

# Growing *in* Christ



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *John 3:1–15; 2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:4–10; Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 9:23, 24.*

**Memory Text:** “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” (*John 3:3, NKJV*).

Nicodemus felt drawn to Christ but dared not visit Him openly. He greeted Jesus politely, acknowledging Him as a teacher from God. The Master knew that behind this courteous greeting was a seeker of truth; therefore, wasting no time, He told Nicodemus that he did not need theoretical knowledge as much as he needed spiritual regeneration, a new birth.

This concept was hard for Nicodemus to grasp. Because of his descent from Abraham, he was sure he had a place in God's kingdom; in addition, as a strict Pharisee, he surely deserved the favor of God, right? So, why did he need such a radical change?

Patently Jesus explained that spiritual transformation is a supernatural work produced by the Holy Spirit. Though we cannot see or understand how it happens, we can perceive the results. We call it conversion, a new life in Christ.

Though we should always remember how the Lord called us and converted us, our challenge is to steadfastly abide in Him daily so that He can transform us more and more into His image.

\* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 9.*

## To Be Born Again

A zealous Christian confronted a politician and asked her, “Have you been born again?” Angry at what she deemed a personal question, the politician replied, “It worked the first time, thank you.”

Maybe it did, but considering our fallen nature, our first birth isn’t enough, at least not for eternal life. For that, we must be “born again.”

**Read** Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1–15. How did Jesus explain what it meant to be born again?

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No doubt Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, knew the Old Testament Scriptures, which speak about the need for a “new heart” and God’s willingness to create it in us (*Ps. 51:10, Ezek. 36:26*). Jesus explained to Nicodemus this truth and how it can happen.

The dialogue recorded by John ends with Jesus’ words. No answer from Nicodemus. He probably went home immersed in profound reflections. Quietly the Holy Spirit worked in him, and three years later he was ready to openly become Jesus’ disciple.

The fact that it is necessary to be born again shows without a doubt that our previous birth is insufficient from a spiritual standpoint. The new birth must be a double one: of water and of the Spirit. In light of John the Baptist’s ministry, Nicodemus easily understood that to be born of water referred to baptism with water. What he also needed to know was that to be born of the Spirit is the renewing of the heart by the Holy Spirit.

There are similarities between physical and spiritual births. Both mark the beginning of a new life. Also, we produce neither birth ourselves; it’s done for us. But there is also an important difference between them: we were unable to choose if we wanted to be born physically; we can, however, choose to be born spiritually. Only those who freely decide to allow the Holy Spirit to generate a new spiritual self within them are born again. God respects our freedom and, although eager to transform us, He does not change us by force.

**Think about the way in which the Lord produced your conversion. It does not matter if it was through dramatic circumstances or through a long and imperceptible process of transformation. How have you experienced the new birth?**

## The New Life in Christ

Being born again is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus made use of the fact that the Greek word *pneuma* means both “Spirit” and “wind” in order to illustrate the process of conversion (*John 3:8*). The wind blows; none of us can start it, direct it, nor stop it. Its great power is beyond human control. We can only react to it, either resisting it or using its potential for our benefit.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit is constantly working upon the heart of every human being, drawing him or her to Christ. No one has control over its great saving and transforming power. We can resist it or yield to it. When we surrender ourselves to His convicting influence, the Holy Spirit produces a new life in us.

Is there any way to know if we have experienced the new birth? Yes. The Spirit works invisibly, but the results of His activity are visible. Those around us will know that Jesus created a new heart in us. The Spirit always produces an outward demonstration of the inward transformation He makes in us. As Jesus said, “ ‘by their fruits you will know them’ ” (*Matt. 7:20, NKJV*).

The new life in Christ is not a patched-up life with a few external reformations. It is not a modification or improvement of the old life but a complete transformation.

