

Growing Through *the* Word



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt 22:37, 38; Gal. 2:20; 5:14; Eph. 4:14, 15; Heb. 4:2; 5:12-14.*

Memory Text: “We will no longer be infants. . . . We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (*Ephesians 4:14, 15, NIV*).

Key Thought: The Bible plays a pivotal role in our spiritual growth.

The Bible makes it clear that our walk with Christ doesn't end on the day of conversion. On the contrary, when people give themselves totally to Christ, they begin a whole new life, a whole new existence (*Rom. 6:4*). It's not that a new Christian has to work to reach salvation, as in other faiths; instead, because he or she already has salvation, already stands perfect and accepted in God, the Christian begins to live a life that reveals and reflects that salvation. Sure, we are saved by faith, but what kind of faith? A faith that is expressed in a life that reveals a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Central to our new life in Christ is spiritual growth. As Christians, we can't remain static: We are always in the process of change as we should better reflect the image of Jesus Christ. And crucial to the whole growth process is the Word of God, which shows us how and why we must “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (*2 Pet. 3:18, NIV*).

This week we'll study about what it means to grow in Christ, and we'll see the pivotal role the Word of God must play in that growth.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 23.*

The Need for Growth

When Nicodemus went to see Jesus by night and asked Him how to have eternal life, Jesus immediately answered by saying that we need to be born again (*John 3:3, 5*). This condition indicates that a Christian life begins as a baby. When the beginning of Christian life is portrayed as a new birth, and the new believer is considered a babe in Christ, it's important for every Christian to be nurtured and have the opportunity to grow into spiritual maturity.

Peter appealed to the believers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (*2 Pet. 3:18, NIV*). Earlier, after using a new-birth illustration (*1 Pet. 1:23*), Peter urged those to whom he was writing to desire the “milk of the word” by which they would grow (*1 Pet. 2:1-3*).

Read Hebrews 5:12-14. What point is Paul making here about spiritual growth? How does he define spiritual immaturity, and how does he contrast it to spiritual maturity?

In 2 Corinthians 7:1, Paul shows that accepting Jesus isn't the end of our spiritual walk but the beginning. There is a need for growth. “Perfecting holiness” means to bring it to completion. He also in Ephesians admonished followers of Christ to lead a life worthy of their calling (*Eph. 4:1*).

It's clear from the Word that though we are saved by faith, though our acceptance with God is based on the righteousness of Jesus credited to us by grace through faith alone, the Christian life is one of spiritual and moral progress. We are to change, and for the better; we are to reflect more and more the character of God (*see 1 Pet. 1:14-16*).

Look over your life as a Christian, regardless of how long you have been one. In what areas have you seen much spiritual growth and maturity? What are the weaker areas? Why, as you seek to advance in the Christian life, must your hope of salvation rest not on yourself but only on Jesus and the merits of His righteousness?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *2 Peter 3:18*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: That spiritual growth is an ongoing process.

Feel: The need to grow in faith daily.

Do: Exercise faith and seek opportunities for spiritual growth.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. New Life in Christ (*Ps. 51:10*)

A A life surrendered to Christ becomes transformed to reveal His character. How does the Bible describe His character?

B How is spiritual growth defined by Galatians 5:16-26? Discuss how each fruit of the Spirit can assist a person in specific instances.

II. Spiritual Growth Produces Faith (*Rom. 10:17*)

A Why is it crucial to seek opportunities for spiritual growth?

B How does remembering ways in which Christ has led us in the past help us to live by faith today?

III. True Love Comes Through the Indwelling Spirit (*Zech. 4:6*)

A What is the only way possible to love even those who do not love us in return?

B Define *true love*. How is this a reflection of God's character?

C At what point does the Holy Spirit come into the heart of a new believer?

► **Summary:** The indwelling Spirit of God brings about a change in the life of a new believer. The new Christian's faith is strengthened by nurture and spiritual growth.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

C O N T I N U E D 

Growing in Faith

In Hebrews 3 and 4 Paul talked about the children of Israel, who, after escaping from Egypt, had wandered in the desert for 40 years. What's most fascinating, however, is what Paul said about them in Hebrews 4:2.

Read Hebrews 4:2. What was the problem with the children of Israel? What crucial element was lacking?

What makes the answer so troubling is the fact that this generation had so much evidence of God's leading. Go back over the story of the Exodus and of what happened to them in the desert. God performed miracle after miracle, everything from the parting of the Red Sea to the daily provision of the manna. *And yet, they still lacked faith!*

What lessons about faith, about what it means to have faith, can we draw from this account? See *Heb. 3:12*.

