

Spiritual Growth 7. Its Stages

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Transcript

Spiritual Growth

7. Its Stages

I

In the last chapter we called attention to the fact that Christians may be graded into three classes according to their "stature" in Christ or their spiritual development and progress. In proof thereof appeal was made to Mark 4:28 and 1 John 2:13. In addition to those passages we may also take note of our Lord's Parable of the Wheat, wherein He represented the good-ground hearers as bringing forth fruit in varying degrees or quantities. That parable is recorded in each of the first three Gospels and there is, among others, this noticeable difference between their several statements: that Mark says of those who received the Word, they "bring forth fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred" (4:20); whereas in Matthew's account that order is reversed: "brought forth some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (13:23). Evidently the same parable was uttered by our Lord on different occasions and He did not employ precisely the same language, the Holy Spirit guiding each Evangelist according to His particular design in that Gospel. Since Matthew is the opening book of the New Testament it is obviously the connecting link between it and the Old, and accordingly the nature of its contents differ considerably from that of the three which follow. The prophetic element is far more prominent and its dispensational character more marked. Many have regarded the parables of Matthew 13 as supplying a prophetic outline of the history of Christendom. Personally, we still believe in that view: that, instead of its course being steadily upwards, it was to be definitely downwards, and that so far from the gospel converting the world to Christ this age would witness the whole public testimony of God being corrupted. Thus we regard the "hundredfold" of Matthew 13:23 as being descriptive of the primitive prosperity of Christianity in the days of the apostles, the "sixty" of the noticeable and lesser yield during the times of the Reformers and Puritans, and the "thirty" as that which resulted from the labors of men like Whitefield, Jon. Edwards, and later, Spurgeon; while today nothing is left but the mere gleanings of the harvest. Thus the course of this Christian dispensation has been very similar to that of the Mosaic, with its reformations in the days of David and then of Ezra, but ending as Malachi shows! But in Mark 4:20 it is not the corporate testimony which is in view, but the spiritual experience of individual believers: "and brought forth fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred," which corresponds with the three grades of verse 28—"first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear," and the apostle's more definite description—"I write unto you fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you young men, because

ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you little children [babes] because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13). As Thomas Goodwin pointed out: John "had an advantage over all his fellow apostles in that he lived the longest of them, so that in the course of his life he went through the several ages or seasons that Christians do, and having also had an experience of other Christians and what was eminently in and proper to each age of men in Christ, writes to all sorts accordingly, and sets down what things spiritual belonged into those several stages." In the preceding chapter we dwelt upon some of the features which characterize the "babes" or "little children," pointing out that those very designations intimate that which distinguishes them from the "young men" and "fathers," for God has made the natural to shadow forth the spiritual. "Brethren, be not children in understanding" (1 Cor. 14:20). As in a young child reason is undeveloped, so in a spiritual babe there is but a feeble apprehension of the deeper things of God; yet as that exhortation shows, the believer ought soon to pass out of a state of infancy. What is said of them in 1 John 2:13 describes another mark: "ye have known the Father." Little children acknowledge their parents, are dear to them, hang about them, cannot endure to be long absent from them. They expect to be much noticed and fondled, and accordingly it is said of the good Shepherd "He shall gather the lambs with his arms and carry them in his bosom" (Isa. 40:11). Little ones must be dangled on the knees, cannot endure the frowns of a father, and are not yet strong enough for conflicts: and hence God tempers His providential dealings with them accordingly. The babe has "tasted that the Lord is gracious" (1 Peter 2:3), but as yet knows not of the "fulness" there is in Him. Now the young convert is not to remain a spiritual babe but is bidden to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18), yea, to "grow up into him in all things" (Eph. 4:15). God has made full provision for him to do so, and by his availing himself of that provision is He honored and glorified. But the sad fact is that many Christians never do so, and many others who "run well" for a while lapse back again into spiritual infancy. We are warned against this very danger by the solemn example of the Hebrews, to whom the apostle had to write, "Of whom we have many things to say and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God, and are become such as have need of milk and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe" (5:11-13). Three things marked those believers who had failed to advance in the school of Christ. First, they were "dull of hearing" which connotes not slow-wittedness, but failure of affection and will to respond to the teaching they had received. They were unconcerned about what they heard, unsearched by it, and consequently it effected no change for the better in their characters and conduct. In Scripture, to "hear" God means to heed Him, to bring our ways and works into accord with His revealed will. God's Word is given to us as a Rule to walk by (Ps. 119:105), and walking signifies to go forward in the highway of holiness. Thus, to be "dull of hearing" is a species of self-will, it is a non-response to the call of God, it is to disregard His precepts. As intelligence begins to dawn, the first thing required of a little child should be subjection to the will of those who have its best interests at heart; and the first thing required by the Father of His children is loving obedience to Him. Spiritual babes need to be taught "the first principles of the oracles of God." What were the "first principles" which God taught Adam and Eve in Eden? Why, that He was their Maker and required obedience from them. What were the "first principles" inculcated by Jehovah at Sinai? Why, that Israel must be in dutiful subjection unto the One who had redeemed them from Egypt. What were the "first principles" enunciated by Christ in His initial public address? His sermon on the mount must answer. The "first principles" of spirituality or genuine piety are personal faith in God and loving obedience to Him. While they be in operation the soul will prosper and make progress; as soon as they become inoperative we deteriorate. Hence, the second thing complained of is, the Hebrews were "unskillful [margin "inexperienced"] in the word of righteousness." Observe the

