

# Growing in Christ



## SABBATH—AUGUST 2

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** John 3:1–15; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 15:4–10; Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 9:23, 24.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “Jesus replied, ‘What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. No one can see God’s kingdom without being born again’ ” (John 3:3, NlrV).

**NICODEMUS<sup>1</sup> ADMIRERD CHRIST BUT DARED NOT VISIT HIM OPENLY.** He greeted Jesus politely and praised Him as a teacher from God. The Master knew that behind this courteous greeting was a seeker of truth. So Jesus wasted no time. He told Nicodemus that he did not need more knowledge of the Bible. What Nicodemus needed was a spiritual rebirth.

This idea was hard for Nicodemus to understand. Because of his family connection to Abraham, Nicodemus was sure he had a place in God’s kingdom. Also, as a strict Pharisee (religious leader), he surely deserved the favor of God, right? So, why did he need such a great change?

Patience, Jesus explained that spiritual change is the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see or understand how it happens. But we can see the results. We call it conversion,<sup>2</sup> a new life in Christ.

We should always remember how the Lord called us and converted (changed) us. But our challenge is to “live” in Him daily so that He can change us more and more to be like Him.

### DEFINITIONS

1. Nicodemus—an important member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council.
2. conversion—the process of becoming a believer in Christ, changing from an old to a new spiritual life.

## TO BE BORN AGAIN (John 3:1–15)



We must be born of water  
and of the Spirit.



“You must be born again.”

## DEFINITIONS

3. comparisons—two or more things that are shown to be the same or different.

An ambitious Christian met a politician and asked her, “Have you been born again?” Angry at the very personal question, the politician answered, “It worked the first time, thank you.”

Maybe it did. But because of our fallen nature, our first birth is not enough for eternal life. For that, we must be “born again.”

**Read Jesus’ conversation (talk) with Nicodemus in John 3:1–15. How did Jesus explain what the new birth means?**

No doubt Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, knew the Old Testament Bible. The Bible speaks about the need for a “new heart” and God’s desire to create it in us (Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26). Jesus explained to Nicodemus this truth and how it can happen.

The talk ends with Jesus’ words. But there is no answer from Nicodemus. He probably went home filled with new and deep thoughts. Quietly, the Holy Spirit worked in him. And three years later, Nicodemus was ready to openly become Jesus’ disciple.

To be born *again* shows that our natural birth is not enough to save us. The new birth must be a double one: of water and of the Spirit. John the Baptist’s ministry (work done for God) helped Nicodemus to easily understand that to be born of water means baptism with water. What Nicodemus also needed to know was that to be born of the Spirit is the renewing of the heart by the Holy Spirit.

There are several comparisons<sup>3</sup> between physical and spiritual births. Both mark the beginning of a new life. Also, we cannot give birth to ourselves, either physically or spiritually. It is done for us. But there is also an important difference between them. We cannot choose if we want to be born physically. But we can choose to be born spiritually. Only those who freely decide to let the Holy Spirit work out new spiritual selves within them are born again. God respects our freedom. He is very eager to change us. But He does not change us by force.

**Think about the way in which the Lord brought about your conversion. How have you experienced the new birth?**

## THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST (Titus 3:5–7)

Being born again is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus used the Greek word *pneuma*, meaning both “Spirit” and “wind,” to show the slow method of change (John 3:8). The wind blows. None of us can start it, direct it, or stop it. Its great power is beyond human control. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is always working upon the heart of every human. He is slowly leading people to Christ. No one has control over God’s great saving and changing power. We can refuse Him or surrender to Him. When we surrender ourselves to His influence, the Holy Spirit produces new lives in us.

Is there any way to know if we have experienced the new birth? Yes. The Spirit works unseen. But the results of His work are visible. Those around us will know that Jesus created new hearts in us. The Spirit always shows examples of the inward changes He makes in us. As Jesus said, “ ‘You can tell each tree by its fruit’ ” (Matthew 7:20, NIV).

