

## Growth of the Life of Faith

Unser Herr lebt, Issue 49, 2018  
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He was also saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seeds on the ground. He sleeps and gets up night and day while the seeds sprout and grow, although he doesn't know how. The ground produces grain by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, he immediately starts cutting with his sickle because the harvest time has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

[International Standard Version]

In this article, I would like to discuss with you the "growth of the life of faith" for the Christians. In chapter 4, verse 26 of the Gospel according to Mark we cited at the beginning, it is written, "the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seeds on the ground," which implies the beginning of the life regenerated through the belief in the Lord. And this expression in verse 27, "he sleeps and gets up night and day while the seeds sprout and grow," illustrates how the regenerated life continues to grow.

Birth in physical form only marks the beginning of new life of humans. This birth has to be followed by the growth of the body. Likewise, spiritual rebirth is merely the first step of the beginning of our life of faith. Newly reborn believers are not to remain as they were born, but they have to grow until they reach the perfect obedience of their faith. The life that follows the footsteps that Jesus walked; this is the very purpose of our being regenerated.

I suppose that, from these verses cited above, we can find three rules that govern the growth of our faith. Firstly, we need to move forward step by step. Secondly, we have to make ourselves grow. Thirdly, as we continue to grow, it is necessary to look for things that cannot be seen. Let us discuss these three things briefly.

### Growing Gradually

To begin with, new life has to continue to grow in small steps. In verse 28, we see the words like 'first,' 'then' and 'then' again, which, I suppose, implies that spiritual growth is accomplished by following specific orders. It takes time for our faith to grow. This stepwise growth is mentioned in many other parts of the Bible. Let us begin with the chapter 3, verse 18 of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

As all of us reflect the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, we are becoming more like Him with ever-increasing glory by the Lord's Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Let us pay attention to this expression, "with ever-increasing glory," which implies that our spiritual growth continues step by step following some specific sequence. Let me read now chapter 1, verse 4 from the Second Epistle of Peter:

....wonderful promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, seeing that you have escaped the corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:4)

This verse is written in present tense, which tells us that our spiritual growth continues in a step-by-step manner throughout our lives instead of being accomplished at one sweep. It takes a long time for our new life to grow. It is because of this that we, brothers and sisters in the Lord, need to learn to wait patiently praying for the spiritual growth of each other.

### Growing by Itself

Not only that this new life grows little by little, but what is more, it grows by itself. It is written in chapter 4, verse 28 of the Gospel according to Mark we read at the beginning, "the ground produces grain by itself." Therefore, once the sower has finished sowing seeds, his job is done; he can go home and go to sleep — Sowers sow seeds. And the job of the sower is done there. How this new life grows is out of his control, and it actually grows by itself.

Jesus, of course, was well aware that the time He was allowed to work with people in this world was limited to three years. Still, Jesus never hurried or made haste in anything He did; instead, He completed His tasks in this world being filled with peace and joy. Jesus undoubtedly knew that the sown seeds of His Words would absolutely bear fruit when the time comes. This attitude of the Lord Jesus should serve as our example as to how we should act when we apt to lose patience and feel rushed or haste in our lives.

Jesus always wants to give us peace through the faith. The Word of the Lord helps us to bear everlasting fruit of the Holy Spirit, which can never be obtained by the effort or eagerness of our own. The Lord Jesus desires us to rely on this fact, to be filled with joy as we continue to live waiting eagerly for the time of the harvest.

There are two distinct aspects of our life of faith, both of which are extremely important. Firstly, we need to serve the Lord as faithfully and enthusiastically as possible. Then, it is essential for us to fix our eyes on the Lord being filled with the peace and joy He gives us and wait patiently until the Lord completes His work.

If we lack either of them, our life of faith cannot be regarded as healthy. Wrong zeal often deprives peace of mind of our faith. On the other hand, if we take an apathetic attitude, in which we merely expect that the Lord does all things by Himself anyway and we do not have to do anything on our end, it hinders the work of the Lord. Besides serving the Lord ardently and faithfully being filled with joy, we ought to maintain peace of mind within our soul. This well-balanced life of faith is exactly what is required of us. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote:

For God is not so unjust as to forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have ministered to the saints and continue to minister to them.

But we want each of you to continue to be diligent to the very end, in order to give full assurance to your hope.

