

The Path that Leads to Glory

The General Stages of Normal Christian Growth

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1993, 2008

[update: October 2013]

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“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”

I John 2:12-14

Acknowledgment

The idea of a study of the various stages of the Christian life based on I John 2:12-14 resulted from a discussion with my friend Daniel Regli of Zürich, Switzerland.

Introduction: Growing In Grace

Much has been written, and rightly so, about the nature of saving faith. I have some rather extensive thoughts on this important subject myself. Nevertheless, it is not my intention here to deal particularly with the means by which we come to salvation, but rather with the nature of Christian growth. In other words, we will not be looking so much at what faith *is* as *where it's going*. I will touch on the content of saving faith only incidentally, as it has a bearing on the current subject. I am more interested for the moment in exploring the "phases" through which Christians tend to pass as they discover more and more precisely the exact nature of their final goal, as they understand better and better not only where they are going, but why they are going there. My hope is that in doing so, the teaching of the apostles, and especially of John, can encourage us to move with ever greater determination towards that ultimate, glorious goal.

We can imagine at least five levels of spiritual progression. They are "normal" in the sense that it is to be expected that as we "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"¹ we will progress from one to the other. Though none of us experience these different stages of growing spiritual understanding in exactly the same way, it is basically impossible to "jump over" any of them, nor am I even convinced that would necessarily be a good thing. The earlier stages, though insufficient for truly profiting from the Christian life, nevertheless teach us simple but important truths that, when put into a proper place and perspective by further growth, will actually help us to progress to successive levels. Thus, one should not look down on those who are at these levels, as if they were living an "inferior brand" of Christianity. Nevertheless, it is a very serious problem if one stays too long at any one of these levels.

It is also in the very nature of these various levels that one will often tend to think, at any given level, that one has attained "spiritual maturity". Especially if one has never been truly confronted with the fact that there is more to knowing God than that, that God's grace can take us even further. That is true even of the "fifth level". I am convinced that there are levels of grace far beyond the fifth level. I cannot understand them, am not really even aware of their existence (except as a kind of intellectual knowledge that "they must be there", without really knowing anything about their nature), because I have not gone that far. Perhaps someone who has gone much further with Christ than I have can "supplement" this work by describing where the path leads from here; perhaps at some later date I can do so myself.

Perhaps not. And perhaps that isn't really necessary, for in a sense, we *know* where "the path leads from here." It leads to God Himself, as Jesus has said so clearly: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes *to the Father* but through Me"². The path leads to the day that we will "stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,"³ and infinitely far beyond that: into joy and glory that we cannot imagine at present, because fallen man has only the vaguest notion of what true joy might be. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is."⁴ "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him."⁵

So let us not be overly concerned with "getting to the highest level" as quickly as we can. There is too great a chance that what would motivate us in that desire would be nothing more than sinful pride, the desire to be "the best," the "most spiritual." And that very pride will prevent us from advancing. Let us learn in general where the path leads, lest we be too quick to think we have attained "all that God has for us," and settle down too firmly and too comfortably where we are. But let us also, at the same time, concern ourselves primarily with moving ahead, not with how far we have gotten. A growing child will not grow faster for wishing he were older; he will only deprive himself of the joys of his childhood, a childhood that will never be renewed. Let us enjoy the relationship that we have with God at any given point, and then move on further as He gives us more grace. *That* is the path of glory.

How It All Begins: The Father Reaches Out to Us

The path does not actually start out at the new birth. It merely becomes visible and personal at that point. There is a great deal of insight to be gained here from the illustration of physical birth. A child does not begin to exist when he is born; the process has simply reached the point where the baby can live outside its mother. Without pushing the analogy too far (for there *are* important differences), there are long periods of growth and development before the new birth, during which we are already learning more and more of God's grace.

