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The Importance of Spiritual Growth

There was a lot of activity and discussion in the Evans family in the months before the birth of our first grandson, Jackson. Between baby showers came conversations about the baby's name and other details of the birth and new life we were looking forward to.

It was interesting to listen to my son-in-law, Jerry, who was already talking about the college his son would attend and what team he would play football for. He, my daughter Priscilla, and our entire family were filled with ideas and plans for the future as we waited for the arrival of this new life.

Families can look ahead with excitement to a new child's future because inherent in every birth is the hope and expectation that this baby is going to grow and develop. Once a child has been conceived and born, growth is anticipated,

because that's the way God designed the human body to work. No parents I know are content simply to say, "Well, we conceived a child, and that's all that matters," or "We have a healthy baby, so it doesn't matter if there is no growth." Parents who are excited about the conception and birth of their child are also excited about seeing that child grow.

One reason parents can tolerate the 3:00 A.M. feedings is that they know this phase of childhood won't last forever. The same can be said for each stage of a child's growth—and aren't we all glad that the teenage years with their ups and downs and major crises every week didn't last forever? We grew past all those stages, and so will our children, because growth is the normal and expected outcome of a new birth. In fact, if a child doesn't grow, then loving parents seek whatever help is necessary because they care about their child's development.

Now if human parents are concerned about the growth of their children, then we ought not be surprised that our loving heavenly Father is concerned about the growth of His children. If the Holy Spirit, using the Word of God, brought about conviction in your heart and you put your faith in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation, then God is your Father by virtue of your new birth. He wants to make sure that you are growing properly in your Christian life.

We're going to begin our study of spiritual essentials by talking about the nature and importance of spiritual growth. But before we can begin to build a solid biblical understanding of spiritual growth, we need to clear away the rubble that can come from confused thinking. There is an enormous amount of confusion on this matter of how Christians grow spiritually. We need to address some of these issues, because if we don't get our thinking right, we can actually stifle instead of enhance our own spiritual growth, as well as that of others.

For example, some people view spiritual growth as primarily a matter of learning the correct biblical information. This group

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believes that if you attend enough Christian seminars, read enough books, accumulate enough data, and study the Bible enough, then growth in Christ will follow automatically.

I can identify with this group as a person who spent years studying the Bible in college and seminary. But any seminary student can tell you that studying the Bible and accumulating knowledge can lead to spiritual dryness and stymie growth if that "head knowledge" is not accompanied by inner spiritual transformation in response to God's truth.

Jesus said to the people of His day, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). These folk studied their Bibles. They were the theological scholars of their time, but they didn't know Jesus. Their study, even of the Bible's accurate data, did not lead them to Him who is the source of truth and life.

Other people believe that spiritual growth is the result of following a certain well-defined process. They want to know the ten steps to spiritual growth, or the eight surefire keys to achieving maturity in Christ. Lists like these often contain good ideas, but when you have a lot of steps to climb, you get weary after a while. And if you miss a step, you get tripped up and everything gets out of sync.

I'm not saying there aren't some clearly defined stages or steps in our spiritual growth. The problem comes when we try to reduce a living process to a mechanical list of steps that everybody has to follow. People simply don't grow at the same rate, so a "one size fits all" approach to spiritual growth won't fit everyone.

One other misconception about the nature of spiritual growth is important to mention, because it has such a long history in the church. Most people in modern Western culture are inclined toward action and want to know what they can do to achieve a desired result. But another group of people is convinced that

spirituality is achieved by what you avoid rather than what you do. These are the folk who work hard to give up certain things, deny themselves certain pleasures, and abstain from certain activities.

This approach to spiritual growth is known as asceticism, and it's almost as old as Christianity itself. Some ascetics live in cloistered monasteries to escape the world and its temptations. They may also systematically deny food to their bodies and scrupulously avoid anything that could be considered a worldly pleasure lest they defile their souls.

During certain periods of church history, ascetics did spectacular and even bizarre things to try to conquer their sinful flesh and get closer to God. Some whipped themselves to punish their flesh, while one man sat on a high pole for years to free himself from the evil world.