Then, instead of being lazy, you will imitate those who are inheriting the promises through faith and patience. (Hebrews 6:10-12)

“The right zeal” is always accompanied with “peace of soul that is given by faith.” Both of these two aspects are required when we are to bring others closer to the Lord. I especially want the brothers and sisters whose spouses or family members have not accepted the salvation yet. The life of regeneration grows little by little throughout the lives of believers. Furthermore, it does not grow by human effort, but it grows by itself by the power of the Lord.

### **Growing Looking for Things that Cannot be Seen.**

There are three laws that govern the growth of our faith. The first rule is that it grows one step at a time. Secondly, it grows by itself being helped by the power of the Lord. And thirdly, we need to fix our gaze on what eyes cannot see as we seek to grow.

This life of regeneration will certainly bear fruit one day, even though in the beginning, it may look as though nothing is changed in sight. It is promised in verse 28, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” If the good seed falls on the good soil, it will undoubtedly produce a crop when the time comes. Likewise, this new life will absolutely come to bear fruit someday. However, it is important for us to learn to wait patiently. This truly is an extremely severe testing of our life of faith in a sense.

Newly born believers can be compared to newborn babies. Peter explains it in His First Letter, chapter 2, verse 2:

Like newborn babies, thirst for the pure milk of the Word so that by it you may grow in your salvation. (1 Peter 2:2)

People are not born into their life so that they remain in the state of suckling young who need to be taken care of by others throughout their lives. Likewise, our life is regenerated so that we grow up being fed by the milk of His Word and become mature. Paul used an expression, “mature adulthood,” when he explained this in his Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 13:

....until all of us are united in the faith and in the full knowledge of God’s Son, and until we attain mature adulthood and the full standard of development in the Messiah. (Ephesians 4:13)

In order for us to grow up and attain mature adulthood, we need to maintain more and more of our patience. Paul certainly fought through prayers for the growth of his fellow believers. It can be seen in his confession in the first chapter, verse 11 of his epistle to the Romans:

For I am longing to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong. (Romans 1:11)

This was a desperate prayer of Paul and his desire. Paul wrote in his another letter to the brothers and sisters in Corinth:

I wrote to you out of great sorrow and anguish of heart—along with many tears—not to make you sad but to let you know how much love I have for you. (2 Corinthians 2:4)

I am jealous of you with God’s own jealousy, because I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to the Messiah. However, I am afraid that just as the serpent deceived Eve by its tricks, so your minds may somehow be lured away from sincere and pure devotion to the Messiah. (2 Corinthians 11:2-3)

Paul cared about his brothers and sisters in the Lord from the bottom of his heart and made these sincere confessions. The pain he had in his heart must have been beyond our imagination when he wrote, “Who is weak without me being weak, too? Who is caused to stumble without me becoming indignant?” (2 Corinthians 11:29)

To brothers and sisters living in the Galatian area, Paul also confessed the horrible pain he had in his heart.

My children, I am suffering birth pains for you again until the Messiah is formed in you. (Galatians 4:19)

Paul continued to pray truthfully and never stopped struggling for the growth of his fellow believers. Let

us look at what he wrote to the people in Colossus:

For I want you to know how much I struggle for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have never seen me face to face. (Colossians 2:1)

### The Fruit of a Life Filled with Faith.

So far, we have discussed the growth of our life of faith. The life of faith continues to grow by looking for things that cannot be seen. Not only Paul, but John must have had the same idea about this matter. Let us look at what is written in his first epistle, chapter 3, verse 2:

Dear friends, we are now God's children, but what we will be like has not been revealed yet. We know that when the Messiah is revealed, we will be like him, because we will see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

"We will be like Christ;" this exactly should be the fruit that our faith bears and the purpose of our having faith.

Finally, I would like to discuss briefly with you the outcome of our life of faith.

How the seeds have been growing will be clearly revealed at the time of the harvest. Those who have accepted Jesus are all regarded as believers, but there are many different kinds of believers, and they are not all the same. All believers have been recreated through the Word of the Lord and obtained the eternal life. However, even among believers who share these experiences, the difference arises among them according to what their faith is built upon this same foundation. That is to say, some people build their faith with gold, silver or beautiful stones, while others build it with woods, grass, and straws. Those believers who belong to the first group would never fail to be rewarded by God, while believers who belong to the latter group cannot receive a 'fruit' from the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

It is the state of our mind that determines which group we belong to. Even if you believe in the Lord, if you belong to such believers who put a greater importance on their own interest, who place their business ahead of serving the Lord, who care more about their own family than brothers and sisters of the assembly and who spend more time in watching TV than reading the Bible, you cannot expect to be rewarded by the Lord. You never would be.