This is all necessary in order to begin spiritual life in a healthy way. Just as a baby born too early will experience difficulties, so a "new birth" precipitated before its time can cause problems. Fatal ones in some cases. A premature birth makes for a baby that does not yet have the capacities it needs to live properly on its own, and needs excessive care to survive. (Of

1 II Peter 3:18. All direct Scripture quotes are from the New American Standard Bible, copyright The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973. Reference is sometimes made to Scripture passages without quoting them directly, in which case the terms used may not be precisely the same as those in NASB, and the notes instruct the reader to see the passage in question ("cf."), rather than referring to it directly.

2 John 14:6 (emphasis added)

3 Jude 1:24

4 I John 3:2

5 I Corinthians 2:9

course, any baby needs a great deal of care as it grows through its first months and years, and that is true spiritually as well. But I am talking here about care that is greater than what should normally be necessary.) In the same way, a person pushed to “make a decision for Christ” before understanding enough of God’s grace and God’s intentions for him to really commit himself to the “path of glory” will falter terribly for a long time, before coming to the balance that he should have had already at the beginning of his Christian life.

And if a birth is provoked even earlier, the result is not a premature baby, but a miscarriage. A dead baby. Such a baby will not merely have difficulty growing; it will never grow at all. It has the form (though stunted) of a baby, but it has no life in it.

The same is true of the spiritual process. Decisions made with insufficient knowledge of what God wants for us will make for difficult growth, but decisions made on the basis of even less understanding than that are little better than spiritual miscarriages. They result in people who are still as spiritually dead as they ever were, who have not the slightest clue about what God really wants to do in their lives. To thoroughly mix our metaphors (and split our infinitives!), one pastor has referred to such people as being “vaccinated” against Christianity. Having been exposed to a weak and harmless (in terms of what it does to sin and Satan’s kingdom) variety of Christianity, they are relatively immune to letting themselves ever be touched by the true message of God. They don’t know that what they experienced was a weak imitation, a sham and a fraud that shouldn’t ever have existed.

The problems we will look at shortly, of those who do not advance properly with God, should not be confused with these “spiritual miscarriages.” Here, the problem is not merely stunted growth due to an incomplete understanding of the path of grace. These may be people who have had a sincere experience with God, people in whose hearts God has worked, but despite all that they never got as far as the new birth. Like the church in Sardis, they have a name that they are alive, but they are dead⁶. These are people who know *only* the desire for some secondary aspect of religion, and who have never actually chosen to walk the path that leads to glory. It is not merely that they are having difficulties in drawing closer to God, but that they are not even *seeking* to draw closer to Him. He is not their goal. A “decision” was prompted on the basis of the barest minimum of knowledge about some part of Christianity, and they have gotten into a dead religion, instead of seeking to know a living Lord.

Those whose experience with Christianity is of this nature correspond to the seed that fell on rocky places, in Jesus’ parable of the sower⁷. They sincerely accepted what they thought was the Christian message, but not the “root” of that message, the driving desire for fellowship with God Himself. Their primary concern was with eliminating the difficulties of this life (a problem which, incidentally, the gospel never promises to resolve entirely). When faced with the inevitable reality of life in a fallen world, they turn away, convinced that Christianity “doesn’t work.”

None of this should be taken in any way as an encouragement to put off making a decision to walk with God. “I’ll get at it when I’m ready” will never help anyone to advance spiritually. Rather, concern lest a decision be “premature” should cause those who are seeking to make every attempt to grasp, correctly, what God wants to give us. And as soon as that is understood, to the degree that such understanding is reasonable in someone who is just discovering all this, it is appropriate to take the step of choosing to walk with God. The Bible still says, as clearly as ever, “Behold, *now* is ‘the acceptable time,’ *now* is ‘the day of salvation’”⁸.

Coming back to our comparison between the beginnings of spiritual life and the beginnings of physical life, the birth of a child can in fact be traced back even further than conception, to the love between its parents which planned and began the process before the baby even existed. Again without pushing the analogy too far, our salvation began before the world was made, when God foreknew us, and loved us, and created the world, so that we might exist. He prepared it even further when He became a man, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to die for sins we hadn’t yet committed, and when He rose in glory to the “newness of life”⁹ that He dearly desires for each of us. And even in our personal lives, God was at work long before we knew it, before we even cared, calling us to Himself, preparing us for spiritual life, though we hadn’t the slightest idea, at the first, of what He wanted to do with us.