But asceticism by itself also ultimately fails to produce lasting spiritual growth because our problem is that the sinful desires and impulses that mess us up come from within, from our hearts, rather than just from the outside. There's nothing wrong with avoiding sinful activities and worldly lusts that inflame wrong desires. But as the great reformer Martin Luther discovered when he was a monk, we still have to wrestle with sin even if we are sitting in a bare cell in a monastery. Luther was said to have thrown his inkwell at the devil one day in frustration at trying to make himself holy.

If you have ever tried to grow spiritually using any or all of these methods, believing that they will do the job, then you have probably experienced some degree of frustration in your desire to grow in Christ. There is some truth in all of the methods we have mentioned, but the Bible's teaching on spiritual growth is bigger and more exciting than a list of dos and don'ts. My goal is to approach the subject in a way that is both biblically sound and applicable to your life.

The Necessity of Spiritual Growth

Getting a handle on spiritual growth is crucial for at least two reasons. First, it is God's command and, therefore, His will for us. And second, the alternative to growth is stagnation and eventual deformity. There's a good reason you won't find a hymn called "Backwards Christian Soldiers" in your hymnbook. Failing to grow is not an option for believers—at least not if we want to please God.

It may help to begin with a definition of spiritual growth that will serve as the basis for this book. Spiritual growth may be defined as that transformational process by which we allow the indwelling Christ to increasingly express Himself in and through us, resulting in a greater capacity on our part to bring God greater glory and experience His greater good for ourselves.

That's a mouthful, so here's a boiled-down version. Spiritual growth is more of Christ being expressed in my life through less of me. John the Baptist said it best. As Jesus' ministry and popularity grew and John began to step into the background, John's disciples came to him and said, "Do you realize what's going on here?" (see John 3:22–26). John's bottom-line answer was, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30). We are growing spiritually when more of Jesus is being expressed through less of our fallen humanity.

Spiritual Growth Demands Nourishment

It often helps to follow a definition with an illustration of what we're talking about. One obvious way to illustrate spiritual growth is by looking at its physical counterpart. Let me tell you, the extended Evans family can testify that a newborn baby wants and demands food. Everything within that child is screaming, "Give me something to eat. I've got some growing to do!"

If you have ever heard a newborn baby cry out for food, you can appreciate the apostle Peter's words of admonition to

Christians: "Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). This is one of the best one-sentence descriptions of spiritual growth you'll find in the Bible. We may not know exactly how spiritual growth works, but this verse helps us because it compares spiritual growth to physical growth.

The issue for a newborn baby is the development of the life he or she has been given. Now that may seem so simple and obvious that you wonder why I even mention it. But it has been my experience as a pastor that this key principle of spiritual growth is often overlooked for exactly that reason. Spiritual growth is not first and foremost a program or a curriculum, as we said above, but the nourishment and development of a life.

Now I can hear someone saying, "Well, a baby may not be following a program, but its mother certainly is." That's true. There is a well-established, proven program of nourishment that a mother needs to follow if she wants her baby to experience healthy growth. That's why we said there is nothing wrong with various programs or steps *as long as they are facilitating the growth of spiritual life*. The goal of spiritual growth is to feed the life you were given by the Holy Spirit at the moment of your conversion, or new birth, so that you may, as Peter wrote, "grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). Paul put it this way: "We are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

The point is that your spiritual DNA is complete because you received the life of Christ at your conversion, and nothing can be added to Christ. Our challenge as Christians is to maximize what we already have, not run around looking for the latest gimmick or shortcut to spiritual growth.

Spiritual Growth Demands Relationship

A baby is dependent on other people for the nourishment needed for proper growth. This demands a relationship that be-

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gins even before birth as an unborn child draws nourishment from the mother through the umbilical cord. In this case the importance of that relationship is clear because the baby is feeding off the mother, whose life is supplying life to the child. If that relationship is disrupted, the baby is in serious trouble.

A child in the womb is not studying a book, listening to a teacher, or following a program. He or she is simply piggybacking off a life that is, ideally, already mature and strong. As long as the umbilical cord isn't cut or blocked—as long as the baby stays in right relationship with the mother—growth will continue to occur.

The spiritual application of this physical truth is, of course, the importance of our relationship with Jesus Christ. It's interesting that Jesus did not say, "I have come to give you My program," but, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). So if we are not growing as we should, even though Jesus came to give us not just life but abundant life, then maybe it's because we have messed up our relationship with Him or traded it for something less. Spiritual growth is progressively learning to let Christ live His life through us, and that only happens by relationship.