**What** do the following texts tell us about what the new birth will accomplish in us? *Titus 3:5–7, 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15.*

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Through the Holy Spirit, Christ implants in us new thoughts, feelings, and motives. He awakens our conscience, changes our mind, subdues every unholy desire, and fills us with the sweet peace of heaven. Though the change doesn’t happen instantly, over time we do become a new creature in Christ. We have to, because the original version, the one that came out of the womb, isn’t right with God.

**Meditate on your life during the last 24 hours. To what degree did those who relate with you perceive Christ in your words, attitudes, and actions? Pray about those traits of character that still need to be modeled by the Holy Spirit.**

## Abiding in Christ

A flourishing spiritual life is possible only by constantly depending on Christ. Jesus used the illustration of the vine to teach us how to accomplish this. “‘I am the vine, you are the branches,’” Jesus said (*John 15:5, NKJV*). In the Old Testament, Israel was depicted as a vine that the Lord had planted (*Isa. 5:1–7; Ps. 80:8, 9; Jer. 2:21*), but Jesus presents Himself as “the true vine” (*John 15:1*) and urges His followers to be united with Him just as the branches abide in the vine.

**What** do these texts teach us about abiding continually in Christ? See *John 15:4–10*.

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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 source of life. By the same token, we can receive life only through our connection with Christ. But in order to be effective, this union must be maintained. Devotional time in the morning is essential, but our communion with the Lord has to continue throughout the day. Abiding in Christ means seeking Him constantly, asking for His guidance, praying for His strength to obey His will, and begging for His love to fill us.

One of the most deceitful traps is to try to live the Christian life independently from the Lord. “‘Without Me you can do nothing’” (*John 15:5, NKJV*). Without Him we cannot resist even one temptation, overcome one sin, or develop a character in His likeness. The new spiritual life can grow only by means of an uninterrupted communion with Christ.

By reading the Word and meditating on it, we are nourished and strengthened. “‘The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life,’” Jesus said (*John 6:63, NKJV*). Treasured in our hearts and minds, these words will inspire our prayers in order to keep us in contact with the Lord. Though it’s easy to be distracted by “‘the cares of this world’” (*Mark 4:19, NKJV*), we must make a concentrated effort to abide in Jesus.

**What are the greatest obstacles that prevent you from abiding constantly in Christ? What steps can you take in order to remove or overcome them?**

## Prayer

Along with studying the Bible, prayer is indispensable in order for us to abide in Christ and grow spiritually. Even Jesus Himself needed prayer to be united with the Father. He left us an example of a life of prayer. Prayer marked the crucial moments of His life. He prayed when He was baptized. He often prayed in solitary places before daylight or on the mountain after sunset. Sometimes He spent the entire night praying, such as when He chose the Twelve Apostles. He prayed to resurrect Lazarus. Not even the cross deterred Him from praying.

If the “ ‘Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him’ ” (*Matt. 6:8, NKJV*), why do we need to present Him 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; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you’ ” is Jesus’ promise (*Matt. 7:7, NKJV*). Although we do not need to impress Him by endless prayers of vain repetitions (*Matt. 6:5–9*), we need to persevere in prayer, clinging to His promises (*John 15:7, 16:24*) no matter what.

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

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Jesus is our Mediator in heaven. Therefore, He instructed us to address our prayers to the Father in His name. “ ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you’ ” (*John 16:23, NKJV*). Christ taught that there are certain conditions in order for this wonderful promise to be fulfilled. We need to believe that God can answer us (*Matt. 21:22*). An attitude of forgiveness toward our neighbor is required (*Mark 11:25*). Most important, our will should always be subordinated to the Father’s will (*Matt. 6:10, Luke 22:42*). And any “delay” in the answer should not discourage us; on the contrary, we need to always pray and not give up (*Luke 18:1*).

**“Lord, teach us to pray” (*Luke 11:1*) is always a relevant request, no matter how long ago we accepted Christ as our Savior. In what aspect of your prayer life do you still need to grow by the grace of God?**

## Die to Self Every Day

Paradoxically, it is only by dying that we may truly live. When baptized, we (ideally) died to our old nature and rose again to a new life. It would have been wonderful if the old man of sin had permanently died when we were buried under baptismal waters. Sooner or later, however, all of us have discovered that our past habits and tendencies are still alive and do strive to regain control of our lives. After our baptism, our old nature has to be put to death again and again. That is why Jesus associated the Christian life with a cross.