particular title by which the Word is here called—that which emphasizes the practical side of things: they were not walking in "the paths of righteousness" (Ps. 23:3). They had degenerated into self-pleasers, following the by-ways of self-will. Third, they were incapable of receiving "strong meat." The force of which may be gathered from verses 10, 11. The apostle desired to open unto the Hebrews the mystery of "Melchizedek" and bring before them deeper teaching concerning the official glories of Christ, but their state cramped him. He must suit his instruction according to the condition of their hearts, as it was evidenced by their walk. He was similarly restrained by the case of the Corinthians: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk and not with meat, for hitherto (because of their perversity and naughtiness) ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Cor. 3:1, 2; see Mark 4:33). "Milk" is a figurative expression denoting precisely the same thing as "the first principles of the oracles of God"—faith, obedience. As it would be senseless to teach a child grammar before it learned the alphabet, or arithmetic before it knew the values of the numerals, so it is useless to teach Christians the higher mysteries of the Faith or to take an excursion into the realm of prophecy when they have not learned to be regulated by the practical teaching of Scripture. Here, then, are two of the chief reasons why so few Christians really advance beyond spiritual babyhood and become "young men" that are "strong" and who "overcome the wicked one." Here are the worms which, it is to be feared, have been eating at the root of the spiritual life of some of our readers. Because they were "dull [not of intellect, but] of hearing." The Creek word for "dull" is rendered "slothful" in Hebrews 6-12. It denotes a state of slackness and inertia. It means they were too indolent to bestir themselves. They were spiritual sluggards. They were not willing to "buy the truth" (Prov. 23:23)—make it their own by incorporating it in their daily lives. They failed to "gird up the loins of their minds" (1 Peter 1:13) and earnestly and resolutely set about the task God has appointed them, namely, to deny self and take up their cross daily and follow Christ. They did not lay to heart the precepts of the gospel and translate them into practice. They made no progress in practical godliness. Second, lack of progress was due to their being "unskillful in the word of righteousness." The word "righteousness" means right doing, up to the required standard. God's Word is the alone Rule of righteousness, the Standard by which all our motives and actions are to be measured, the Rule by which they are to be regulated. That Word is to govern us both inwardly and outwardly. By that Word of Righteousness each of us will be judged in the Day to come. Now it is not said that those Hebrews were ignorant of this Word, but "unskillful in" it. The word "unskillful" here means inexperienced, that is, inexperienced in the practical use they made of it. I may be thoroughly familiar with its letter, understand much of its literal meaning, able to quote correctly scores of its verses, yet so far from that serving any good purpose it will only add to my condemnation if I am not controlled by it. To be "unskillful in the word of righteousness" means I have not yet learned how to mortify the flesh, overcome temptations, resist the Devil; and as long as that be the case, if I be saved at all, I am only a spiritual infant, undeveloped in the spiritual life. Another thing which holds back many a young convert from spiritual progress is his making too much of his initial experience. Unless he be on his guard there is great danger of making an idol of the peace and joy which comes from the knowledge of sins forgiven. God requires us to walk by faith and not by feelings, for though the latter may for a while please us, the former is that which honors Him, and the faith which most honors Him is that which rests on His bare Word when there are no feelings to buoy us up. Moreover, God is a jealous God and will not long suffer us to esteem His gifts more highly than Himself. If we are more occupied with lively frames and inward comforts than we are with God in Christ, then He will take from us a sense of His comforts, and the soul will sink and be cast down under a sense of the loss of them. In such a case, Revelation 2:5 prescribes the remedy: the sin of idolatry must be penitently confessed and we must return to the Storehouse of grace as a beggar, and make Christ our all. Many babes in Christ have their spiritual

growth retarded by (negatively) the lack of suitable instruction, and (positively) by the cold water poured on their joy and ardor by theft elders. It is neither necessary nor kind for some would-be wiseacres to tell them, this joy of yours will not last long: your bright sky will soon be overcast with dark clouds. Many of them are likely to discover that soon enough for themselves, while others may live to disprove such doleful predictions. This writer was often told that he would quickly lose his assurance of God's acceptance of him in Christ, but though more than thirty-five years have passed since sovereign grace "plucked him out of the fire" (Zech. 3:2), his assurance has never wavered or weakened, for it has always rested on the unchanging Word of Him that cannot lie. Others are greatly stumbled by empty professors and the inconsistencies of some real Christians, and they allow that to keep them from striving after a closer walk with God. Many are kept weak in faith through failure to attain unto a proper acquaintance with the person and work of Christ. They do not realize how sufficient and able He was for everything He undertook to do for them, and how perfectly He finished the same. They have no clear views of either the fulness or the freeness of His so-great salvation. Consequently, a legal spirit working with their unbelief puts them upon reasoning against their being saved freely by grace through faith. Those unbelieving reasonings gain great power from their defeats in their warfare between the spirit and the flesh, or grace and nature. They hearken to and trust more in the reports of self than to the testimony of God's Word. Thereby their faith is checked in its growth and they remain but babes in Christ. Their weak faith receives but little from Christ, and it continues weak because they have so little dependence upon the fulness of grace there is in Him for sinners. They appropriate not His promises, nor trust in His faithfulness and power. Growth in grace and in the knowledge of Christ are inseparable, and experimental knowledge of Christ is entirely dependent upon the exercise of faith on Him. But we must pass on now to the second class. "I have written unto you young men because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:14). Although the classification which this passage makes of the Lord's people does not regard them simply according to their natural ages, but rather to the several degrees of stature in Christ, yet the characters given them are more or less taken from and assimilated unto what prominently distinguishes each class in their natural life. Infants rejoice in the sight of their parents and in prattling to them: thus the spiritual babes are said to "know the Father." Proverbs 20:29 tells us "the glory of young men is their strength," and accordingly those who reach the second stage of Christian development are termed "young men" and it is said of them ye are strong." Young men are renowned for their athletic vigor and are the ones called upon to fight in the defense of their country, and here they are pictured as victorious in conflict, as having "overcome the wicked one." II