The Ingredients for Spiritual Growth

Since this chapter is an overview and introduction to our subject, I'm hitting the highlights as we talk about the importance of spiritual growth. Let me give you two ingredients of this growth as found in a key verse from 2 Peter 3: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (v. 18).

These two things work in partnership to enhance our growth, but let's be sure we understand once again that our growth is not in the grace and knowledge of a program, a denomination, or anything else. Our growth is inextricably connected to the person of Jesus Christ, the One whose life flows through our spiritual

veins. The supply of grace and knowledge we need comes from Him.

The Essence of Grace

One reason the grace of God is so amazing is that it comes up no matter where we turn to talk about the Christian life. We're devoting chapter 4 to grace and its place in spiritual growth, so let me just give you the essence of grace and how it relates to spiritual growth.

Grace is all that God is free to do for you based on the work of Jesus Christ on your behalf. It is God's inexhaustible supply of goodness whereby He does for you what you could never do for yourself. This is the ABC's of the faith, but we need to review it because the truth of grace seems to get lost so often when it comes to how we grow in Christ. That may be true because growth suggests effort on our part, while grace is a gift that can only be received and enjoyed, not earned. But the Bible says we are saved by grace and we grow by grace. Or as Paul told the Colossians, "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (2:6).

If I were the devil and I didn't want Christians to grow, I would keep them from drawing on God's grace and drive them back to the principle of law to keep them in bondage. Romans 6–8 contain Paul's classic contrast between the Law of Moses and grace, describing in painful detail our complete inability to obey God's commands in our own power.

Now Paul made it very clear that the problem is not with God's law, which is "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). The fault is with our sinful, fallen flesh. What happened under the Mosaic Law is that when God's perfect standard, with its requirement of perfect obedience, was applied to sinful and weak human beings, something had to give—and God was not about to lower or adjust His standard to accommodate our sinfulness. And since

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the Law carried with it a penalty for failure to obey, we fell under the sentence of death.

Paul also wrote, "The Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" (Romans 7:14). The reason this is important is that the Law had no power to help anyone obey its commands. Law tells you what to do, but it doesn't hold out a hand to help you. The Law reveals God's demands, which never change. But we need someone to give us the power to obey God's commands.

Living under law is like living with a perfect person who takes joy in telling you everything you are doing wrong, but never lifts a finger to help you get it right. Under these conditions you will inevitably live an unhappy, defeated, and empty life.

This is where grace enters. Law shows you what to do, but grace assists you to do it. Law says, "You know you ought to obey God." Grace says, "You know you want to obey God." The Law held people in bondage because they couldn't do anything to satisfy its demands and thus experience release. But grace has set us free, not to sin all we want ("May it never be!" Paul cried to that idea in Romans 6:2), but to become all that God redeemed us to be.

We can see why grace is required for spiritual growth. Spiritually dead people can't grow, but all that the Law of Moses could produce was death because it was all command and penalty without the enablement to obey. That's why Peter said if we are going to grow, it has to be by grace. And not just grace as a theological concept, but as it is related to Christ.

The Knowledge of Jesus Christ

As an author, I rarely ever receive one of my books in the mail from someone I've never met, with a request that I sign the book. But when I speak at a conference where books are available, a lot of people come to me and ask me to sign their copy. The differ-

ence is that they have met the author, and so the book takes on a new meaning. They have connected the content with a person.

Peter told us to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We have His book, the Word of God, to learn from, and the Holy Spirit as our Teacher. In other words, we have everything we need to put the ingredient of knowledge to work in our lives.

We have already mentioned how easy it is to get off track in this area and seek spiritual knowledge for its own sake. But that's like a young man who carries around a boxful of letters from his girlfriend, content to read them instead of using the insights they contain to deepen his relationship with his girlfriend.

Our goal is to know Christ, not just know about Him. A lot of people can give you facts and details about the lives of their favorite sports star or celebrity. But there's a world of difference between that kind of knowledge and having the person invite you over for dinner because you are good friends.

I am often asked in theology class why the original manuscripts of the Bible do not exist. After all, if they were available, we could learn so much from them. But God didn't see fit to preserve them, at least in part because He knew we would be tempted toward bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible. We have enough people worshiping sacred relics as it is. Imagine what would happen if we had the original documents of Scripture.

