

## Steps To Spiritual Maturity

'I could not talk to you as spiritual adults but as to nonspiritual, or as infants in our Messiah. I fed you with spiritual milk not spiritual meat for you were not mature enough and even now you are not strong enough, for you are still too carnal' (1 Corinthians 3:1 to 3).

'Listen to the parable of the farmer. When someone hears the Word of the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in their heart. This is what was sown by the roadside. What was sown on the rocky places, is those who hear the Word and immediately receive it with joy, yet because they have no root in themselves endure for a while but when oppression or persecution arises because of the Word, they immediately stumble. What was sown among the thorns, is those who hear the Word but the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word and they become unfruitful. What was sown on the good ground, is those who hear the Word and understand it, who most certainly bears fruit and brings forth, some one hundred times as much, some sixty and some thirty' (Matthew 13:18 to 23).

Prolonged spiritual childhood is carnality and it is often mentioned in the scriptures. Acting like immature Christians had reduced the Corinthian people to the status of spiritual babes. There was no distinction between carnality, immaturity and spiritual babes, because carnal people act childishly. If a person does not grow as they should in Christian character, then they are immature babes. Having a good memory for scriptures does not signify maturity. Christianity has to be of the heart, not head knowledge. Growing up as a Christian does not mean being able to quote many scriptures, it means to produce spiritual fruit or good Christian character. If a Christian goes whimpering off to the church leadership about silly trivialities, they are childish and that signifies immaturity. At this early stage of their Christian walk, weaker people are more likely to give up their faith (Matthew 13:19 to 21). It takes strength of character to remain faithful to God through difficult times.

Ongoing sin or a reactive dislike of parts of the Bible are signs of immaturity. Many Christians love the excitement and joy of the house of God and may see a lot of miracles but will not accept the discipline of church leadership. Many people dislike the way the Bible describes some sins as abominations to God. They will not tolerate being told their sin is their sin and not someone else's fault. They dislike being told they will have to give an account to God on Judgement Day for their actions, both good and bad (2 Corinthians 5:10). Some people cannot accept solid teaching from the Word of Truth where a strong foundation can be laid. God cannot work through a church where He is not Lord and Head of that assembly, nor can He adjust the relationships of people within the church to create strong disciples, or touch on their greed, their materialism or their worldly lifestyle. These same 'babes' might grow up if they could see the Christians in Africa for example, who dress in bark because they have no clothes and cannot easily access fresh drinking water, or having one Bible shared amongst 5,000 people like in some countries. The Corinthian church had many gifts but they also had many problems caused by immaturity. Gifts given by the Lord are not a sign of growth, but of grace. Maturity is knowing how to handle the gifts to glorify God and to edify the whole body of believers.

The scriptures need to be understood by the mind but experienced in the heart. We all need to seek the Word of God and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal those areas where we need to grow up in God. Spending time with the Lord, being completely silent in His Presence, waiting for His Word to come, worshiping, fasting, listening to Christian music, attending church, being involved in church activities and exercising self-control will all help with spiritual growth. Once a person feels they cannot get enough of God's presence even after spending hours with Him, that individual is growing up. If every Christian spent two or three hours reading His Word, praising, worshiping and praying, every single day, we would have very few spiritual infants. People who do not regularly read the Bible, will not mature in God.

The story of the elder brother of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11 to 32) shows an immature man who complained about the father's welcoming home party for his lost son. Many Christians are like that. They do not realise Jesus has made the way of eternal deliverance for them, nor do they realise they have an inheritance. To them, Christianity is not an eternal process but is no more than meeting up with nice people in church once a week. They are still struggling to gain the victory over sin, but they do not have to gain the victory for it has already been given to us by the blood of Jesus, so all we have to do is walk in that victory with prayer and repentance. Some people take a long time to grasp the concept of deliverance from sickness, spiritual weakness, sin, carnality and walking in the liberty of salvation. 'Whom the Son sets free (from the burden of sin) is free indeed' (John 8:36). At this stage of spiritual growth, there are still people who walk away from their faith when life gets tough (Matthew 13:22). Other people turn to 'alternative' teaching. 'Do not be carried away by various and strange teachings for it is good for the heart to be established by means of grace' (Hebrews 13:9). A mature Christian will produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit and behave graciously. 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control ... and

those who have crucified the flesh with its desires. If we live by the Holy Spirit let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking and envying one another' (Galatians 5:22 to 26).