None of that was our responsibility, though. It was all pure grace, pure sovereign, divine action, motivated by the perfect love of a perfect Father, planned by His infinite wisdom, and brought about by His almighty power. He took the initiative for our salvation, not we. He reached out, and down, in love, taking not only the first step, but the first thousand steps, the first million steps, or more, to come to us, who were not yet ready or willing to come to Him.

But there are limits to the similarity between human birth and the new birth. For a baby need never “choose” to be born; he is a passive character in the process from one end to the other, carried along by a current of which he knows nothing, a current with which he may not even agree. Indeed, it is entirely possible that unborn babies, knowing nothing of how good life is and aware only of the fact that “birth” is the end of their existence as they have known it up until then, wouldn’t choose to be born at all, if it depended on them. But nobody consults them about the process.

Spiritual birth, however, involves an important difference: At some point, despite God’s foreknowledge and sovereign intervention and almighty power, we nevertheless have to agree. There is a choice that must be made, and though the human will could never make that choice on its own, yet it must *participate* in that choice. God influences and encourages us in our decision, reaching out to us in love at every step. But He will not – must not – violate the freedom of the human will so much

6 cf. Revelation 3:1

7 cf. Matthew 13:3-8 and 18-23

8 II Corinthians 6:2 (emphasis added)

9 Romans 6:4

that He makes the decision for us, else He has not produced children who love Him, but only robots who are properly programmed. One of the greatest mysteries of theology is that divine omnipotence cannot do for us what we – frail, finite, sinful human creatures that we are – must do ourselves, and that because of the very nature of life, because of the fact that we are made in God's image,¹⁰ truly able to choose, to participate in our own destiny by active, conscious choices of the will.

And when, after all the preparations, from eternity past, through the Cross and the Resurrection, and down to God's actions in our lives, we finally come to that decision, that choice that He will be our Father, as He intended for all mankind when He created us, then the path of glory finally becomes visible, and represents a specific, personal choice for each one of us. We are consciously and actively committed to following it. The "preliminaries" are concluded, and we can truly begin to discover God.

It is important to understand that the path does not end there; it begins there, in its personal form at least. The theology that teaches that conversion is the goal does so at the expense of most of the message of the Bible, since the Bible has much, much more to say about how to live the Christian life, and where we are going as believers, than it does about how to become a Christian in the first place. It is the general direction of that path that we want to explore here, as the growing believer discovers more and more of who God is.

Phase One: Discovering the Father

The first part of that path corresponds to what the apostle John calls "children" or "little children."¹¹ He mentions in these lines two different things which characterize spiritual children: "Your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" and "you know the Father."¹²

Most believers start out on the path that leads to glory by discovering the Father the way a little child discovers his father: He is first and foremost a provider. He goes to work, he earns money, he buys you things. "Daddy, can I have a nickel?" (I suppose in our day that has become, "Daddy, can I have a dollar?")

What God provides, first of all, is forgiveness: "Your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." Most Christians, even those who are truly born again, understand little more than this at first. Nor do they need to understand more, in the early days of their walk with God. John saw that clearly in the first century, and it is still very much true today. The young convert knows next to nothing of his responsibilities, but is concerned only with what God has given him: He is forgiven, he is a member of the family.

And in his discovery of God as a provider, he will figure out very quickly that God gives us more than just spiritual life. God in fact gives us innumerable blessings. More than we dare to ask for, more than we deserve or even really need, simply because our Father is an infinitely rich God of love, who delights in giving us things.