The new life in Christ is not a patched-up life with a few outside changes. It is not a small change or an improvement of the old life but a full change.

**What do Titus 3:5–7; 2 Corinthians 5:17; and Galatians 6:15 tell us about what change the new birth will make in us?**

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ puts in us new thoughts, feelings, and motives (reasons for doing something). He awakens our consciences, changes our minds, stops every unholy desire, and fills us with the sweet peace of heaven. The change does not happen quickly. Over time we do become new people in Christ. We have to, because the old person who came out of the womb is not right with God.

**Think about your life during the past 24 hours. How much did those who know you see Christ in your words, attitudes (feelings), and actions? Pray about the ways in which you still need to be changed by the Holy Spirit.**

## STAYING IN CHRIST (John 15:4–10)



The branch separated from the vine will die.



We can receive life only as we stay connected to Christ.

A growing spiritual life is possible only by always depending on Christ. Jesus used the example of the vine to teach us how to do this. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus said (John 15:5, NKJV). In the Old Testament, Israel was pictured as a vine that the Lord had planted (Isaiah 5:1–7; Psalm 80:8, 9; Jeremiah 2:21). But Jesus presents Himself as “the true vine” (John 15:1). He urges His followers to be united (joined as one) with Him just as the branches are united with the vine.

**Read John 15:4–10. What do these verses teach us about abiding (living; staying) continually in Christ?**

A branch recently separated from the vine may appear alive for a while. But it will surely wither and die because it has been cut off from the vine, the source of life. In the same way, we can receive life only through our connection with Christ. But for it to work well, this union must be kept. Devotional time in the morning is very important. But our connection with the Lord has to continue throughout the day. Staying in Christ means always looking for Him, asking for His guidance, praying for His strength to obey His will, and begging for His love to fill us.

One of the most tricky traps is to try to live the Christian life independently from the Lord. “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NKJV). Without Jesus we cannot protect ourselves even from one temptation, overcome one sin, or develop a character (good actions, words, thoughts) in His likeness. The new spiritual life can grow only through a close connection with Christ.

By reading the Word and thinking deeply about it, we are spiritually fed and strengthened. “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life,” Jesus said (John 6:63, NKJV). Kept closely in our hearts and minds, these words will inspire our prayers to keep us in touch with the Lord. It is easy to be concerned about “the worries of this life” (Mark 4:19, NIV). But we must try hard to stay in Jesus.

**What are the greatest problems that prevent you from staying in Christ? What steps can you take to remove or overcome them?**

## PRAYER (Matthew 6:9–13)

Along with studying the Bible, prayer is very important in helping us to stay in Christ and grow spiritually. Even Jesus Himself needed prayer to be united with the Father. He gave us an example of a life of prayer. Prayer marked the important moments of His life. He prayed when He was baptized. He often prayed alone before daylight or on the mountain after sunset. Sometimes He spent the whole night praying. He did this before He chose the Twelve Apostles. He prayed to bring Lazarus back to life. Not even the cross stopped Him from praying.

If the “ ‘Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him’ ” (Matthew 6:8, NKJV), why do we need to tell Him about our needs in prayer? Because through prayer, we learn to empty ourselves of ourselves and become more dependent upon Him.

“ ‘Ask, and it will be given to you. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you’ ” is Jesus’ promise (Matthew 7:7, NIV). We do not need to impress Him by repeating the same prayers (Matthew 6:5–9). But we need to continue praying, holding on to His promises (John 15:7; John 16:24) no matter what happens.

**How can the different parts of the Lord’s Prayer help us to grow in Christ? Read Matthew 6:9–13.**

Jesus is our Mediator<sup>4</sup> in heaven. So, He taught us to direct our prayers to the Father in His name. “ ‘What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. My Father will give you anything you ask for in my name’ ” (John 16:23, NIV). Christ taught that there are certain rules for this wonderful promise to be fulfilled. We need to believe that God can answer us (Matthew 21:22). An attitude (feeling) of forgiveness toward our neighbor is a must (Mark 11:25). Most important, our will should always be surrendered to the Father’s will (Matthew 6:10; Luke 22:42). And any delay in the answer should not discourage us. Instead, we need to always pray and not give up (Luke 18:1).