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

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Many think the cross they have to bear is a serious sickness, unfavorable circumstances 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 once in a while but every day; not just a part of us but our entire being.

The Christian life is a cruciform life. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (*Gal. 2:20, NKJV*). In the ancient world, the victims of crucifixion did not die immediately. Usually they agonized for many hours, sometimes several days, while hanging on the cross. Similarly, our old nature, although crucified, fights to survive and get down from the cross.

It is not easy to deny ourselves. Our old nature lingers on; our old man doesn't want to die. Moreover, we cannot nail ourselves to the cross. "No man can empty himself of self. We can only consent for Christ to accomplish the work. Then the language of the soul will be, Lord, take my heart; for I cannot give it. It is Thy property. Keep it pure, for I cannot keep it for Thee. Save me in spite of myself, my weak, unchristlike self. Mold me, fashion me, raise me into a pure and holy atmosphere, 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 renunciation of self is to be made. At every advance step heavenward it is to be renewed. . . . Only by constant renunciation of self and dependence on Christ can we walk safely."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 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, especially in light of today's texts?**

**Further Study:** Ellen G. White, “Consecration,” pp. 43–48, in *Steps to Christ*; “Nicodemus,” pp. 167–177, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The warfare against self is the greatest battle that was ever fought. The yielding of self, surrendering all to the will of God, requires a struggle; but the soul must submit to God before it can be renewed in holiness.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 43.

“We cannot retain our own self and be filled with the fullness of God. We must be emptied of self. If heaven is gained by us at last, it will be only through the renunciation of self and in receiving the mind, the spirit, and the will of Christ Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 155.

“When the Spirit of God takes possession of the heart, it transforms the life. Sinful thoughts are put away, evil deeds are renounced; love, humility, and peace take the place of anger, envy, and strife. Joy takes the place of sadness, and the countenance reflects the light of heaven. . . . The blessing comes when by faith the soul surrenders itself to God. Then that power which no human eye can see creates a new being in the image of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 173.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is your own experience with what it means to abide in Christ? What happens when you connect with Jesus? What happens when you don't?
- 2 Who hasn't struggled with the issue of prayers that are not answered, at least as we have prayed them? How do you maintain faith in God and in His promises in the face of requests that have not been answered as you wanted? What crucial things must we always keep in mind in such situations?
- 3 What is it about self, about the very nature of self, that we are called to deny it daily? Look at it this way: if you didn't deny self, if you allowed self to dominate all that you thought or did, what kind of life would you live? Would it, in any way, resemble that of our Master? What does your answer tell you about yourself apart from Christ?

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Corinthians 5:17*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Know that God has provided everything necessary for Christian growth and development.

**Feel:** Feel personal satisfaction from an intimate, transformational encounter with God that stimulates personal spiritual growth.

**Do:** Grow in knowledge, wisdom, and appreciation for what God is doing through his or her life.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: The New Birth Experience Is Stimulated by God’s Will Rather Than by Human Initiative.**

**A** Why does God’s respect for freedom prevent Him from coercing obedience?

**B** How does the life of Christ stimulate our desire for Christian growth and discipleship?

**C** What happens to spiritual growth whenever our constant dependence upon Christ is interrupted?

**II. Feel: Healthy, Satisfying Relationships With God Stimulate Spiritual Growth.**

**A** What transforms an intelligent mental acknowledgment of God into a satisfying emotional attachment?

**B** How do healthy spiritual relationships contribute to our spiritual growth?

**C** How can the emotional destruction caused by legalistic approaches to salvation be reversed?

**III. Do: Believers May Grow in Knowledge, Wisdom, and Experience.**

**A** What can believers do to ensure that they have continuously maturing spiritual relationships?

**B** How might your daily schedule be altered should Christian growth become your focal point?

**C** What can Christians do to nourish spiritual growth in other people?

► **Summary:** Christian growth is the natural consequence of healthy relationships with God and the church’s nurturing atmosphere. Wherever these conditions exist, personal growth multiplies through evangelistic growth.



## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *2 Corinthians 5:17*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Christian growth is the natural consequence of healthy relationships with God and of the church's nurturing atmosphere.

How is vibrant, flourishing, strengthening faith nourished? Gardening, perhaps, supplies the quintessential illustration. Growth begins with a healthy seed and healthy soil. A cooperative climate supplies the appropriate balance of precipitation and sunshine. Scheduling is likewise crucial. Colder-than-usual temperatures could delay germination. Excessive rainfall could postpone planting. Insufficient rainfall could suspend harvesting. Even appropriate amounts of precipitation arriving in an untimely fashion could damage yields. The spectrum of potential hazards is mind-boggling. Successful gardening is the result of combining strategies that minimize these hazards while providing adequate nourishment (fertilizer, moisture, and sunshine) and timely harvesting. Successful spiritual growth happens under similar circumstances. Willing hearts (seed) fall into nurturing environments (soil) where they receive spiritual encouragement (sunshine) and divinely appointed invitations (precipitation). Various types of nourishment (prayer, scriptural witness, personal testimony, even the gift of suffering, and other factors) fertilize the emerging seedling. Additional sunshine prepares the maturing plant for harvest.

Spiritual decisions are the result (harvested seed). These fresh believers (currently harvested seed) reenter the world (soil), and the process restarts.

**Opening Activity:** Bring a potted plant to class and discuss ways to destroy the plant. If you are unable to bring a plant, discuss conditions under which plants flourish or are destroyed. Answers might include withholding moisture, overfertilization, withholding nutrients, disturbing the soil, plant injury (e.g., inadvertently mowing it down), elevated or lowered temperatures, and other environmental hazards.

**Consider This:** Switch the discussion to spiritual growth. How can spiritual growth be nurtured? How has spiritual advancement been interrupted? What tools has Satan utilized to interfere with growing believers? What elements does God use to grow Christians?

## ►STEP 2—Explore

### Bible Commentary

#### I. The New-Birth Experience (*Review John 3:1–16 with your class.*)

Although wealthy, educated, and honored, Nicodemus was strangely attracted by the humble Nazarene. Troubled by the diminished spirituality of Israel's religious leadership, he was attracted by Christ's uncorrupted comportment. Jesus' recent temple cleansing caught his attention. He marveled that Someone *unschooled* commanded such impressive authority. Remembering how Israel had historically treated God's prophetic messengers, Nicodemus was distressed by his colleagues' mistreatment of this obscure Galilean. Although Nicodemus had advised caution regarding their planned course of action against Christ, he was, nevertheless, hesitant to unequivocally declare open support for Him. Instead, he pursued a personal audience with Jesus.

Conscious of his social standing and political position, Nicodemus shunned public exposure. Jesus acceded to his request for a nighttime rendezvous. Concealed by shadows, the prominent Pharisee felt strangely timid and displaced. Gathering his composure, he attempted to commence the interview by flattering Jesus. He acknowledged his superlative teaching and wondrous miracle working. Jesus, however, bypassed the pleasantries and flattery, maximizing this opportunity to deepen the growing spiritual conviction in Nicodemus's heart. With certainty He declared, "You must be born from above." The Greek *anōthen*, signifying "from above," carried a double meaning. The pun could also be understood as being "born again," which, apparently, is how Nicodemus apprehended it. He remonstrated that such a birth was physiologically impossible. Christ responded metaphorically, not biologically, hearkening back to covenantal promises uttered years before through Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's ministries. God promised that a "new heart" relationship was available that night. The Divine Physician was prepared to perform heart-transplant surgery immediately. Nicodemus, however, deferred, leaving perplexed but contemplating great truths that later would flower unto salvation.

