

FIRST WORDS
TO
YOUNG CHRISTIANS

by

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CHAPTER THREE
SPIRITUAL GROWTH

MUCH IS SAID IN THE PRESENT DAY about human progress. In praise of it, poetry and eloquence have taken their loftiest flights. Ours has so often been called a progressive age that with all our vanity we are beginning to tire of the endless repetition. Progress is doubtless a good thing, if it only be of the right kind. Many suppose that by repudiating what is old, and eagerly adopting what is new, they are making progress. Change, however, is one thing, and true progress is another. All true progress, such as is pleasing to GOD, must come from within, not from without. The eagle might have wings tied upon it, but it could never make any progress with them; it must have wings that grow up out of its own body with which to soar up from its favorite peak on the sky-piercing mountain. All true human progress must begin in the heart, and it must be put there by His hand who plants the glorious galaxy of stars upon the dark brow of night.

We all know that the body, under the influence of proper food, air, and exercise, is capable of growth in strength and in the development of all its powers. The same law of growth holds good in regard to the deathless soul. That was a remarkable wish of the apostle John for his beloved friend Gaius: "**I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper, and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.**" Alas, if the measure of our physical health were to be regulated by the health of the soul, what a nation of invalids we would be! How many there are who are sensitively alive to the wants of their bodies, but utterly neglectful of the immortal soul lodged within!

Many a large, sturdy, vigorous body covers a poor, weak, sickly, starved soul; so that the disproportion between the soul and its outward covering is as great as would be were a very small boy clothed in his father's garments.

There can be no growth without life. Dead things do not grow, but decay. You might ornament a dead tree to any extent; you might paint and varnish over the dead, rotten trunk; but unless you could put life there, there could be no growth. Nay, in spite of all your ornamenting, the process of decay would go on, and one dead limb after another would fall down, fit only for the fire. And so there can be no spiritual growth unless we are connected with JESUS by a living faith.

JESUS says: "**I am the... Life**" The branch, to get life and strength from the vine, must be in the vine, not merely near it. It might be tied against the vine, but it would get no strength, and bear no fruit, but hang there an unsightly object, rustling in the winds of heaven. Thus a man may be connected with a church by an outward profession, and may remain so connected for many years; but if there is not a union with CHRIST there can be no spiritual growth, and no bringing forth of fruit unto holiness.

The Ottawa river, in Canada, at certain seasons of the year rises to a great height, and then suddenly falls again, leaving logs on the high banks, and dead branches and other rubbish hanging in the tops of the trees. There they lay, useless things, rotting in the sun and rain that are making other things grow. I have often looked sadly upon them, and thought how like those Christless professors, who in some wild flood of excitement have been swept into the church, and when the excitement has gone down, are left there with no spiritual life!

They may be moral, and amiable, and never do any outward act of public sin for which they can be cast out of the church; but they are spiritually dead. They may hold an orthodox creed; they may sing and pray, and go through religious duties with mechanical regularity; but as there is no CHRIST in their religion, there is no life.

Sometimes, on great occasions, they may put on the semblance of life, just as a corpse may, by galvanism, be made to roll its eyes, and toss wildly its lifeless limbs; but it is only a spasmodic exertion that soon settles down into the stillness and corruption of death. Ah, how sad it is to look upon these moral automatons, these types of the old Pharisee, and to think how few of them are ever likely to be saved! O that the divine SPIRIT might give efficacy to the appeal:

"Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light!"

Where there is true union with CHRIST, there will not only be life, but growing life: "**I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.**" But our eye must be

FIXED SINGLY UPON CHRIST,

and our whole hope centered in Him. He alone must be our strength. We must not be looking partly at ourselves and partly at CHRIST; now glancing at our own feelings as a ground of hope, and then at His merits.

It is no uncommon thing for young converts to make great mistakes here. Deeply conscientious, they dread deceiving themselves; and fervently desirous of growing in grace, they watch and analyze every feeling and emotion of their minds. In the meantime, while thus engaged, their attention is turned away from JESUS, the great source of all spiritual life and growth; and thus they find themselves plunged into a dark jungle of doubts and fears.

We have seen children, in their great anxiety for the growth of their little gardens, keep pulling up their plants every now and again, to see if they were growing. The farmer who would pull up his corn to measure if it was growing, would not have much of a crop in the fall; and that, Christian who turns away his eyes from the SAVIOUR to analyze his own

experience, and who is constantly putting every motive, feeling, and emotion, on the rack, to make it speak something good concerning himself, will find that, instead of growth and strength, leanness has come into his soul.