The Lord is hoping to bless us. However, it depends solely on the attitude of our minds whether the Lord will actually bless us, whether the Lord can use us in His service and whether the Lord will be able to hear and answer our prayers.

When our sincere and heartfelt wish is for the Lord to be glorified and for ourselves to do the exact will of the Lord, the Lord will be able to listen to our prayers and answer them. Contrarily, if we unwisely choose to walk on our own path and pray for our own personal desires, the Lord can neither hear such prayers nor answer them. It is because the best thing that the Lord wants is for us to be "transformed into the image of Himself."

Then, what does it take for the Christ to be formed within us? Firstly, it is to go through many trials. Secondly, we need to wait patiently. And thirdly, it is to look for things that cannot be seen by eyes.

Jesus gave up His own life on the Cross for our sake after going through unimaginable ordeals and sufferings. Although Jesus died as one tiny seed, through His death, the Lord bore abundant fruit. Abundant fruit refers to churches as Jesus' body as well as all those brothers and sisters who were saved by the grace of the Lord. Throughout the 2000 years since the crucifixion and His death at the Calvary, this 'seed' has continued to grow.

However, the time of harvest is approaching now. It takes drought for the fruit to ripen. It is right before the time of harvest that the drought needs to become most severe. In our spiritual growth, 'drought' represents the sufferings and trials which are indispensable for our growth. It is at the time of such trials that we should set our mind to waiting for the Lord and remembering that the time of His Second Coming is approaching. Trials are the greatest blessing for all believers because it is through trials that we are given a chance to understand the Lord Jesus better.

Let us read the latter part of chapter 4, verse 17 of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. In this one short sentence, the secret of spiritual growth to the believers of those days is clearly explained, isn't it?

This light, temporary nature of our suffering is producing for us an everlasting weight of glory, far beyond any comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

As we all know, Paul had to go through so many unbearable ordeals. But, in this verse, Paul expressed all his ordeals "light nature of our suffering." This is telling us that, no matter how hard the ordeals we are going through are, they are of no significance as compared with the glory to come in the future. Now, to whom is "an everlasting weight of glory" mentioned in this verse referred?

The answer can be found in the verse 18. It is prepared for no one but us, who "do not look for things that can be seen but for things that cannot be seen."

....we do not look for things that can be seen but for things that cannot be seen. For things that can be seen are temporary, but things that cannot be seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18)

Things that can be seen refers to the weaknesses and shortcomings of ourselves, our unsaved family members in front of our eyes and our friends who still deny the Lord. Instead of becoming preoccupied with them, the Bible is encouraging us to look for things that cannot be seen. Abraham, who is called the father of faith, was a man who truly walked throughout his life looking for things that could not be seen. He was mentioned in these verses from the Epistle to the Romans.

Abraham acted in faith when he stood in the presence of God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that don't yet exist. Hoping in spite of hopeless circumstances, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," just as he had been told: "This is how many descendants you will have." (Romans 4:17-18)

This is a truly remarkable promise of God. It is explained in the previous verse, verse 16, "therefore, the promise (...that he would inherit the world...) is based on faith, so that it may be a matter of grace and may be guaranteed for all of Abraham's descendants—not only for those who were given the Law, but also for those who share the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all. As it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations.'"

What is it that the Lord is expecting from us? The answer can be found in the Epistle to the Ephesians:

....until all of us are united in the faith and in the full knowledge of God's Son, and until we attain mature adulthood and the full standard of development in the Messiah. (Ephesians 4:13)

....and might present the church to Himself in all its glory, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, but holy and without fault. (Ephesians 5:27)

When this purpose of the Lord is accomplished, at that very moment, all believers will be raised to Heaven while they are alive, leaving all ordeals and trials they have been suffering behind. These often-cited verses from the Scripture should always be kept in our mind.

With a shout of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet, the Lord Himself will come down from Heaven, and the dead who belong to the Messiah will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the

Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Being with the Lord forever; this exactly is our true desire, our joy, and our hope. The heartfelt desire and prayer that all brothers and sisters in early churches shared with each other has been, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). It will be truly a wonderful blessing if this becomes our desperate desire too.