The "new-birth" experience described by Jesus may arrive dramatically (e.g., Paul's Damascus-road experience) or imperceptibly (e.g., Timothy's gradual gathering of his mother's and grandmother's faith). The delivery apparatus notwithstanding, the results are identical: redeemed, transformed lives. "New birth" signifies spiritual surrender and humble acknowledgment that, apart from divine grace, human beings are capable of unspeakable crimes. Respected, apparently successful people, even gos-

pel ministers, have been convicted of murdering spouses, trafficking cocaine, embezzling from followers, and molesting children. Human respectability is insufficient. Education alone is inadequate. Moral modification is too shallow. “You must be born again.”

**Consider This:** How does God destroy those barriers that restrain people from spiritual advancement? Why is humility absolutely essential for inaugurating spiritual growth?

## II. Spiritual Proximity: Staying Near to God’s Heart *(Review John 15:4–10, Matthew 6:9–13, and Galatians 2:20 with your class.)*

This section focuses on those practices that maintain vibrant, healthy, exciting relationships with God.

*Prayer*, someone said, is spiritual breathing. Starvation can terminate human life within weeks. Dehydration can cause death within days. Asphyxiation requires only minutes. No wonder Paul admonished the Thessalonians to pray unceasingly! For asthmatics, who may frequently suffer traumatic shortness of breath, death really seems imminent during such episodes. Because prayer is spiritual breathing and humans are spiritual asthmatics, great care should be exercised to keep spiritual airways open. Framing each day with morning and evening prayer is only the beginning. Conversing with God throughout the day is our objective.

*Abiding* certainly includes prayer but also the spiritual disciplines of scriptural exploration and meditation. Healthy growth requires balanced nutrition. Scripture invites us to “taste and see” (*Ps. 34:8*). Christ and Scripture, metaphorically speaking, constitute that which God’s Word invites us to consume. Scriptural nutrients immunize our spiritual beings against heresies, self-confidence, and dozens of impediments that blockade Christian growth. Biblical proteins form building blocks for heart restoration and optimal cell growth. Beginning and ending each day with Scripture safeguards our spiritual selves. In meditating upon God’s promises, His previous leading, and His historical self-revelation (preeminently Gethsemane, Calvary, and Joseph’s tomb), our sinfulness is flushed away, replaced by nobler thoughts and holier reflections.

*Dying* seems counterintuitive because people spend lifetimes and fortunes trying to prolong life rather than shorten it. Scripture, nonetheless, demands that believers “die.” Paul rejoiced that he was “crucified with Christ” (*Gal. 2:20*). Christ’s death, resurrection, and departure were necessary that the Spirit might reign. With slightly different connotations, the believers’ deaths (to their rebellious natures) and departures (from transgression, sin, and rebellion) are needed for the Spirit to reign over their lives.

**Consider This:** How can we incorporate these principles into our lives?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

#### Thought/Application Questions:

- ① How can we safeguard against the temptation to substitute religious activities and worthwhile service for personal spiritual nurture?
- ② What practices have you incorporated into your regular schedule to create space for spiritual reflection and meditation?
- ③ What resources have you found valuable in cultivating your spiritual life?
- ④ Which material possessions could you dispense of or forego to promote more effective spiritual communication?
- ⑤ Which emotional involvements might you surrender in order to advance your spiritual life?

**Consider This:** Sometimes possessions possess us. People work overtime, financing toys they no longer have time for because they are busy working. Maintaining these things can likewise be exhausting, even when financially affordable. Relinquishing these things could provide a spiritual boost. Similarly, emotional entanglements can retard our spiritual advancement. Are our relationships enhancing or exhausting? Is a particular friendship worth the price of losing eternal life? Think of other ways to simplify your lifestyle.

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Activity:** Supply class members with clipboards, writing instruments, and sheets of stationery. Invite them to write themselves letters that outline changes they will implement in their lifestyles, schedules, and relationships. The purpose of these changes is to improve spiritual growth. If supplies are unavailable, have members discuss these changes.