The scriptural steps of spiritual maturity are water, milk, meat and oil. When we slowly grow up through the steps, we will see God is building His church gradually, step by step. The first step, water, is for spiritual cleansing and for spiritual thirst quenching. Consistently reading the Bible washes us spiritually. This 'water' is figurative or spiritual. The Bible is the cleansing water of the Word (Ephesians 5:26). Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1 & 14; Revelation 19:13). He came with water and blood (1 John 5:6). We are washed by His blood (Revelation 1:5). The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). The water of the Word washes us clean from sin when we give our lives to Jesus, then after our salvation we should then be baptised in real water, which is very significant for our salvation. Jesus was baptised by full immersion so we should be baptised by full immersion. A strong, pure God-given sanctity of earthly Christian marriage is a spiritual example of the relationship Jesus intends to have with the church, being the Bride of the Lamb, our Messiah. 'This mystery is great, concerning Jesus and the assembly' (Ephesians 5:32). Jesus Himself is the Saviour and the Head of His body, the church because He gave Himself up for the church so He could cleanse the church by the washing of water with the Word, so He could then present the church to Himself in glorious splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing ... Wives need to submit to their husbands; husbands need to submit to Jesus ... Husbands are the head in a household; Jesus is the Head of the church ... Wives are to submit to their husbands; the church must submit to Jesus ... Husbands must love their wives; Jesus loved the church so much He gave Himself up for her ... Jesus sanctified the church by washing her with the water of the Word ... Jesus nourishes the church as a husband provides nourishment for his wife (Ephesians 5:22 to 33).

The water of the Word quenches our spiritual thirst or need for God. 'As the deer pants for water, so my soul pants after you, God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God' (Psalm 42:1 & 2). 'Listen, everyone who is thirsty! Come to the waters ...' (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks of this (normal) water will thirst again but whoever drinks of the (spiritual) water I will give them will never thirst again. The (spiritual) water I give will become in them a well of living water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:13 & 14). 'To the thirsty, I will give (spiritual) water without price from the fountain of the water of Life' (Revelation 21:6). 'The Holy Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" Let those who are listening say, "Come!" Let everyone come who is thirsty and whoever will, let them come, take of the Water of Life without cost' (Revelation 22:17).

Moving on from the watery steps, we come to the 'milk'. 'Like newborn babies you should crave the pure spiritual milk, so by it you may be nurtured and grow into salvation since you have already tasted the goodness of the Lord' (1 Peter 2:2 & 3). As brand new baby Christians, we began our walk by listening to preachers tell us all about the Word of God. Most of it went right over our heads. When we first begin to read the Bible, it leaves us wondering. As new baby believers, we are not expected to know more than the basic doctrine of salvation. New Christians are called babes or infants. Jesus called His disciples infants, yet they were all strong, adult men, but they were infants in the New Covenant (Matthew 11:25). Jesus called young Christians, lambs (John 21:15). The first step is as a spiritual baby, then a little child. John called them little children several times (1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18 & 28; 1 John 3:7, 18; 1 John 4:4; 1 John 5:21). As a new Christian, we need a long time to grow, just human babies do. The milk of the Word nourishes us until we learn to 'walk' in the Lord, unaided. After we learn to walk in the Lord, we are called young men (1 John 2:13 & 14). As we grow spiritually and learn more, so the steps of spiritual growth as mentioned in the Bible become deeper, more interesting, more exciting and we begin to get to know more about God's personality. Once we become 'children' rather than 'babes', God begins His discipline and we grow faster, spiritually. 'By this time you ought to be teachers but you still need someone to teach you the basic principles of God's Word. You have come to need spiritual milk not solid food. Everyone who feeds on milk is immature in the Word of righteousness, for he is a spiritual infant' (Hebrews 5:12 & 13). Paul said he could not talk to the people as spiritual adults, but he had to speak to them as though they were spiritual infants because they were too carnal and unspiritual, behaving like unchanged people. They were arguing amongst themselves and Paul told them off (1 Corinthians 3:1 to 23). We need to grow up in God, mature and see things through spiritual 'eyes', not through worldly eyes. God will tolerate carnality in a new Christian for a while, but eventually He will start to deal with us as sons and purge the sinfulness out of us. Jesus said His words and teaching cleansed and pruned the disciples (John 15:3). Later on He said He could not tell them everything He wanted to because they were not ready for it (John 16:12).

After a few years, we come to the next step in our spiritual growth. The next step is the need to go on to meat or more solid spiritual food. 'Meat is for full-grown adults who are able to distinguish between good and evil' (Hebrews 5:14). At this level we should be able to seek out for ourselves the deeper oracles of God written in the Bible. We should be past the stage where we believe everything the pastor says, just because he says it. We should be able to search both Old and New Testaments and cross-reference scriptures. We should be able to line up the latest sermon from church with the scriptures. The Bible should be making a lot

