn to relate to each other like good friends. Because of our diverse backgrounds, this usually requires some effort and persistence.

A God-devoted lifestyle leads directly to the opportunity of brotherly kindness, because the closer we walk with God the more He asks us to represent Him to others. This almost always *begins* with occasions for thoughtful, loving service.

Step Eight: Brotherliness to Godly Love

Brotherly kindness comes from the Greek *phileo*, but godly love comes from the Greek *agapao*. A different word to describe a unique kind of love.

While brotherly kindness is rooted in passively shared feelings of interest and pleasure or pain, godly love is rooted in active commitment, regardless of the fluctuation of feelings. It is based on evaluation and choice, and is a matter of will and action.

Paul writes of this kind of love as greater than eloquent speech, greater than spiritual insight or power, greater than philanthropy or acts of service.

1 Corinthians 13

⁴ Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵ or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. ⁶ It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷ Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

This is the way God loves you and me. This, John wrote, is the love that comes from God. In fact, it is God’s very nature.

1 John 4

⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Paul agreed: God pours this love into us.

Romans 5

⁵ The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Therefore, this is our highest act of faith and devotion — the only real evidence of our spiritual maturity — to love one another as God loves us. Only by this, Jesus said, will the rest of the world recognize that we have been taught and trained by Him (John 13:35).

Sacred Presence

So, we build upon each promise God gives us — by faith, by virtue, by knowledge, by self-control, by perseverance, by devotion to God, by brotherly kindness, until we reach the expression of godly love. And with each new word from the Lord, we begin again, growing up into His likeness in every dimension.

Ephesians 2

²¹ *In Him the whole structure is joined (bound, welded) together harmoniously, and it continues to rise (grow, increase) into a holy temple in the Lord [a sanctuary dedicated, consecrated, and sacred to the presence of the Lord]. (AMP)*

The questions I first presented to you are these: What are you doing with the life God has given you? Where are you going? Are you growing in Christ? What have you done with the promises Jesus gave to you? Are you living like a new person? Like a child of God?

Perhaps you are ready to reconsecrate yourself to God's purposes and promises. To recall what the Lord has spoken to you and apply your faith again. Why not take a few moments now and ask Him to remind you of what you may have forgotten? Tell Him that you will start to trust Him for those things again and expect Him to lead you as you do. This is the way to participate in the life of God and be blessed every day.