So often people think that if only they had more signs, more evidence, their faith in God would grow. But it doesn't work that way. Faith, or the lack thereof, isn't an intellectual matter, or even a matter of signs and wonders. It's a matter of the heart. We can grow in faith only to the degree that we surrender our hearts and souls to the Lord; we can grow in faith only through exercising our faith; we can grow in faith only to the degree that we study God's Word with a heart open to learn from Him.

God is the Source of faith, but we must put our trust in Him. Faith grows through study of the Word (*Rom. 10:17*), but we must take the time and put forth the effort for that study. The more we study, with a heart and mind surrendered to the Lord, the more we know about our loving God. And the more we know Him, the more we love and trust Him. The more we can trust Him, the more we do whatever He wants us to do. Study of the Word of God is absolutely essential if we want our faith to grow.

A number of years ago a scholar left Christianity. He told someone later, "Had I kept up reading my Bible, studying it, and applying it to my life, I probably wouldn't have lost my faith." How precious is your faith to you? You can know the answer by this simple question: How carefully do you guard and nurture that faith?

Learning Cycle

Christian growth is one of the great themes of the Bible. Lead the students to discover why growth is so important and what the Bible offers to help us grow.

A seed germinates, and the appearance of those first two leaves makes the gardener happy. A baby is born, and with its first cries, the mother forgets her pain and joins the rest of the family in celebration. But imagine: Those two leaves wither away; a year later the baby cannot take its first step.

Without growth, life has no meaning or purpose. This is so in spiritual life as well. What, then, is spiritual growth, and what does the Bible say about it?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **What do I need to know from God’s Word?**

“Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (*1 Pet. 2:2, NKJV*). This and other scriptural passages indicate the need for spiritual growth and the role the Bible plays in that growth. Lead the class members to explore the nature of both.

Bible Commentary

To grow is a necessary part of both physical and spiritual life. Without growth life loses its meaning. What does the Bible say about growth, and what are the hallmarks of spiritual growth?

I. Spiritual Life and Growth: The Biblical Concept

The Christian life begins with the death of Christ, which frees us from the dominion of Satan (*Col. 1:13, 14*), the condemnation of sin (*Rom. 8:1*), and the penalty of sin (*Rom. 6:23*). Christ’s death makes our new birth possible (*Rom. 6:1-4*). The uniqueness of God’s gift was not that He gave His Son but that He gave Him to die for our sins (*John 3:16*). Without the Cross there could be no forgiveness for sins, no eternal life, and no new birth.

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Growing in Love

The Scriptures say that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We are to love our enemies and our fellow believers. These are God's commands, and they aren't always easy to follow, because we are by nature selfish sinners who love self above and beyond everything else. If you love someone, usually it is someone who loves you back. But the Scriptures say that's not enough (*Matt. 5:44*). It really takes growing in the Lord to be able to love, not only those who don't love you, but those who are your enemies.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8. What point is Paul making? Why is that point so important? What does that point tell us about the importance and power of love? See also *Matt. 22:37, 38; Gal. 5:14; 1 John 3:14; 4:7, 8, 16.*

The word *love* is used so often that it is easy to lose sight of what it actually means. Biblical examples show that love is something we do rather than simply an emotion. Scripture speaks about love as attitude and actions (*1 Corinthians 13*). We know that love will motivate us to action. The Bible clearly gives an example of what true love really is: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (*1 John 3:16, NIV*). To love at this level, we need to get beyond our own rights, our own interests, and our own hurts; and we can do this only through the power of God, only as we grow in Him and His grace.

How often have you ever been wrong, wrong about theology, wrong about doctrine, wrong about the motives of other people? And yet, love never fails; that is, whatever errors and mistakes we make, we can never go wrong when we love others. We might make a million mistakes, but love can never be one, not when we are commanded to love even our enemies. It's hard to imagine what our witness would be like if all who professed the name of Christ loved the way Christ loved.

Look at your recent actions toward the people you frequently come in contact with. What do your actions say about how well you love these people, if at all? What do these actions say to you about your own need to learn more about how to love as God would have us love?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

New birth owes nothing to the will or the power of the human being. We are born again simply by accepting what God has made possible through Christ and letting the Holy Spirit transform the old self into a new creation (*Col. 3:9, 10*). “The Christian’s life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 172.