more sense than before because the more we read, the more the Lord opens our spiritual eyes, and so the more we can understand. Jesus said, "Blessed are your eyes because they do see, and blessed are your ears because they do hear" (Matthew 13:16). Jesus was speaking about spiritual eyes and ears. The things of God are foolish to the natural, nonspiritual man and it takes time to learn and discern the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). Mature Christians are called sheep who should mature into shepherds. The next step is when we get to the point where we can teach others. The Bible calls mature Christians, fathers (1 John 2:13 & 14). It is a time when the Lord expects mature Christian behaviour and He will no longer tolerate immaturity or bad conduct. We are to be examples of Christianity to the outside world, to our families and especially, to new Christians in the church. This is the time when we are aware God is watching our every move. He always has been, but we are more aware of it. We become more aware of the sin nature that lurks in our bodies. We strive to become as holy as mere humans can be because we know our purity brings us closer to God. We are also aware of the greatness of our Creator and are able to have long, involved conversations with Him. He tells us secrets. He becomes more real than ever before. We can experience His kiss on our cheek, His wonderful perfume filling the room; we can sense the warmth and love in His eyes. He becomes a real Person. We are far more aware of what He expects of His people in the terms of holiness, honesty, kindness and other attributes He has, we are to attain to. This is when He reveals the weaknesses in our character He disapproves of and the new fresh clean aspects of our character are revealed. At the same time, we are able to search the scriptures in a much deeper way and get to know God in a deeper, more mature way. He becomes our whole life, our breath, our constant companion and our lifeblood. This is the point where we know we can never live without Him and there are no more stumbling blocks. If people make it to this stage in their walk with the Lord, they are much less likely to slip away (Matthew 13:23).

Another step is the 'oil' of the Holy Spirit. This can come at any time in our lives, or any time in our walk with God. Some people receive the Holy Spirit the day they receive Jesus as their Saviour. Other people are not filled with the Spirit for years afterwards. Some are baptised in water before being baptised in the Holy Spirit, others receive the Holy Spirit before baptism in water. Every person is different and there is no set sequence for receiving the Holy Spirit but once we do, we receive power to do God's will. We receive the internal 'fire' that gives us the desire to get out there and preach. We receive the guidance we need (John 16:13). Praying in tongues, or praying in the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to live in this sinful world without being tainted by sin (Jude 1:20 & 24). We have learned to listen to the tiny voice of God so we are able receive answers to problems and questions we often want to ask Him. We receive the power to walk by faith, walk in the Holy Spirit and walk in a totally new way of life. All we have to do is ask, receive by faith and learn to listen to His still, small voice.

Signs of spiritual maturity ... Mature believers do not allow themselves to be spiritually tossed around by winds of doctrine but will adhere closely to the whole Word of God. These believers cannot be manipulated by false teaching. They live and breathe the life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, having a hunger for the Word of God and His purity. 'Jesus called some to be apostles, some to be prophets, evangelists, shepherds or teachers for the perfecting (maturing) of the believers, to the work of serving, to the building up of the Body of our Messiah until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a full grown (spiritual) adult, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Jesus. We should no longer be spiritual children, tossed to and fro between various winds of doctrine, following unscrupulous men in every form of trickery, inventing errors to mislead, but speaking truth in love, let us grow up in every way to be like Jesus Who is our Head' (Ephesians 4:11 to 15). We should all aspire to, 'Adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all humanity, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus our Messiah, Who gave Himself for us so He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works' (Titus 2:10 to 14). Adhering to the doctrine of Jesus will enable us to become the image of God (Colossians 3:10).

Mature believers hate sin as much as God hates sin and will not compromise their faith to please others. 'Let us cleanse ourselves from all uncleanness of flesh, soul and spirit, perfecting holiness in the (reverential) fear of God' (2 Corinthians 7:1). The doctrine of Jesus is a doctrine of Godliness, holiness, good behaviour, giving God the glory while we worship Jesus. 'If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not consent to sound words, the words of our Lord Jesus and to the doctrine which is according to Godliness, they are conceited, knowing nothing but obsessed with arguments, disputes and word battles, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, constant friction between people of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that Godliness is a means of gain. Withdraw yourself from such people. Godliness with contentment is great gain' (1 Timothy 6:3 to 6).

If you are a new Christian and are wondering why the Bible is so hard to understand, keep reading it because God will show you new things in His time. Just as we would not overload a young child with

information they are too young to understand, so God also does not overload us with information we cannot yet absorb. Be patient with yourself and allow God to reveal the steps and stages of spiritual growth for you, slowly, as you are able to deal with each new piece of information. It gets better, more interesting and more exciting as God slowly reveals things to us; things we would never have dreamed possible. 'They (Christians) have a garland (hope) for ashes (broken lives), the oil of joy (the Holy Spirit) for mourning (distress of any kind), the garment of praise (praise and worship) for the spirit of heaviness (depression, sadness) so they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord so He may be glorified' (Isaiah 61:3).

Amen and God bless you.

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