Thus, this level of spiritual progression is characterized by preoccupation with what a Christian *receives* from God. That does not go far towards spiritual maturity, but we should not scorn it. Too many sincere believers, thinking themselves more "spiritual" by their deprivations, look down on those who regularly ask God for things as spiritual "beggars." They pretend that intercession is more lofty a prayer than requests, that praise is more lofty still, that adoration is the loftiest level of all. And perhaps that is partially true; as we grow, we *will* learn to do more than just ask for things. But to disdain those who ask God for what they desire is to disdain the Word of God, by criticizing those who obey it. For it is God Himself who invites us, over and over again, to ask for what we want¹³. As a loving, wise father, if what we ask for is not what is best for us, He will not give it to us. That, too, is His love. But He nevertheless invites us to ask, freely and without complexes. It is too simple to think we need not ask, because He knows what we need. That is given as a reason not to *worry* about these things¹⁴, but not as a reason to refrain from *asking* for them, for in asking God even for the simplest things, we are also constantly reminding ourselves that we are dependent on Him for the things that we might otherwise think we can and do provide for ourselves. "Give us this day our daily bread" is as much a part of prayer as "Hallowed be Thy name" and "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory."¹⁵

I am a father myself, and I know that in their earliest days, my children were hardly aware of me. Then they began to understand who Daddy was: Daddy is the one who fixes the broken toys, who gives them things, who plays with them because they want me to play with them. They are fast passing out of that stage even now, and discovering Daddy as one who can teach them and guide them and protect them. And in years to come they will discover Daddy in other ways as well. Nevertheless, I was not in the least offended when, as little children, they knew me basically as a provider. They acted like little children because they *were* little children. They were *my* little children. They will never be little children again. I will enjoy thoroughly the adults they come to be, but I will never regret having known them as infants. I did not think of them as "immature beggars;" I enjoyed the fact that they knew I had something to give them: love, manifested (as far as they could know at that point) by the things I could do for them.

10 cf. Genesis 1:27

11 I John 2:12-13

12 *ibid*

13 cf. Matthew 7:11, John 16:24, Philippians 4:6, I John 5:14-15, *et al*

14 cf. Matthew 6:25-34, especially verses 31 & 32

15 Matthew 6:9-13

This is spiritual infancy. We do a great disservice not only to new-born children of God but to God Himself by disdaining infancy. Especially as there is nothing *wrong* with asking God for things. Sometimes we ask wrongly¹⁶, but that does not mean that we should not ask at all. God is discovered first of all as a provider, someone who gives us good gifts. And though He is much, much more than that, He *is* that. And He will always be. My children will come to the point where they no longer need me to provide for them. Indeed, the day will come when they must get along without me completely because I am almost certain to die before they do. There, again, we discover the limits of our illustration, for as spiritual children, we will never, never – not even in eternity – come to the point where we no longer need our Father to provide for us. We were created from the start to be dependent on God, to lean on Him and count on Him for our needs and our joys, and we will always do so.

Nevertheless, there are those who have made a whole theology out of “receiving,” as if God were nothing *more* than a provider. They compare themselves with other believers, to see how far they have “progressed,” by what they have received. “I have received more than you; I am therefore more spiritual than you.” They work out great explanations of how we must pray, how we must act, how we must believe, in order to receive from God what we think we want. For them, the whole of the Christian life consists of living, as thoroughly and as profitably as possible, what should have been only the first level.

Some do this on a purely material level: God must give us health, wealth, and happiness. He must heal us of all our sicknesses, take care of all our problems, provide us with a big car, a nice house, beautiful children, and a good job. If He doesn't, they reason, then we are at fault, because we have not come to Him right. How would God, who is all-powerful and to whom belong all the riches of the world, ever let His children live in misery? They fail completely to understand that God might have *other* riches in mind for us, and that coming to *those* riches might sometimes mean lacking certain things on a purely material level.

Other people go beyond that, and are more concerned with what God gives us on a “spiritual” level. They measure their progression by the spiritual gifts they have received, the revelations and visions and supernatural experiences. But these things, though they have their place just as do the material blessings that God gives us (when they are appropriate), are still in the domain of what we have received from God. They are still the level of spiritual infancy, an infancy that is wonderful to see in infants, but that becomes distinctly disappointing when we see Christians who, after five, ten, twenty years of knowing God, continue to live as infants, impressed with glittering experiences and knowing God only as someone who gives them what they want.