"I have written unto you young men because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." Though these words were most certainly not written by the apostle in order to flatter, but were beyond doubt a sober statement of fact concerning those he addressed, yet—because of our dullness of understanding—they are by no means free of difficulty to us, Therefore, as the Lord is pleased to enable, we shall endeavor to supply an answer to the following questions. Wherein do the "young men differ from the "babes"? In what sense can they be said to be "strong"?—Is there such a thing as out-growing spiritual weakness! Exactly what is signified by "the Word of God abideth in you," and are those words to be understood as explaining the preceding clause or the one which follows? In view of the many defeats which apparently all Christians experience, what is meant by "ye have overcome the wicked one"? Wherein do "young men" differ from babes"? First, because having been longer engaged in the practice of godliness, they have learned more seriously to consider their ways in order that they may avoid sin and the occasions thereof. They have sufficiently acquainted themselves with God as to realize the need of watching, praying, striving both against inward corruptions and outward temptations. They frequently present before the throne of grace such petitions as these: "Teach me, O

Lord, the way of thy statutes, and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding and I shall keep thy law, yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me to go in the path of thy commandments, for therein do I delight. Incline my heart unto thy testimonies and not to covetousness (Ps. 119:33-36). Sins which formerly they regarded as blotted out by the general pardon received at conversion, are now thought of with shame and bitterness. Second, they are more diligent in the use of means. Not that they necessarily devote more time thereto, but that they are more conscientious and spiritually exercised therein. As they have become increasingly acquainted with their corrupt inclinations, rebellious wills, the workings of unbelief and pride, they attend more closely to that basic duty "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23), and accordingly they can truthfully say "I have inclined my heart to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end" (Ps. 119:112), though they will often have to confess lack of power to perform their desire. That makes them the more concerned to learn how to make use of their spiritual "armor," for none so conscious of its need and so earnest to put it on as this grade of believers. Third, they are better versed in the Word of God. Though not so experienced and proficient in the Word of Righteousness as the "fathers," yet they are not as unskillful as the "babes." They have learned much in how personally to appropriate the Scriptures, how to apply them to their several cases, circumstances, and needs. They long to make further progress in piety and therefore they meditate in the law of God day and night. Deeply exercised that their daily lives may be pleasing to God and adorning to the profession which they make, they are concerned to inquire "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" and discover the answer to be "by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Ps. 119:9). Thus they are daily furnishing themselves with spiritual knowledge and fortifying themselves against their enemies. Fourth, they have learned to look more outside of self. They neither make so much of inward comforts nor do they lean so much unto their own understanding as once they did. They look more to Christ and live more upon Him. As formerly they trusted Him for cleansing and righteousness, now they turn to Him for wisdom and strength. They have discovered from experience that these can only be drawn from Him by the exercise of faith. They have realized themselves to be poor, helpless creatures, continually in need, and as having no means of their own to supply them. Thereby the Lord teaches them to live more out of themselves and more upon His fulness. When the enemy cometh in like a flood, they look to Christ for victory. When conscious of their impotency they do not give way to despair, but trust Christ to renew their strength. Thus by such means they pass from the weakness of infancy and become "young men." "I have written unto you young men because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:14). We have sought to describe some of the characteristic features of those whom we consider may justly be regarded as belonging to that class of Christians who are here designated "young men" particularly as they are distinguished from the "babes" or "little children." Let it be understood that what we wrote thereon was in no spirit of dogmatism, but merely an expression of personal opinion. We consider that the spiritual "young men" are believers who have acquired a considerable knowledge of the Truth and are well established in the whole plan of doctrine as set forth in the Scriptures, though as yet lacking the deeper understanding thereof as pertains to "the fathers." To which we would add, they know whom they have "believed" and "committed" their all, for we would certainly regard a Christian without assurance that Christ is his as still but a "babe," though we do not expect all will agree to that. "I have written unto you young men because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." How different are the ways of God from men's, even those of good men! Many elderly Christians today would deem it most imprudent to write or say to their younger brethren "ye are strong . . . and have overcome the wicked one," fearing that such an assertion was "dangerous" because having a strong tendency to "puff up" its recipients; which only goes to show how little some of our thoughts are formed by the Word of God and how prone we all are to fleshly

