

Back to Basics

Steps of Spiritual Growth

1 John 2:12-14

Introduction

The Apostle John writes this letter to expose and refute false teachers and their views of spirituality. He also writes to remind the believers about the nature of authentic Christian spirituality.

The Gnostics believed there was a dualism between God and the material world. They taught that God was separate from creation and that creation was the work of evil powers who did not know God. Humans, therefore, had an evil body but a divine soul. Therefore, it doesn't matter if you sin in the flesh because it is evil. You are saved and enlightened by unique spiritual encounters of divine revelations.

John reminds them that genuine Christian spiritual life is developed over time through steps of spiritual growth. John outlines these stages of spiritual development in Chapter 2, verses 12-14. "I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him *who is* from the beginning. I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him *who is* from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one." (1 John 2:12-14)

John refers to three different stages of development:

1. childhood ("dear children"),
2. young adulthood ("young men"), and
3. mature adulthood ("fathers" or "parents").

John is not referring to people of different chronological ages but to Christians in different stages of spiritual development. We see it in the way he supplies spiritual characteristics to describe them. But why the repetition? It's a form of Hebrew parallelism (like the rest of the letter!) which emphasizes John's points and allows him to elaborate on them.

Let's take a closer look at each of these steps of spiritual growth to learn what distinguishes them.

I. I Write to the Children

Read 1 John 2:1-5. "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His

commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked." (1 John 2:1-6)

I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. (1 John 2:12)

In this childhood stage, John calls our attention to two specific things. First, "Your sins have been forgiven on account of His name." (the name of Jesus) As a young believer, God assures you of His complete forgiveness of sins. He also assures you that His forgiveness is not based on how perfectly you keep the commandments or how much penance you do when you sin.

Forgiveness is based upon what Jesus did for you on the Cross. Jesus paid the penalty for your sins, and when you accept Jesus as God's worthy sacrifice, sufficient enough to pay for all your sins, you are forgiven! This is what John means when he writes, "for His name's sake." It means because of Jesus and his death.

John says in verse 1, "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." This perfect gift of forgiveness through Jesus is the foundation of all healthy spiritual development and paves the way for us to start experiencing a personal relationship with God.

John says, "I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father, that is, you have met God and are getting to know God, not formally as an abstract, distant Deity, but personally as your loving heavenly Father.

God's Spirit comes into your heart and introduces you to God as "Abba or Father." Through our new relationship, we experience God's love in very personal ways. Our relationship grows:

- through personal prayer,
- a sense of security in his love,
- recognizing his hand at work,
- responding to his correction and guidance,
- experiencing the scriptures come alive as you read them,
- seeing his loving activity through answered prayer, having his Word come alive in your heart,
- experiencing his correction and deliverance from damaging sins.

It is what characterizes the work of the Holy Spirit within us in the early stages of our Christian spiritual development. Of course, how you experience these things varies from person to person. And, of course, our growth isn't constant. There is usually an ebb and flow and ups and downs. Physically, we experience growth spurts. And the same is true for spiritual growth as well.

John describes this stage, knowing that young Christians can relate to what he is saying! Is your relationship with Christ deepening and growing? It all begins with a personal relationship with God. There must be birth before there can be growth.

You must be born spiritually into God's family in order to grow in your relationship with him. But unlike physical birth, in which your decision plays no part, you can and must choose to be born spiritually by personally receiving Jesus. In his gospel, John writes, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:" (John 1:12)

Receiving Christ as your savior is how we begin a relationship with God. But Christian spirituality doesn't end here. God builds on this foundation to lead you into the next stage of spiritual development.

II. I Write to the Young Adults (Men)

In verse 13, John says, "I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one."

I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one.

Verse 15, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever." (1 John 2:15-17)

Spiritual children should develop into spiritual young adults. But the road is not easy. You will encounter many temptations and face difficult struggles. God uses these trials and tests to perfect our faith and help us grow spiritually. The reward is victorious fellowship with Christ.

It isn't long after you receive Christ and experience God's love and forgiveness; you meet his enemy (Satan), who now opposes you because you are a friend of God. We have to fight against him on at least two different fronts. First, Satan will try to keep you enslaved to sin. Even though Christ delivers us from sin's penalty of death, there is still a battle to be fought to be delivered from its power. Some of the old sins you thought were gone forever may return and tempt you with great intensity.