Christian growth is dying daily to sin and living for righteousness (*Gal. 5:19-23*). Paul lays down the basic principle: “If anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (*2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV*). We are a new creation because self is no longer our master, but Christ. We are a new creation because we now reject old ways of thought, action, and relationship and accept God’s will and way; it is also new in that there emerges a reconciled and redeemed relationship, freed from sin in order to grow in righteousness (*Rom. 8:1-16*), and reflect Jesus “from glory to glory” (*2 Cor. 3:17, 18*).

Consider the role of the Bible in each of the following:

1. Revealing our sins and convicting us that we are sinners: *Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 1 John 3:4*.
2. Giving us the message of salvation: *John 5:39, John 17:17*.
3. Pointing out the way to grow and mature: *Ps. 119:11; John 14:26; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 5:12, 13*.

II. Biblical Hallmarks of Spiritual Growth

- **Growth in faith** (*Ps. 25:4*). Faith has three parts: (1) believing in a set of doctrines, (2) believing in Jesus as our Savior, and (3) following His will and way. The first is intellectual, and the other two are life-changing, involving surrender to Jesus (*Phil. 4:13*). All three parts of faith are important for spiritual growth. Although without the second and third, the first is empty.
- **Growth in love** (*1 John 3:14; 4:7, 8, 16*). The love factor in Christian growth is unique to the gospel. Jesus called it the new commandment (*John 13:34*). However, the newness does not refer to love but to the object of love. People love, but they love the lovable. Jesus, however, introduced a new factor: “Love one another as I have loved you” (*John 15:12, NKJV*). Jesus’ love is universal, sacrificial, and complete. He loves the undeserving. That is how our love should then be. To love others that way is to grow spiritually.

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Growing in Christ

Read Ephesians 4:14, 15. How does Paul here describe growth in Christ?

Considering that the Bible is our final authority on all doctrine, how crucial then that studying the Word is for us to grow in Christ. Only through knowing the Word and what it teaches can we be protected from the “sleight of men.”

Yet, it’s not enough just to read the Bible. It needs to be obeyed. We need to follow what it says; otherwise, it will effect no change in us. By obeying, by seeking to be like Christ in our words, in acts, and even in our minds, we will grow in Him.

Paul wrote to the Romans that we are called to be like Christ (*Rom. 8:28, 29*), and that should be in every way possible, especially in our thoughts (*2 Cor. 10:5*), because if our thoughts are right, our words and actions and attitudes will be too. By keeping our hearts pure, our words and actions will be, as well.

Read Galatians 2:20. What crucial element about how we can grow in the Lord is revealed here?

We can never grow in Christ, into Christian maturity, without a surrender of self. Paul talked about his being crucified so that Jesus could live in him instead. We are no longer to follow the whims and the passions of the flesh but, rather, the commands of God. Our decisions are no longer based only on just what we think; rather, Christ is now Lord of our lives, and our actions should reveal His Lordship in us. This surrender is a day-by-day process, something that must be part of our walk with Christ. The moment we start letting self rule, sin lies at the door, and sin leads to death.

What are some of your own experiences with surrendering to Christ? What happens? How do you feel? What are the results? What have you learned that you could share with others who are seeking the same experience? Share your answers with your class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

- **Growth in the study of God’s Word** (*2 Tim. 3:16, 17*). Food is essential for physical growth. In spiritual growth, our nutrition is found in the study of God’s Word and in prayer. Jesus showed the importance of God’s Word in spiritual growth by His reliance on it when He defeated Satan in the wilderness (*Matt. 4:4*).
- **Growth in prayer** (*Eph. 6:18*). If God’s Word is the bread that nourishes our soul, prayer is the breath that keeps our soul alive. Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane gave Him strength to walk the way of the Cross and prepared Him for the victory of Easter morning. Without prayer, “you cannot maintain a Christian walk. It elevates, strengthens, and ennobles; it is the soul talking with God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 313.
- **Growth in worship, witness, and service** (*Acts 2:42-47; 5:41, 42; 6:7*). Christian growth and maturity are not possible without active participation in worship and fellowship, in witness and service. The Christian life is lived neither in a vacuum nor a refrigerator, but in a dynamic relationship whereby a believer is moved from worship to fellowship and service until the entire community sees Jesus reflected in the believer’s life (*Heb. 10:24, 25; Phil. 3:12-14*).

Consider This: Ask your class members to add other marks of spiritual growth that the Bible points to.