reasoning. Such an attitude is but a "show of wisdom" (Col. 2:23) and a poor show at that, for it betrays both ignorance and silliness. Those who are "strong" spiritually are not at all likely to be puffed up by telling them the truth. Contrariwise, any who are puffed up by such a statement would demonstrate they were weak! Let us not seek to be wise above what is written, but rather set aside our proud reasonings and receive what God says as "a little child." In making the above assertion the apostle was certainly not seeking to flatter them for he did not say "ye have made yourselves strong." Rather was he making a factual statement. In doing so, he, first, honored the Holy Spirit, by owning His work within them: the explanation of that statement of fact was the gracious operations of the Spirit in their hearts. Second, he was expressing his own joy: it was a matter of delight to him that they had, by the grace of God, reached this stage of spiritual health and vigor. Third, it was said by way of encouragement to them. If on the one hand it be our duty to rebuke and reprove what is evil in fellow Christians, it equally becomes us to recognize and own whatever is good in them. A word of cheer and stimulus is often a real help. If there be "a time to break down," there is also "a time to build up" (Eccl. 3:3). Paul did not hesitate to tell the Thessalonians "your faith groweth exceedingly and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth" (2 Thess. 1:3). But what did the apostle signify by his "ye are strong"? Probably the majority of Christians would promptly reply, Why, only in the sense that they were "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10). Yet we believe that answer is inadequate, and if the "only" in it he insisted upon, erroneous. We are in hearty accord with Thomas Goodwin who pointed out that, "There is a double spiritual strength: one that is radical in the soul itself, consisting in the strength and vigor of habitual graces; the other is assistant thereto from the Spirit, according as He is pleased to arm and fill the soul with Himself, joining with it by strengthening the graces in us, which we read of in Eph. 3:16, 'That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man. By nature the Christian was entirely devoid of spiritual power. Writing to the saints at Rome Paul said, "For when ye were yet without strength, in due thee Christ died for the ungodly" (5:6). Now that "yet" would be quite pointless if those to whom he was writing were still "without strength." "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). We dishonor the work of the blessed Spirit if we view the regenerate as being in the same helpless plight as the unregenerate. At regeneration we received spiritual life, and as Goodwin pertinently asks "what is strength but life in an active vigor." Are we not told "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10), i.e., the more the believer delights himself in the Lord and rejoices in His perfections and his relation to Him, the more will his soul be invigorated and his graces quickened. Does not the Psalmist acknowledge Thou "strengthenedst me with strength in my soul" (138:3), so that he was no longer feeble in himself, But let us not be misunderstood at this point. We are not arguing in favor of any kind of "strength" being imparted to the Christian which renders him in any wise self-sufficient. No indeed, perish the thought. Even the "fathers" are as completely dependent, moment by moment, upon Divine grace, as the youngest and feeblest babe in Christ. Paradoxical as it may sound to the carnal mind, the very "strength" which is communicated at the new birth makes its recipient conscious (for the first time) of his utter weakness. It is the purity of the new nature in the soul which makes manifest the corruptions of his flesh: it is his reception of the earnest of his inheritance which makes him poor in spirit: it is the gift of faith which causes him to be sensible of the workings of unbelief. It is the life of God in the renewed which causes them to thirst and pant after God. Nevertheless, there is a real sense in which the Christian is strong, both comparatively with his unregenerate impotency, and relatively in himself. "A wise man is strong, yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength" (Prov. 24:5). In proportion as spiritual knowledge increases so also does spiritual strength. The spirit is nourished and enriched both for spiritual work and warfare by true wisdom. As we have so often reminded the reader, growth in grace and in spiritual knowledge are inseparably

connected (2 Peter 3:18). There is a strength of courage, of fortitude, of resolution, which enables its possessor to stand firm against opposition, to overcome difficulties, to endure trials and afflictions. But the reverse of that is expressed in "if thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small" (Prov. 24:10). If in the day of testing and trial spirits sink so that your hands hang down and your knees become weak, if when afflictions come you take the line of least resistance, neglect the means of grace and are unfitted for duties, then your "strength" is "small," and such an attitude will further weaken it. Unto such that word is especially appropriate, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord" (Ps. 27:4). The order there is to be carefully noted: first, an acknowledgement of our dependency upon the Lord. Second, a being of good courage. Third, the Divine promise unto those who are of good courage. Fourth, trusting God for the fulfillment of His promise of further strength. It is unto those who have that more is given (Matthew 24:29), it is those who make use of the grace bestowed who receive larger supplies. "God more ordinarily vouchsafeth adjuvant (extra-assisting) efficacious grace to overcome temptations according to the measure of grace habitual or inherent, and therefore when men (we) are grown up to more radical inward strength He gives more effectual assisting strength, and (accordingly) He meeteth forth temptations to the ability our inward man is furnished withal, as that we are able to bear them (1 Cor. 10:13). He vouchsafes His actual supplies of aiding strength according to the proportion of that inherent stock of ability He sees in the inner man, and then as the conflicts grow greater our additional aids are together therewith increased" (Thos. Goodwin). Without further quoting verbatim from this writer we will summarize and paraphrase his next paragraph, with which we are in hearty accord. The grace of God indeed works freely, and He ties Himself absolutely to no rules and measures, but ever acts according to his own good pleasure. He takes liberty to withhold His supplies of assisting grace even from those who have most inherent grace, to show us the weakness of all our grace as it is in us, withholding from "the strong" (Rom. 15:1). His further influencing grace which moves us both to will and to do—to evidence that His grace is tied to none. This we see both in David and Hezekiah when they had grown up to this middle age in grace. Yet that alters not the fact that in His ordinary dispensations God gives more grace to those who make good use of what they already have: "every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:2). The promise of being "made fat" is not to the sluggard but to "the soul of the diligent" (Prov. 13:4). To sum up: by the apostle's "young men, because ye are strong," we understand that through using the means of grace, by increased spiritual knowledge, by appropriating the strength which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1), through exercising the graces of the new man, by improving (profiting from) the varied experiences through which they had passed, and by the assisting operations of the Holy Spirit, they had developed from "babes" into a higher spiritual stature and were the better qualified to use their spiritual muscles. It is written "They that wait upon the Lord [which refers not so much to an act as it is descriptive of an attitude found in all the regenerate who are in a healthy condition] shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). There is such a thing as overcoming spiritual weakness or babyhood, but not of continual dependence on the Lord. There is such an experience as going on "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7). Though without Christ I can do nothing (John 15:5), yet through Him strengthening me "I can do all things" (Phil. 4:13). "And the Word of God abideth in you." We regard that clause as connected first, with the preceding one, as casting light upon and furnishing a (partial) explanation of why these "young men" were "strong," as revealing to us one of the principal sources and means of their spiritual strength. And at the same time it also serves to define the nature of the strength mentioned, namely, as inherent grace, as something within themselves. It is by the pure milk of the Word that the babe in Christ grows (1 Peter 2:2), and it is by that Word abiding in him that he becomes strong, that the faculties or graces of the new man are kept healthy and vigorous. But, second,