**“Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1) is always important to ask of God, no matter how long ago we accepted Christ as our Savior. In what part of your prayer life do you still need to grow by the grace<sup>5</sup> of God?**

## DEFINITIONS

4. Mediator—go-between; a lawyer. Jesus is the Mediator between us and the Father.

5. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

**DIE TO SELF EVERY DAY (Luke 9:23, 24)**

It seems odd. But it is only by dying to self every day that we may truly live. When baptized, we died to our old natures and rose again to new lives. It would have been wonderful if the old man of sin had permanently died when we were buried under the water through baptism. But sooner or later, all of us have discovered that our past habits and desires are still alive and working hard to retake control of our lives. After our baptisms, our old natures have to be put to death again and again. That is why Jesus asks us to bear (carry) our crosses with Him in this life.

**What does Luke 9:23, 24 mean?**

Many think the cross they have to bear is a serious sickness, sad events in life, or a permanent disability. While any of these surely is heavy, the meaning of Jesus' words goes further. To take up our cross means to deny ourselves daily. Not just a part of us but our entire (whole) lives.

The Christian life is a "crucified" life (put to death on a cross). " 'I have been crucified with Christ. I don't [do not] live any longer. Christ lives in me' " (Galatians 2:20, NIV). In Bible times, the victims of the cross did not die quickly. Usually, they suffered for many hours, sometimes several days, while hanging on the cross. Even after our old natures are crucified, they still fight to live and get down from the cross.

It is not easy to deny ourselves. Our old natures are stubborn. Our old selves do not want to die. What is more, we cannot nail ourselves to the cross. "No man can empty himself of self. We can only let Christ do the work. Then the soul should say, Lord, take my heart, because I cannot give it. It is Thy property. Keep it pure, because I cannot keep it for Thee. Save me from myself, my weak, unchristlike self. Mold me, make me, raise me into a pure and holy life, where the rich current of Thy love can flow through my soul.

"It is not only at the beginning of the Christian life that this denial of self is to be made. At every advance step toward heaven, it is to be renewed. . . . It is only by continuous denial of self and dependence on Christ that we can walk safely."  
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 159, 160. There must be a daily surrendering to the Lord.

**When was the last time you died to self? What does your answer say to you after you have studied today's verses?**

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Ellen G. White, “Consecration [Being Set Apart as Holy for God],” pages 43–48, in *Steps to Christ*; “Nicodemus,” pages 167–177, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The war against self is the greatest battle that was ever fought. The surrendering of self to the will of God requires a struggle. But the soul must surrender to God before it can be renewed in holiness.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, page 43.

“We cannot keep our old self and be filled with the fullness of God. We must be emptied of our old self. If heaven is gained by us at last, it will be only through (1) the denial of self and (2) in receiving the mind, the spirit, and the will of Christ Jesus.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, page 155.

“When the Spirit of God takes control of the heart, it changes the life. Sinful thoughts are put away. Evil deeds are turned away. Love, humbleness, and peace take the place of anger, jealousy, and worry. Joy takes the place of sadness, and the face shines with the light of heaven. . . . The blessing comes when by faith the soul surrenders itself to God. Then that unseen power creates a new person in the likeness of God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 173.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 What is your own experience in what it means to stay in Christ? What happens when you connect with Jesus? What happens when you do not?
- 2 Who has not struggled with the issue of prayers that are not answered, at least not in the way that we have prayed for? How do you keep faith in God and in His promises when your prayers have not been answered as you wanted? What important things must we always remember when such things happen?
- 3 What are the problems with self that lead God to ask us to deny it daily? Look at it this way: if you did not deny self or if you let self control all your thoughts and actions, what kind of life would you live? Would it be like that of our Master (Jesus)? What does your answer tell you about yourself?