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 The Bible has much to say about spiritual growth. Probe your class members as to how they might put these teachings into practice.
- 2 Ask class members what the following quotation means to them. Have them discuss the texts in the quote by commenting on how the texts apply to their lives.

“The change of heart by which we become children of God is in the Bible

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Growing in the Spirit

Jesus told Nicodemus that “ ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit’ ” (*John 3:5, NIV*). Born of water means baptism, and born of the Spirit is conversion, which means that the Holy Spirit comes within us at the moment of spiritual birth. As a baby needs to grow, the newly baptized member needs to grow in the Spirit. “ ‘When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth’ ” (*John 16:13, NIV*). This means that the Spirit has a very important role to guide every Christian into all truth by reminding us of the things that the Bible says, because the truth is the Word of God (*John 17:17*). The Spirit also has the role of convicting us about our own spiritual condition (*see John 16:8*).

As we grow in Christian living, we need to grow in the Spirit. Growing in the Spirit means that we are more and more sensitive to His leading; we know that He is talking to us because we know the Word of God, and the Spirit will guide us to the Word.

How can we grow in the Spirit? Read the texts listed below. What principles needed for spiritual growth are found there?

Matt. 5:6

Gal. 3:11

Gal. 5:16

2 Tim. 3:15

1 Pet. 3:11

1 John 1:9

Jesus in Luke 11:13 makes it clear how readily available the Holy Spirit is for those who want Him. Yet, God never forces Himself upon us. He has shown us who He is and what He has done for us. We, ourselves, in our hearts, have to make the daily choices—choices of faith, obedience, surrender, confession—that will enable us to grow in grace and in the Spirit or that will lead us toward eternal ruin.

Is there anything in your life, such as what you read or watch or do, that could be desensitizing you to the influence of the Holy Spirit? What might those things be? Why not let the Holy Spirit, right now, convict you about what you need to do regarding these things? After all, the longer you wait, the harder it will become even to heed His voice.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

spoken of as birth. Again, it is compared to the germination of the good seed sown by the husbandman. In like manner those who are just converted to Christ are, ‘as new-born babes,’ to ‘grow up’ to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus. 1 Peter 2:2; Ephesians 4:15. Or like the good seed sown in the field, they are to grow up and bring forth fruit. Isaiah says that they shall ‘be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.’ Isaiah 61:3.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 67.

Witnessing

Have one of the members read Matthew 20:25-28. Then have the class briefly discuss how growth is linked to service.

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Consider This:

Ask class members what the statement below means in terms of their understanding the connection between spiritual growth and the Bible. You may suggest the following:

- 1 List Bible texts that support the idea of God’s matchless gift of His Son.
- 2 What support does the Bible give for breathing God’s grace daily and growing in it?
- 3 Spiritual growth demands that we die daily to self. List how this became a reality this week.
- 4 Spiritual growth means we grow in Christ daily. How did this happen yesterday?
- 5 Review the hallmarks of growth that were discussed in the commentary section. Ask class members to choose one and discuss how they can apply it to their experience.

“In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.”
—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Growing Up Into Christ,” pp. 67–75, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The Author of this spiritual life is unseen, and the exact method by which that life is imparted and sustained, it is beyond the power of human philosophy to explain. Yet the operations of the Spirit are always in harmony with the written word. As in the natural, so in the spiritual world. The natural life is preserved moment by moment by divine power; yet it is not sustained by a direct miracle, but through the use of blessings placed within our reach. So the spiritual life is sustained by the use of those means that Providence has supplied. If the follower of Christ would grow up ‘unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (*Ephesians 4:13*), he must eat of the bread of life and drink of the water of salvation. He must watch and pray and work, in all things giving heed to the instructions of God in His word.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 284, 285.

“The work of educating the mind and manners may be carried forward to perfection. If those who profess the truth do not now improve their privileges and opportunities to grow up to the full stature of men and women in Christ Jesus, they will be no honor to the cause of truth, no honor to Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, pp. 358, 359.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What practical steps can you take to help other church members who are seeking to grow in the Lord and yet feel frustrated at what they deem is a lack of progress? What hope and advice can you offer them?
- ❷ As a class, go over your answers to Wednesday’s final question. What can you learn from each other’s experiences in surrendering to God?
- ❸ What are some of the biggest obstacles we face regarding spiritual growth? What distinctive factors in your common culture work against spiritual growth? What are your defenses against these factors?