we regard that clause as having an intimate bearing on the one that follows, seeing that it ends as well as begins with the word "and." For it was by means of the Word of God abiding in them that these young men had been enabled to "overcome the wicked one"—"by the word of thy lips have I kept me from the paths of the destroyer" (Ps. 17:4). "And ye have overcome the wicked one." Note, first, this is not an exhortation or intimation of duty: it is not "ye ought to" but "ye have." Second, this is not predicated as a rare experience, peculiar to some exceptionally exalted saint, but is postulated of the whole of this company: "ye have." Third, it is not described either as a present process or a future attainment, but as an accomplished thing: not "ye are overcoming" or "will" do so, but "ye have overcome the wicked one." Little wonder that Goodwin said on this point, "There is a second and greater difficulty [beyond defining the "ye are strong"] namely, How and in what respect they are said more eminently [i.e., than the "babes"] to have overcome Satan? For are they not in their conflicts apt to be overcome and to yield to corrupt affections? and how far they may be overcome [by those] is not to be determined by man"—words in brackets are, in each instance, our own additions. "Ye have overcome the wicked one." Whatever difficulty we may experience in understanding the meaning of those words, there is surely no occasion for us needlessly to add to the difficulty. We must be very careful with this verse, as with all others, not to read into it what is not there. It does not say "ye have overcome the flesh," that the young men had obtained victory over their inward corruptions. It is a most significant fact, and one which should exert great influence on our thinking at this point, that while this Epistle speaks of overcoming "the wicked one" and overcoming "the world" (5:4), it does not speak of believers overcoming their lusts. It is true we are bidden to mortify our members which are upon the earth (Col. 3:5), and that in varying degrees all the regenerate do so. It is also true that the grace of God effectually teaches its recipients to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world" (Titus 2:12), but Scripture nowhere affirms that any saint "overcame the flesh." As intimated above, we believe that the preceding clause "and the Word of God abideth in you" throws light upon those words which have presented such a difficulty unto so many—"and ye have overcome the wicked one." First, because they declare unto us the principal means by which the enemy is overcome, namely, the Word of God, which is expressly designated "the Sword of the Spirit"—the one offensive weapon which is to be used against the "wicked" (Eph. 6:16, 17). Supreme demonstration of that was given by the Lord Jesus when He was attacked by the Devil. He then gave proof that the Word dwelt richly in Him, that the Word of God abode in His affections and thoughts and was the Regulator of His ways. To each of Satan's temptations He replied "It is written." He did not parley with the Enemy, He did not reason or argue with him; He took His stand on the authoritative and all-sufficient Word of God and refused to turn aside therefrom, and thereby He overcame him. In that Christ has both left us an example that we should follow His steps and given us such encouragement as ensures success. But second, it seems to us that the clause "and the Word of God abideth in you" not only signifies the means to be used, but also and perhaps chiefly, intimates the very nature of wherein the young men had overcome the wicked one." In other words, the very fact that it could be said of them "the Word of God abideth in you" was itself the grand proof of their victory over the great Adversary. In His parable of the Sower our Lord taught that the seed sown was the Word, and that which fell by the wayside "the fowls of the air came and devoured it up." In His interpretation Christ explained that to signify: "Satan cometh immediately and taketh away the Word that was sown in their hearts" (Mark 4:15). That shows plainly that the primary and principal aim of the Devil is to prevent the Word of God finding a permanent abode in the human heart, and in the case of the vast majority of our fellows he is permitted to succeed. To a very large percentage of professing Christians the Lord says, as He did to the Jews, who had much head knowledge of the Scriptures. "Ye have not the Word of God abiding in you" (John 5:38). We are living in a day of such darkness that this generation is "ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11). Many of