Sometimes when the Holy Spirit shows you how much more sinful you are than you thought, Satan will tempt you to fatalism and despair. That's when you will have to dig in and struggle with some real faith issues. And you must come to believe that God is willing and able to change you as you continue learning the lessons he is teaching you gradually.

Satan will oppose you as you talk about your faith and share Christ with others. But this is the very reason why God leaves us here on earth and changes us to be more Christlike. The Holy Spirit wants to work through you to invite others to meet and receive Christ. And he wants you to help other believers (especially younger Christians) to grow spiritually. When you choose to follow Jesus, Satan will attack you and try to keep you from making Jesus and your faith in him a topic of conversation.

Satan will unleash painful circumstances, cause people to lash out against you, and work to suppress your effective witness for Christ. This painful struggle does not mean that something is wrong; just the opposite; it is a sign that you are healthy and growing! Where do we get the strength to be victorious in this struggle? Certainly not from willpower, secret mantras, or rituals—our victory comes from abiding in God's Word.

Satan is a deceiver, and all of his attacks involve deception. The key to discerning and overcoming his attacks is to become familiar with the truth of God's Word. It involves reading your bible every day. Daily Bible reading, telling others about what we read, memorization God's promises, and meditating (thinking) about what God is saying to you should become a part of your daily routine.

As we continue to abide in God's word and share him with others, despite the attacks of Satan, God will win victories in your character while He's transforming you to be more like Christ. As you grow in Christ, more and more people will be deeply moved by the change in you. In spite of your failures and setbacks, you will overcome the evil one in ways that glorify God!

And you will eventually develop into the next stage; a seasoned and experienced adult.

III. I Write to You, Mature Adults (Fathers)

In verse 13, John writes, "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him *that is* from the beginning."

I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him *that is* from the beginning.

On the surface, this sounds like the same thing that characterizes spiritual childhood—"You have known him." And on one level, it is—because from first to last, the main goal is always to know God better and better. Spiritually mature Christians don't ever outgrow their appreciation of God's love and forgiveness or in making God a part of their daily lives. Their appreciation of God's work just continues to grow and grow.

On another level, there is something new and different about their relationship and knowledge of God. John hints at this by stressing that they know God, "who has been from the beginning."

Spiritually mature Christians know by personal experience that God is unchanging and completely faithful to his Word. Their lives have stability, and they are "strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." ([Colossians 1:11-12](#))

"And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." ([Romans 5:3-5](#))

Mature believers have passed many tests of their faith and personally experienced how reliable God is. They have built their lives on the rock of God's Word and survived many storms giving them a quiet strength that is precious beyond words.

This kind of maturity is for all who know Christ! No matter how damaged your life has been, no matter how much you lack spiritual maturity, no matter how far off the goal may seem to be—God is willing and able to develop *you* into a spiritually mature believer as you keep walking in step with him.

Spiritual maturity is not just for us to enjoy, although it brings great joy. It is also for others. It is one reason why John calls mature adults "fathers"—they are spiritual parents to other younger Christians. God will draw younger Christians to you so that you can inspire them and guide them into their own spiritual maturity.

John says that this role brings an even greater joy. In 3 John 1:4, he writes, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." ([3 John 1:4](#))

Knowing that you have helped other believers grow and develop their faith in Christ is a profound joy.

Conclusion

Notice that the terms John uses are not "novice, intermediate, and expert," like you find in video games, but "children, young men, and fathers." These are relational terms and family roles. John chooses them on purpose because genuine spiritual growth is relational and requires a relational context. Christian spiritual growth involves beginning a relationship with God by accepting Jesus Christ as God's Son, sent into the world to rescue us from a life of sin.

When we receive Jesus as our savior, He gives us the right to become a child of God and begin a spiritual relationship with God. At the start of your faith journey, the Holy Spirit becomes your teacher to teach you God's Word and God's ways. As we grow in faith, the life of Christ is reflected through our attitudes and actions.

So keep taking those steps in spiritual growth and go from childhood to young adult to mature and seasoned adult. Live your faith every day. Develop positive spiritual

disciplines and routines that promote growth. Talk to Jesus and make Jesus a part of your conversation with others.

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ; [\(Philippians 1:3-6\)](#)