

Growing in Knowing God
Pastor Joe Oakley
GFC – 4/2/17

We are in a very important sermon series in Knowing God. Today I am preaching on Growing in Knowing God. I want you to understand that knowing God is a journey, not a destination. By that I mean that we will never fully comprehend God. Romans 11:33-34 says:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord?

God is infinitely beyond our understanding – but fortunately He has revealed Himself to us through His Word and through His Son. But there will always be more of God to know. And we can grow in knowing Him. That’s why Paul said in Ephesians 1:17

I keep asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God.

This is why we do what we do at church. Why we worship – why we preach and teach and counsel – so that we might all grow in knowing God.

The Bible teaches that we are all in different stages of knowing God. We see this in 1 John 2:12-14 which gives a great overview of the stages of knowing God. It compares knowing God to the stages of physical life.

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.

So we see here that the Bible was written to children, young people and grown adults. This is not actually talking about stages of physical life – but it is addressing people in different stages of their Christian walk.

It looks like there are three stages of spiritual growth – but it is actually four. That’s because there are two different Greek words translated as “children” in this passage.

The word for child in 1 John 2:12 is teknion (tek-nee'-on); which means children in general. John used this word to address all believers as dear children.

All Christians have been born into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, and their sins have been forgiven.

In 1 John 2:13 – a different word is used for child. It's the Greek word paidion (pie-dee'-on); which refers to a small child. This word is commonly translated as infant – a new-born child.

So – John gives us four stages of Christian growth. Newborns are the most recent converts. All they really know is that their sins are forgiven.

Little children are those who are able to walk and talk. They know God as Abba Father.

The young adults are in the prime of their spiritual life. They are soldiers who overcome the enemy by the blood of the Lamb.

The mature adults are those with the most wisdom and experience and knowledge of God.

These four groups make up the household or family of God. And these are the four stages of spiritual growth.

Please understand that these stages of growth build upon one another. You don't forget what you've learned in an earlier phase as you mature. You just add to what you already know.

It's like math. You don't forget addition and subtraction as you move into multiplication and division. You don't forget algebra when you move into geometry. You don't forget trigonometry when you move into calculus. It all builds together and works together.

No one begins their Christian life as a full-grown mature believer. We begin as newborn children - but we must not stay that way! And spiritual growth does not automatically happen! Age does not equal maturity. There are many immature elderly people. You are only young once, but you can stay immature forever. Maturity is progressive. It doesn't happen automatically and it doesn't happen overnight.

So – let's look at these stages of spiritual growth that we must intentionally grow to and through to know God better.

1- Newborns are Newly Born Again

The first step to natural life is being born as a baby. And the first step to spiritual life in Christ is being born again.

Every person was created by God but not everyone is a child of God.

The only way to get into God's family is by being born again into it. You became part of the human family by your first birth but you become a member of God's family by your second birth.

That's why Jesus said in John 3:7 - *You must be born again.*
The only way to become a child of God is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:26 says - *You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

John 1:12-13 says:

To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Think about babies when they're born. They are helpless—hungry--thirsty. They make messes. They are selfish and when something doesn't go their way they express themselves in some pretty annoying ways! But thank God they don't stay babies forever!

The truth is that many Christians probably fall into this category - and there is nothing wrong with that. We all start out as spiritual babies. A newborn baby can't do much, but they immediately begin to recognize their parents. A newborn Christian doesn't know much about the Bible or correct doctrine, but they do recognize God the Father.

What we need to do is love them – give them a place of security – feed them and clean up their messes. We also need to teach them the milk of the Word. 1 Peter 2:2-3 says:

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

You will not grow apart from the Word of God! That's the key to growth in every stage. If you don't get in the Word – you get stuck in your growth!

The growth process begins with as a newer believer takes in spiritual milk, which is the gospel of Jesus and the basics of the faith.

We are here to help you with this! This is why we have our Grace Journey classes where we teach the basic fundamentals of the faith.

It's okay to be a spiritual baby when you are first born again. But it's time to grow up! 1 Corinthians 14:20 says:

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

How do you know if you're still a spiritual infant? Well – think of the characteristics of a baby. The main thing is that they are selfish. They do nothing for themselves. Someone else must feed them, clothe them and clean up their messes.

And churches are full of spiritual infants who are selfish. They think church is all about them. They go from church to church trying to get their needs met. They do not give – serve – volunteer – or help anyone else. They are easily offended – so they sit there waiting for someone else to greet them and if no one does, they get upset. And one of the easiest ways to offend them is to ask them to give something or do something.

If you've been a Christian for years yet you still don't give anything, serve anyone or volunteer to help – it's time to grow in knowing the Lord!

2- Little Children are Learning to Walk with God

Little children are not newborns – they have grown to the place that they are learning to walk and talk. Likewise - the Christian life starts with the new birth, and then progresses as we learn to walk with the Lord and talk to the Lord.

We must be willing to leave spiritual kindergarten and move on to elementary school and high school and college. Some people want to stay in kindergarten – it's easier and there's a snack and a nap time. But to do so is to choose to stay immature.

Children should grow in knowledge every year, just as we should be growing in knowing the Lord! 2 Peter 3:18 says:

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Spiritual maturity will not just happen.

You can't outgrow Bible ignorance.

You can't just outgrow prayerlessness.

You can't just outgrow not being filled with the spirit.