My dear reader, if you keep a constant nearness to CHRIST, taking Him as your only hope and His spotless life as your bright example, there will be seen in your life a spiritual progress, brighter and brighter to the perfect day. With knowledge in your mind, grace in your heart, and obedience in your life, there will be such a symmetry of character, as will lead men to glorify your FATHER in heaven.

- In the hard conflict with your besetting sins, CHRIST will be your strength; nor will He leave you till your last foe lies vanquished on the field.
- Rash and impetuous passions will be displaced by calm and holy repose in GOD.
- Unholy bursts of imperious temper will be subdued by the meekness of JESUS.
- Peevish impatience will give way to holy submission to GOD's will.
- Worldly-mindedness will be overcome by communion with GOD, and a clearer conception of the grandeur and glory of eternal things.

Remember that all growth is gradual.

It is not shooting up into a great and holy man in an hour, or in some moment of strong religious excitement, or of hallowed association. The soul on such occasions may receive a heavenly impetus that will greatly increase its strength; but its real growth will be a progressive work, day by day. In the morning, let the thought fill your mind:

"My life is made up of days, and as the great business of life is to live to the glory of GOD, how can I best glorify Him to-day?"

Seek earnestly to live to GOD for that one day, as if it were your last. However pressing your duties, be sure that you get time for two things - speaking to GOD, and hearing GOD speak to you. By speaking to GOD I mean prayer, and by hearing GOD speak to you I mean reading the Bible.

It is said of Col. Gardiner that when in his campaigns he had to march before daybreak, he always made a point of rising early enough to have time for prayer and reading the Scriptures. Instead of making your religion bend to your worldly convenience, make your worldly convenience bend to your religion. Pray earnestly and believingly for growth in grace, and for strength to support you amid the trials and temptations of life; but do not put prayer in the place of duties which you ought to do yourself. GOD says you are to watch as well as pray. Suppose you pray that GOD would give you the victory over some besetting sin, and that you neglect to watch against that sin, and to cut off every temptation to its indulgence as far as you can,

YOU CANNOT EXPECT GOD

to answer your prayer. GOD will do nothing for us that we can do for ourselves: Prayer is not intended to encourage indolence. When we pray for deliverance from evil, and victory over our sins, we must watch, and fight, and struggle against them, or else our prayer is only a solemn

mockery. GOD brought it as a very heavy charge against Israel that "**they will not frame their doings to turn unto their God.**" We must be co-workers with GOD in the great work of growing in grace. We must shun the appearance of evil, and not even seem to come short.

And it is of vital importance that we have daily communion with GOD through His Word. This is to be our daily bread - bread for the soul. "**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.**" You would not expect a child to grow physically unless it were regularly to eat nourishing food; and a child of GOD cannot grow in grace until he lives upon the food which GOD has provided.

Read therefore a portion of the Scriptures every morning, before going out into the bustle of the world. Our Lord's prayer was: "**Sanctify them through thy truth; thy Word is truth.**" If then you are to be sanctified in soul, it must be through the truths of the Word of GOD; and therefore let your mind be deeply imbued with them.

It is a condition of your nature that you will grow in something, and if not in good, it will be in evil.

There can be

NO STANDING STILL WITH AN IMMORTAL SOUL

The soul craves for food, and if it is not fed and nourished by the pure words of GOD, it will betake itself to vile and worldly husks!

My dear reader, resolve to press forward to higher attainments in the divine life. Be not contented with a low standard of piety - with merely being safe. Your example is a very high one, the Lord JESUS. Keep your eye fixed upon Him till you are transformed into His image. An eloquent writer says:

"The growth in grace is the only one not subject to decay and death. It has a vast assimilative power which nothing can resist. It feeds therefore on all the elements of man's life, on all the chequered experiences of his days. It feeds on joy. It feeds on sorrow. It rises by nature's growths, but does not sink in nature's decays. The outward man may perish, but the inward man is renewed day by day. Days of sorest sickness fill the springs of immortal health, and the day of death in the vocabulary of grace is but the earthly name for the first day of eternal life. Grow, then, in that which must forever grow - in that which will always be grace, although it will soon be glory, and always fresh and living as the beauty of the SAVIOUR, or as the thoughts and affections of GOD."

"My hopes are passing upward, onward,
And with my hopes my heart has gone;
My eye is turning skyward, sunward,
Where glory brightens round yon throne!"

~ end of chapter 3 ~