God's own people seek to blame Satan for what originates with themselves. Note well the following statements: "From within, out of the heart of men, [not "from the Devil"] proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, murders . . . all these evils come from within." (Mark 7: 21, 23) "Now the works of the flesh [not "of the Devil"] are manifest, which, are these: adultery . . . envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like" (Gal. 5:19-21). "Every man is tempted when he is [not "assailed by the Evil one," but] drawn away of his own lust" (James 1:14). But pride works, and we do not wish to think that we are so evil and vile, and so we attempt to escape the onus by attributing to Satan what we ourselves are responsible for. There is no need for Satan to tempt men to such things as those passages mention. He works far more subtly and insidiously than that. If we go back to Genesis 3, where we have the earliest mention of Satan—and the first mention of anything in Scripture invariably supplies time key to subsequent references—we are shown the realm in which he works and the central object of his attack. That realm is the religious, and that object is the Word of God. His opening words to Eve were "Yea hath God said?" calling into question a "thus saith the Lord." As he seeks night and day to prevent God's Word entering the human heart, so he labors incessantly to remove it when it has entered. One of his favorite tactics is to inject doubts into the minds of spiritual babes, to get them to question the inspiration and veracity of the Scriptures. Under the imposing terms of "modern thought," "scholarship," "the discoveries of science," he seeks to sap the foundation of faith. Where that fails, appeal is made to the conflicting views of the sects and denominations to discredit the inerrancy of the Word. Where that fails, recourse is had to human "tradition" in order to set aside the Oracles of God. It is far too little realized that every attack which is made upon the Word of God, every denial of its verbal inspiration and Divine authority, every repudiation of its sufficiency as being our alone Rule of faith and practice, every corruption of its doctrine and every perversion of the ordinances and worship of the Triune God, are from the Devil. Many of the "babes" in Christ are severely shaken by those attacks and are tossed to and fro by various winds of erroneous doctrine. Nevertheless, Divine grace preserves them, and as they grow in grace and knowledge, as they become more cautious of whom they hear and what they read, as they become established in the Truth, they triumph over the Enemy. He fails to destroy their faith in the Scriptures, to lead them astray by "damnable heresies," to catch away the Seed sown in their hearts, and therefore the Word of God abiding in them is sure proof that they have "overcome the wicked one." As the same apostle goes on to say in his fourth chapter, "many false prophets are gone out into the world," and then he added, "ye are of God little children [the term of endearment] and have overcome" (4:1, 4). III

In Ephesians 4:13 there is a stature of Christ spoken of, namely, that of "a perfect Man—unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." It would lead us too far astray from the present aspect of our subject, which is the spiritual growth of individual Christians, to enter into a full analysis and discussion of the passage in which this verse occurs (4:11-16), suffice it now to point out that it treats of the corporate growth of the Church and its ultimate perfection. Verses 11, 12, state the appointment of the Christian ministry, verse 13 announces its goal, while verses 14-16 makes known the process by which that goal is reached. There is a "unity of the faith" among believers now, as to its "first principles," as truly as there is a saving "knowledge of the Son of God" possessed by them in this life; but that which this passage contemplates is the consummation of the same in the Body corporate, when there will be perfect unity of faith, as there will yet be perfect knowledge and perfect holiness (Heb. 12:23), for all the saints will then be fully conformed unto the image of Christ. When the "perfect Man" is openly revealed, it will consist of a glorified Head with a glorified Body. "The measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" is that to which the whole of the Church is predestinated and the accomplishment thereof will be seen at the second advent of our Lord, "when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and admired in all them that believe" (2 Thess. 2:10). But during this present life there are different stages of spiritual development reached by

Christians, different forms in the school of Christ to which they belong, different measures of progress made by them. Broadly speaking there are three degrees of "the stature of Christ" reached by believers in this life, though the highest of them falls very far short of that which shall pertain to them in the life to come. Those three degrees are most clearly specified in 1 John 2:12-14, where the apostle grades the members of God's family into the "babes," the "young men" and the "fathers." We have sought to describe the principal features of the first and second, and now we are to consider what is more characteristic of and pre-eminent in the third class, the "fathers." Note carefully how we worded the closing part of the last sentence: it is not that which is peculiar to, but rather that which is distinctive of the third class. This needs to be emphasized, or at least plainly stated, in order to prevent readers from drawing a wrong conclusion. What is predicated of each separate class is also common to the whole, though not to the same degree. In their measure the "babes" overcome the wicked one and have a real and saving knowledge of "him that is from the beginning," yet they do not "overcome" to the same extent as the young men" nor "know" Christ so well or extensively as do the "fathers." In like manner the "fathers" rejoice in the knowledge of sins forgiven, and "know the Father" even better than they did in the days of their spiritual infancy; so too they are not only as "strong" as they were in the time of their spiritual youth, through the Word of God abiding in them, but they have progressed "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7), for the Word now dwells in them "richly" (Col. 3:16). Let us remind the reader once more that in 1 John 2:12-14 believers are not graded according to their natural ages, nor even according to the length of time they have been Christians, but according to the spiritual growth and progress they have made in the Christian life. Some of God's elect are converted very late in life and are left in this world for but a short season at most, and though they give clear evidence of a work of grace wrought in them and bring forth fruit to the glory of God, yet they attain not to the spiritual vigor of "young men" and still less to the spiritual intelligence and maturity of the "fathers." On the other hand there are those who are regenerated in their youth and some of them make steady and constant progress, adorning the doctrine they profess and becoming useful to their fellow Christians; while others after a promising beginning, backslide, and are a grief to their brethren. It is with individual Christians as with corporate companies of them: of the saints at Rome Paul could say "your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (1:8), while to the Galatians he complained "ye did run well, who did hinder you?" (5:7). To the Thessalonians he could say "Your faith groweth exceedingly" (2 Thess. 1:3), but of the Ephesians it is recorded "thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). While it be true that the longer a person has been a Christian the more mature his spiritual character should be, the more growth in grace ought to mark him, the more intelligence he should have in the things of God, yet in many instances this is far from being actualized in experience. In only too many growth is stunted and progress is retarded, and some Christians of twenty years' standing advance no further in the school of Christ than those who entered it a few months before. We have a type of this in the contrast presented between Elihu and the aged men who took it upon themselves to counsel and criticize Job. "I said, Days shall speak and multitude of years shall teach wisdom"—they were given the floor first, only to exhibit their incompetency. "But there is a spirit in men, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding. Great men are not always wise, neither do the aged understand judgment. Therefore, I said, Hearken to me" (Job 32:7-9). The "hoary head" is only a "crown of glory if it be found in the way of righteousness" (Prov. 16:31). Note well, my reader, that statement in the above passage: "the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding." Gracious ability comes not from the passing of the years, but by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. That gives us the Divine side: but there is also a human side—that of our responsibility. Said David "I understand more than the ancients because I keep thy precepts" (Ps. 119:100). Though study of and meditation upon the Word are indeed means of grace and of growth, yet spiritual understanding is obtained chiefly from personal submission to God—He will not grant light on the "mysteries" of Scripture if