It's like saying I'm going to outgrow being lost and will one day automatically be saved. It won't happen!

1 Corinthians 13:11 says:

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

You will not automatically grow out of spiritual immaturity. Childish things are put away by being recognized, refused and replaced with mature thinking and the truth of God's word. The key is getting off the milk of the Word and getting into the meat of the Word.

The author of Hebrews, when rebuking those who should have been mature, said in Hebrews 5:12—6:2:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

Mature believers are abiding in the word and living righteous lives. The word of God is abiding in them because they study it and live it. And as they mature in their faith, we see them start to sacrifice and take on roles of leading, giving and serving. Then they start helping train new believers to become mature believers.

In a church this size we should never have to say we need children's workers or teachers or small group leaders. But we do because so many people are in spiritual infancy. It's time to grow up and start giving out!

I heard about a little boy who fell out of the bed in his sleep. His father put him back in bed and asked him, "Son, what happened?" The little boy responded, "I fell asleep too close to where I got in."

I believe that describes way too many Christians today... they have fallen asleep too close to where they got into the faith. They've been saved but have not grown spiritually. It's time to grow up!

3- Young Adults are Learning to Work With God

Rick Warren says that a mark of spiritual development occurs when a believer "takes off his bib and puts on an apron."

Those who are maturing in the faith are those who are seeking to work with God. They want to put the word to work. They want to discover their spiritual gifts and find a place of service. They know you only grow through exercising faith.

You will never grow in knowing God if you worship but never work. If you take in and never give out. If you want to build your faith without sharing your faith.

1 John 2:14 says:

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.

In order to grow in knowing God – you must become strong in the Word and you must overcome the enemy. Why? Because he wants to keep you in spiritual diapers!

That's why one of the first things you must overcome is the enemy's attempts to keep you out of the Word! Being an overcomer means that you're not backing down from the devil, but you're staying in the Word and prayer as you grow in knowing God!

By the way - I want to challenge you to make sure you are not just surrounding yourself with those that are like you. If you're a spiritual baby – don't surround yourself with other babies! Find some people with some spiritual maturity and hang out with them! This is the great thing about being a multi-generational church.

Some people want a church with all young people or all older people. What a shame! God wants the older generation to help the younger generation grow in the Lord! It requires the whole family of God working together to accomplish the purposes of the Lord.

4- Mature Adults Lead Others with the Heart of God

The "fathers," of course, are mature believers who have an intimate personal knowledge of God. As you develop spiritually, you go from learner (Spiritual Child) to laborer (Spiritual Adolescent) to leader (Spiritually Parent).

The basis of all spiritual maturity is knowing God. Spiritual parents gain wisdom by applying their knowledge of God to daily life. They not only know God through factual understanding; they know Him through personal experience.

The Wuest Translation of I John 2:12 says:

I am writing to you, fathers, because you have come to know experientially the One who is from the beginning.

Spiritual growth does not happen by just merely understanding doctrine intellectually, but it happens when we truly come to know the Lord personally. That means we need fathers – not just teachers. 1 Corinthians 4:14-16 says:

I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

Once again Paul is saying – why haven't you progressed further in faith? Previously he wondered why more were not teachers. Now he's wondering why more are not fathers.

What are some characteristics of spiritually mature fathers in the faith?
 They know God intimately and they share that knowledge with others.
 You see – the word father means you have children.
 Who are your spiritual children?
 Who have you led to the Lord?
 Who are you discipling?

Spiritual adults know "Him that was from the beginning." Do the babes in Christ know the Lord Jesus? Yes, they do; but they do not know Him in His full character.

As we grow in knowing the Lord - we get another view of Him. In order to be a father in the faith we must first have a relationship with Father God Himself; for it is union with God the Father that makes a believer a father in God. You become a father in the faith when you understand the father heart of God and you begin to see others through His eyes.

We become God's children when we are born again. We have our sins forgiven and we begin to know God as Father. Some people stay there.

We grow into spiritual young adults when we strengthen ourselves through the word and begin to wage spiritual warfare. We grow into adulthood as we grow in the knowledge of God. We know Him who is from the beginning. We want to grow in knowing God because we want to grow in becoming like Him!

Do you know God? Where are you in your relationship with Him? Everything else you do and say flows out of that relationship.

Spiritually mature people know the Father – they understand His love and they know His Word.

So – where are you in the process of growing to know God? No matter what stage of the Christian life you find yourself in today, be encouraged.

If you are a newer Christian, be encouraged that your sins have been forgiven and that you are in a growing relationship with the Father.

If you are a maturing Christian, be encouraged that God is teaching you through His word how to overcome the evil one.

If you are a mature Christian, be encouraged that you can help develop others into those who are also growing in knowing God.
 Whatever stage of life you find yourself in - whatever generation of believer you are, be encouraged and continue to grow in knowing God.

I want to prophesy over you today that you will become a mature believer who serves God through every season of life.

You will plant seeds of faith in the spring.
You will work hard in the heat of the summer when there is no visible fruit.
You will work even harder in the times of harvest.
You will overcome the cold of spiritual winter.

This experience will teach you that God never fails.
You will know the truth of sowing and reaping – giving and receiving.
You will know that God will always work everything out for your good!
You will know that weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning!
You will know that it's not all about you because you will know the joy of serving your heavenly Father by serving others.
You will grow to know the Lord in ever-increasing measure!