We can see an illustration of this tendency in Israel, where a museum has been built to commemorate the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Now this was certainly one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, biblical find ever made. The Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrated that the Old Testament we have today has been copied and handed down with incredible reliability and accuracy.

The Dead Sea Scrolls museum is an attempt to honor the Scripture. Special attention is given to the book of Isaiah, a complete copy of which was found in the scrolls. That's interesting because Isaiah 53 contains a wonderful description of the way

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Messiah was going to come and be offered as a sacrifice and substitute for His people.

Isaiah 53 prophesies the life and death of Jesus, but the very people who are seeking to venerate the Bible have by and large missed its central message. You can put the Bible in an honored place in your home, surround it with candles and other objects of worship, and yet not know the Savior it speaks of. Knowledge is an ingredient of spiritual growth, but it is knowledge of a Person that we must seek.

To change the analogy, we could say that even though it's good to use a cookbook, it's even better to call Mama. Why? Because while the cookbook can give you the steps in a recipe, Mama can tell you why it didn't work or give you a secret to make it work better the next time. Mama can bring the cookbook to life by her wisdom, experience, and loving touch.

Information about the Christian faith is critical, because our faith has specific content. But it is also critical that this information gets connected to the living reality of Jesus Christ. So if you are serious about spiritual growth, the driving force must be pursuing a living relationship with Christ, which is deepened as you get to know Him better.

The Product of Spiritual Growth

The ingredients in a recipe are designed to lead to a finished product, which can then be eaten to enhance someone's growth. The ingredients of spiritual growth are also designed to lead to a product, if you will, which is the glory of God.

Reading further in 2 Peter 3:18, we come to a crucial phrase. After instructing us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, the apostle wrote, "To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity." This sounds to me as if God takes His glory very seriously. He does, which is why He wants you to seek Him and know Him and grow in Him, not just because it's the right thing

to do, but because you want to be a person through whom He can express Himself and display His magnificent glory.

You Were Created to Bring God Glory

We said earlier in our definition of spiritual growth that the goal is to expand and increase our capacity to bring God glory. You need to understand that God exists for His glory, because once you grasp this it will revolutionize your entire approach and attitude toward spiritual growth. Many Christians are not growing, even though they desire a closer relationship with Christ and are doing things to facilitate this relationship. The problem is that their emphasis is on them and what they are doing, instead of focusing on God and His glory.

God said that He created mankind for His glory (see Isaiah 43:7). This issue of our bringing glory to God is so important that the Bible defines sin as a failure to bring God glory. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That is, we are not sinners just because we do bad things, but because in our sin we fail to live up to the purpose for which God created us, which is to glorify Him.

This is spelled out in detail in Romans 1, where Paul explains why God's wrath is being unleashed "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (v. 18). Those who practice this evil fail to honor God or give Him the glory He is due (see v. 21). And it gets worse, because the ungodly have "exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (v. 23). They also "did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer" (v. 28), still another way of saying they did not give God the glory He is due.

The word *glory* means to be heavy or weighty, and it came to refer to something or someone of great worth. Those of us who grew up in the sixties used to say, "That's heavy" when we heard something that was deep or made a lot of sense to us.

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When we glorify God, therefore, we are saying that He is a person of great value. We attach weight or importance to Him. Glory also has to do with the way that something attracts attention by the way it shines, so glorifying God means that we draw attention to Him and promote Him as worthy of all praise and adoration. God wants to go public, but since He is invisible, He has created people whose full-time job is to make Him visible so that the world might see and be drawn to Him. We glorify God when we reflect the light of His character the way the moon reflects the brilliance of the sun.

A company that really wants to glorify or show off its product or service will often erect a large billboard along the highway so everyone driving by will see it and get the message. A company that is intent on promoting its glory does not usually settle for a small ad buried in the Yellow Pages. The company may start that way, but the idea is to grow into something bigger so more people will be reached with the company's message.

God says that your job and mine as believers is to be billboards advertising His grace to a lost world. And He wants us to grow so that we can display Him more. As we get up in the morning our prayer should be, "Lord, grow me today so I can show You as being bigger and clearer to the people around me."

When I speak about glorifying God, I like to use the analogy of a woman who goes before the mirror of her glory to adorn and beautify herself to appear attractive to others. It's incredible to realize that we can adorn and beautify our great Savior, making Him attractive to others, by the way we live. In fact, God has entrusted His public image, if I can use that term, to His people. Glorifying Him is an awesome privilege and responsibility.