we forsake the path of obedience. The young Christian who walks according to the Divine precepts will have more spiritual discernment and better judgment than a much older one who is lax in his "ways." "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17). The world says "Experience is the best teacher," but it errs: the child who subjects himself wholly to the Divine Rule has an all-sufficient Guide and is independent of experience. Understanding obtained through keeping God's precepts is infinitely better than knowledge secured by painful experience. "I have written unto you fathers, because ye have known him [that is] from the beginning" (1 John 2:14). The one thing which is here predicated of mature Christians is their knowledge of Christ, for the reference is to the Son of God as incarnate. They have attained unto a fuller, higher, and more experimental knowledge of Christ. They are now more occupied with who He is than what He did for them. They delight in viewing Him as the One who magnified the Divine law and made it honorable, who satisfied all the requirements of Divine holiness and justice, who glorified the Father. They have a deep insight into the mystery of His wondrous Person. They have a clearer understanding of His covenant engagements and of His prophetic, priestly, and kingly functions. They have a more intimate acquaintance with Him through personal fellowship. They have a fuller experience of his love, His grace, His patience. They have obtained experimental verification of His teachings, the value of His commandments, and the certainty of His promises. The "knowledge" which is here ascribed unto the "fathers" is far more than a speculative and historical one, with which the majority of professing Christians are content. There are several degrees of this merely theoretical knowledge. With some it is nothing more than memorative, as the Jews are said to have had "a form of knowledge" Rom. 2:20), like a map of it in their brains—acquired by retaining in their minds what they have read or heard about Divine things. With others it is an opinionative knowledge, so that they have not only a mental acquaintance with parts of the truth, but a kind of conscience and judgment about those things, which causes them to regard themselves as "orthodox," and yet wisdom enters not into their hearts (Prov. 1:20). A few have a yet higher degree of this knowledge, which in measure affects their hearts and leads to reformation of life, so that they "escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the (not 'their') Lord and Saviour"; yet its hold on their affections is too weak to withstand strong temptations, and hence they apostatize from the Faith and return to their wallowing in the mire (2 Peter 2:20, 22). In contrast from nominal professors, every regenerated soul has a supernatural and spiritual knowledge of God, of Christ, and the gospel, and as he grows in grace it increases. The kind of knowledge possessed by each of us may be determined by the effects it produces: whether it be only a bare, non-influential knowledge, or whether it be a spiritual and saving one is discovered by the fruits it bears. A Divinely-imparted one leads its possessor to put his trust in the Lord (Ps. 9:10). to esteem Christ superlatively (Phil. 3:8, 9), to obey Him (1 John 2:3, 4). It is such as causes us to receive the truth not only in the light of it, but in the love of it (2 Thess. 2:10), and thus it is an intimate, permanent, heart-affecting, and life-transforming knowledge. It is what the apostle terms "the excellency of the knowledge of Christ," and that is one which causes its possessor to count all other things but dung, and moves him to pant after a yet fuller acquaintance with Christ, a more unbroken communion with Him, a more complete conformity unto His image. The knowledge of Christ with which the "fathers" are blest is such as fills their souls with holy awe, astonishment and admiration. They know Him through the revelation of the gospel as the One who was "set up from everlasting, from the beginning," who was "daily the Father's delight" (Prov. 8:23, 30). Thus they know Him as the One who took into union with His divine person a holy humanity. They know Him as the Image of the invisible God (Col. 1:16), as the One who has fully told out the Father. They are led into a knowledge of His Divine majesty, His Headship of the church, as the Mediator of union and communion, which floods their hearts with delight. They know Him as their Lord, their Redeemer; their Hope, their All in all. He is the grand Subject and Object of their contemplations, so that they are more and more absorbed

