

GROWING IN GRACE

How many of you have been to an amusement park such as Disney World, Opryland, or even Dollywood? There are all kinds of things to see and do in such parks. You pay an entrance fee that gets you inside the gate and then you can enjoy all the features of the park (except the food you eat) for that one price. Can you imagine a person paying his money to get inside and then spends all day sitting or standing around just on the inside the gate? We would think that was such a waste. Just think of all the sights and events the person could have enjoyed. On the other hand, we don't think it particularly strange that a person becomes a new Christian and then doesn't grow in that grace and enjoy all the great and precious promises that God has provided for all those that trust in Jesus. So many Christians never grow much past their salvation experience and are being robbed of the blessings that God intended for His children. The apostle Simon Peter wrote to his fellow Christian urging them to go on beyond the entrance gate to experience the joys and spiritual maturity that were purchased for them when they were saved.

II PETER 1:1-2 Peter identifies himself with his given name (Simon) and by the nickname that Jesus gave him (Peter). Jesus may have seen in Simon some strength of character that lead Him to the nickname of Peter which means "rock" in the Greek. Whatever that quality was, when it was combined with the power of the Holy Spirit that Peter received on the Day of Pentecost, it made him an effective leader of the early church. When Peter wrote this letter, he was likely in Rome and was recognized as the leader of the church. He did not let that position change the humility that is required of a truly great leader as we see him further identifying himself as a servant or bondsman of Jesus Christ. He was first a servant and then an apostle. The order is important in that having the attitude of servanthood enable a person to carry out the functions of the job he has to do.

Peter's letter was going to what we would call Christians. The phrase that Peter used could be a definition of a Christian: a person who has obtained faith in the righteousness of God and who has responded in faith to the completed work of Jesus Christ (which results in the new birth). We normally think in terms of "having" faith and do not think much about "obtaining" faith. But the faith that we "have" we "received" from God as a gift. We, according to Paul, obtained a "measure of faith." Peter referred to this faith as precious faith meaning that it is of great value and is not something to be wasted by neglecting to grow in grace by building up our capacity for faith. The result of such growth will be that we will be able to participate in the free gifts (grace) of God and that as we come to know God more and more through Jesus we will have greater inward peace because we are trusting God and relying on His promises rather than reacting to the circumstances around us.

II PETER 1:3-4 It helps us to realize that we are dealing with God Who is all powerful as He demonstrated in the creation and as He demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus from death. His power is not of earthly origin but is divine and by that power He has provide everything that we need for life and godliness (or a godlike life). Satan's temptation in the Garden of Eden was that man could become like God in knowledge by disobeying God. The truth of matter is that we become like God in character (holiness, righteousness) by obedience to Him and His word and thus become eligible to participate in His knowledge and power. Some groups of that day (the Gnostics) made claims of having special knowledge that allowed them to progress spiritually. There are such groups today that make the same error. We are given all the knowledge we need in Jesus Christ to be transformed and grow in the character of God and "be partakers of the divine nature." The other choice what we have is to continue in the way of the natural world and experience degradation and corruption. There is

no neutrality. We are either growing or degrading.

II PETER 1:5-7 Even though our faith is key in our Christian experience, for by it we enter into our new life in Christ, it is not the only virtue that God has provided for us. If we do not take some initiative for growth then we will be as the person that buys a ticket to the amusement park and then doesn't take the initiative to go to the other areas to enjoy them. Peter says that we should give "all diligence" to the opportunities at hand. Faith is the starting point and it is by faith that we participate in all the rest of God's promises. We are to add to that faith, virtue or worthiness - strength of mind and body. We might use a term such as "reliability" to capture the same meaning. Peter is saying that it is important that God, as well as people, can count on you. That is a Godlike quality. Above all, we know that we can count on God. The next thing we need to add is knowledge. I believe that every Christian has access to revelation knowledge that come to us from God. This is a knowing beyond understand. It is a knowing that is alignment with the word of God. It is our responsibility to seek after such knowledge and to be sensitive to it as God reveals it to us. It is a matter of competency in being a Christian. Jesus (when He was 12 years old) told Mary that had to be "about His Father's business." We would not think very highly of a person that was in business and did not anything about what he was selling or a physician that didn't know anything about medicine. We would think that they were incompetent.

Beyond that, we are to exercise self-control in all that we do. Being well balanced is important for a healthy (both physically and spiritually) life. Without self-control we can let the good keep us away from the better and the better keep us away from the best. We might get side tracked in life if we forget to focus and to continue to press toward the goal. I guess in that way, self-control and perseverance (patience) work together.

Godliness is both an awareness and reverence for God and it is taking on the character and nature of God, incorporating it in our life from the inside out. God, by the Holy Spirit, indwells us and as we surrender more and more of ourselves to Him, His life will be more evident in us. Flowing out of reverence for God and having His life in us, we will find that element of mercy that is characteristic of God working out in our lives toward other people. The final and ultimate character that we can attain to is to be able to walk in Godlike love which loves regardless of the worthiness of the object being loved and loves regardless of the cost.

II PETER 1:8-11 These "things" are what success is all about in the Christian life. These will assure that your life will bear fruit and be pleasing to God. Without growing in grace is like the person that gets into the amusement park and then forgot why he came. It is as if he is blind to what God has for him. It is important that we validate the genuineness of our faith by growth, maturity, and bearing fruit.

II PETER 1:12-14 We do need to be reminded of why we were saved. We need to remind each other and to remind ourselves lest we become side tracked in our Christian walk.