Glorifying God Must Be Your Passion

What I am talking about here is a radical decision and passion to live for God's glory. Once you decide in your heart that

you are going to be consumed with God's glory, your whole life will be pointed in this direction. It's like putting on a pair of tinted glasses that color everything you see from that moment on. And lest you think I am overstating the case, let me remind you of 1 Corinthians 10:31, where we are told, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." God is passionate about His glory, and spiritual growth increases our capacity to bring God glory.

One reason this commitment is so radical is that it is diametrically opposed to the prevailing attitude toward God today, too often even in the church. What we see being promoted today is a "vending machine" God who gives us what we want when we select our choice, drop in our coins, and push the right button. In other words, too many people believe that God is here to glorify us—to make us more healthy, wealthy, and wise. It's a simple transaction. You choose what you want, and then you reach into the divine vending machine and claim it from God. He's obligated to respond.

Don't get me wrong. God is not opposed to blessing you. The last part of our definition of spiritual growth is that we might "experience His greater good for ourselves." But this is the by-product and overflow of our decision to live for Christ and reflect His glory. Don't forget too that God's blessing may also include trials and problems we would never choose for ourselves. But growth usually comes in the heat of testing.

And by the way, if you are pursuing a relationship with Jesus Christ and are passionately committed to bringing Him glory, your spiritual life will grow at a speed you never imagined possible. The reason is that your growth will take care of itself as you feed your soul on God and His Word, the way a child's growth takes care of itself as he feeds and exercises his body.

We often say to a child or adolescent we haven't seen in a while, "My, look how you've grown!" That child's growth is evident to all because his pants are suddenly too short and his shoes

no longer fit. That's what will happen to you when you are pursuing Christ and His glory. Your growth will be evident to everyone, and people will be saying to themselves, "*My, look how she's grown!*" They will be attracted to you and discover that God is the focus and the glory of your life. The reason so many Christians aren't growing as they should is that God isn't getting the glory He seeks and deserves from their lives. God only expands that which brings Him praise.

The Benefits of Spiritual Growth

So what's in this for you and me if we commit ourselves to grow God's way? That's a fair question. As we said earlier, the definition of spiritual growth includes God's greater good for us. Peter asked a similar question of Jesus one day as he watched a rich man go away from the Lord with his wealth intact. "Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You" (Luke 18:28). In other words, "Lord, what are we going to get for following You?"

Jesus didn't scold Peter for asking, but replied, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life" (vv. 29–30). Think about that promise for a minute! God is not a miser doling out tidbits to His children. It's just that His benefits are of His timing and His choosing. They are not ours to demand. Jesus said, "Seek first [God's] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). God will meet the needs of His children.

Here's another benefit of growing God's way. In 2 Corinthians 3:13 Paul said that Moses had to put a veil over his face so the Israelites would not see that the glory on Moses' face from being with God on Mount Sinai was fading away. Paul concluded his discussion with this statement: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being trans-

formed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (v. 18).

Paul is saying that when we stare into God's glory in the sense of focusing on Him, something amazing happens. We are changed into the image of God the way a person looking into a mirror sees the image in the mirror reflected back to him.

Did you get that? God will change you when you make Him your focus. You've been trying to change—to shed that bad habit or attitude. Your mama tried to change you when you were growing up, and your mate has been working on you for years. But God says if you want to change, you need to stare into the mirror of His glory until you start seeing His image reflected in you. This is spiritual growth in a nutshell. Now there is a lot more to this subject, and we are going to break the details down in the following chapters. But this is what spiritual growth is all about, reflecting God's glory and becoming more like Him.

Where does your greatest good come into all of this? The Bible answers this in Romans 8:28, the familiar promise that God causes all things to work for the good of those who love Him. That's the benefit, but don't miss the purpose of the benefit in verse 29: "For those whom [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son."

This means that even when things happen that don't seem to be good for us, God is at work shaping and growing us in the process no matter what the trial or the mess. I don't know about you, but I can't think of a greater benefit than knowing that God has a good purpose in *everything* He allows into our lives. He wants to grow us even when we are being tested and tried. If you will take care of the business of pursuing and glorifying God, He will take care of your growth, freeing you to enjoy all the rights and privileges of this new relationship.