with Him. Such knowledge finds expression in speaking well of Him to fellow-saints, by endeavoring to please Him in all things, by diligently following the example He has left us. It must not be concluded from 1 John 2:13, 14 that this deeper and fuller knowledge of the Person, offices and work of Christ is the only distinguishing mark which eminently characterizes the "fathers." Hebrews 5:11-14 shows otherwise: they "teach" others, both by example and precept, giving counsel and admonition, encouragements and comfort, to their younger brethren. In that same passage they are termed "them that are of full age," and the marks of such are described as "those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil," and being capacitated to masticate "strong meat," which according to the scope of that epistle has reference to the official glories of Christ, particularly His priestly. While those who cannot digest such food who find neither savour nor nourishment therein, are termed "babes," who can relish naught but "milk," that is, the simpler and more elementary aspects of the gospel. Just as the natural infant possesses the very same faculties as the adult but has not learned to employ them, so the babe in Christ has all the "senses" or spiritual graces of the "fathers" but has not learned to use them to the same advantage. As the natural infant is incapable of distinguishing between wholesome and injurious food, so the spiritual infant has not the ability to form a correct judgment and distinguish between preachers who minister only the letter of the Word and those who are enabled to open it up spiritually. It is by "reason of use" that the spiritual senses are developed. As the muscles of the athlete or the fingers of the craftsman become fit or skillful through constant exercise, so the spiritual graces of the new man are developed by regularly calling them into play. It is by using the light we have, by practicing what we already know, which fits the soul for further disclosures of the truth and for closer communion with Christ, and which the better enables us to "discern both good and evil." Thus, a further mark of the "fathers" is wisdom, sound judgment, keen discernment. "The old Christian has more solid, judicious and connected views of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the glories of His redeeming love: hence his hope is more established, his dependence more simple, his peace and strength more abiding and uniform than is the case of the young convert. Though his sensible feelings may not be so warm as when he was in the state of A (spiritual infancy), his judgment is more solid, his mind more fixed, his thoughts more habitually exercised upon the things within the veil. His great business is to behold the glory of God in Christ, and by beholding he is changed into the same image, and brings forth in an eminent and uniform manner the fruits of righteousness. His contemplations are not bare speculations, but have a real influence, and enable him to exemplify the Christian character to more advantage and with more consistency than can, in the present state of things, be expected from the 'babes' of 'young men'" (John Newton Grace in the Full Ear). The "fathers" are such as are more diligently employed in the exercises of godliness, for having proved for themselves that obedience to God is true liberty, their practice of piety is not performed only from a sense of duty, but with joy. They more wisely manage the affairs of this life, for they have a greater measure of spiritual prudence and circumspection. They discharge their duties with increasing diligence and care, knowing that God esteems quality rather than quantity, the heart engaged therein rather than the length or measure of the performance. They are more weaned from the delights of sense, for their assurance is now based upon knowledge rather than feelings. They are more conscious than they formerly were of their frailty and ignorance, and therefore lean harder on the everlasting arms and more frequently seek wisdom from above. They are more submissive under the varying dispensations of Providence, for the frying of their faith has wrought patience (James 1:3) and therefore they are more content to meekly and trustfully leave themselves and their affairs in the hands of Him that doeth "all things well." The "fathers" are such as have been greatly favored with light from the Spirit by His gracious opening of their understandings to perceive and their hearts to receive the teachings of Holy Writ, and they have learned that they can no more enter into the spiritual meaning of any verse in the Word without the Spirit's assistance than create a world, and

therefore their daily prayer is "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." Through deep acquaintance with God their characters are more mellowed and their lives are more faithful to His praise—not necessarily in outward activities but by the exercise of their graces, thanksgiving, and adoration. Having had made to them many discoveries of the glories of Christ, received innumerable proofs of His forbearance, been partakers of countless love-tokens from Him, their testimony is, "Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:25). Their minds are largely taken up with and exercised upon the wondrous perfections of Christ, both personal and official. "But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: that the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience" (Titus 2:1, 2). Here we are informed what are the particular graces which should characterize the "fathers" in God's family. First, be sober," or as the margin preferably has it, "be vigilant." They must not stiffer increasing years to induce spiritual lethargy, rather should they issue in increasing watchfulness and alertness to danger. "Grave": not garrulous and excitable, but thoughtful and serious: less allowance will be made for them than younger brethren if they indulge in levity and vanity. "Temperate" or moderate in all things: the Greek word signifies "self-restrained," having their tempers and affections under control. "Sound in faith": sincere and steadfast in their profession. "In love" to Christ and their brethren. "And patience," not peevish and fretful: persevering in good works, meekly enduring trials and persecutions. "Those who are full of years should be full of grace and goodness" (Matt. Henry). Not only does the New Testament maintain the distinction between spiritual infants and mature Christians, but it reveals how God provides servants of His who are specially suited unto each: "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet not many fathers" (1 Cor. 4:15). The "fathers" among the ministers of Christ are not only characterized by their disinterested, affectionate, faithful, and prudent instructions, so that they are entitled to the love and respect shown unto a parent; but are Divinely and experimentally fitted to open up "the deep things of God" and edify the older as well as the young saints. Though all the true servants of Christ are commissioned by Him, yet all are not equally qualified, gifted, or useful to the church. Many are "instructors in Christ" but can go no further, being neither designed nor fitted for any thing beyond that. But a few are greatly superior to them and have more lasting importance to the flock. All are useful in their several stations, but all are not useful in the same way. In concluding this aspect of our subject we cannot do better than call attention to the analogy between the spiritual growth of the children of God and that in the incarnate Son. Beautiful indeed is it to behold how this line of truth was exemplified in Him. The humanity of Christ was perfectly natural in its ordinary development and everything was "beautiful in his time" (Eccl. 3:1) in Him. First, we see Him as a Babe "wrapped in swaddling clothes" and cradled in a manger. Then we behold His progress from infancy to childhood and as a boy of twelve His moral perfections shone forth in being "subject to His parents." and we are told that "He increased in wisdom, and stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:51, 52). When He became man His glory found other expressions, working at the carpenter's bench (Mark 6:3) followed by His public ministry. Supremely was He the "Tree planted by the rivers of water" which brought forth "his fruit in his season."

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