There are many, as well, who think they have avoided these traps by contenting themselves with “salvation.” They define salvation as forgiveness and the promise of heaven, and reason that if God has given us such a great gift, we need not seek more. They quote passages such as “in Him you have been made complete.”¹⁷ not in the (correct) sense that we need not seek elsewhere for blessings, but in the sense that if we have forgiveness, we have all that counts, all we need, all that God has for us; it is not our place to seek “something more.” This, too, sounds so spiritual, but it is another way of contenting oneself with the first level, the maturity of the little child whose sins are forgiven but who knows nothing more of God than that.

It is important to maintain an appropriate balance on this first level: We can and should rejoice in what God gives us. We must not disdain the fact that God is a provider, and that we are not only allowed but invited to come to Him for all our needs and desires (while recognizing His right and responsibility to refuse those desires when they are not, after all, what is best for us). But at the same time we must be constantly aware that this is where the discovery of God starts, not where it ends. We should not feel guilty for knowing God as a provider, for He is that. But we are also eager to discover Him, as we grow in grace, as much more than a provider.

Phase Two: Obeying the Father

There is much, much more, because God is much, much more. More than we can ever fully grasp, though we spend all eternity in His presence. But we can already grasp a part of it, as we take our first, hesitating steps in grace on the path that leads to His glory.

John spoke not only of “little children” but of “young men.” This is spiritual adolescence. It is not exactly a distinct stage from infancy. At what point does a child become a young man or woman? At no “point,” really, but progressively, over the years. And so it is with spiritual growth. Little by little, we discover more of God, more of what He can and must do for us, and be for us, and spiritual infancy is left behind. In most cases, we do not just decide some day, “I think that today I will no longer be a baby, but a growing youth.” We are already well along that path by the time we even realize it.

I say all that lest we be tempted to cut up spiritual growth too artificially into small, water-tight “compartments,” thinking that we must abandon one in order to move into the next. In infancy we learn to walk and talk, but we do not forget those things as we grow. We merely learn to do *more* than just walk and talk. The creeping old age that deprives us of the ability to do those simple things we learned in infancy is a degeneration that God never intended for man, the result of the process of sin and death in this world. It should not have its counterpart in spiritual life. We discover more of God as we grow in Him, but we should never leave behind those things we discovered earlier. As God becomes *more* than a provider, we should not think He is *no longer* a provider. We still must ask him, humbly, as little children, to provide us each day with our daily bread. Nevertheless, we will go further in our walk with Him.

16 cf. James 4:3

17 Colossians 2:10

What does John say about these young men? He writes to them, "You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."¹⁸ All of that definitely goes beyond spiritual infancy. The growing believer is becoming stronger, learning more, finding spiritual victory.

This phase of growth will not be without its problems. Few stages of the Christian life are marked as much by struggles with pride as this first serious step beyond infancy. "The glory of young men is their strength,"¹⁹ and the glory of a spiritual youth is his spiritual strength. Spiritual adolescence, like its physical counterpart, is often a difficult time, as much for the growing youth as for those around him. Nevertheless, it is an important time, and beautiful in its own way. Little by little, the boy is becoming a man, the girl is becoming a woman. Adolescents are not yet adults, but they would never become adults without the strength and knowledge and skills acquired during these years.

It is very important to note carefully what John says about these "strong" believers: We do not become strong, spiritually, simply with the passing of years, or because we are somehow "better" than when we were young converts, but because "the word of God dwells in us." Spiritual strength comes, not from experiences and techniques for receiving things from God, as those who are stuck in spiritual infancy would have us believe, but from learning the full counsel of God, from understanding His Word. It is this, and this alone, that will enable us to overcome the evil one, escape the traps of sin in our lives. Spiritual victory does not come from a supernatural experience, but from the drudgery of sitting down with the Bible, alone, day after day, year after year, not just for a "quiet time," but for *study*. "A short meditation" is not at all the same thing as "meditating the Word of God."²⁰ You get out your paper and pencil, and you *work*.

We have all learned from years in school that education is more than just listening to the teacher talk. In the same way, spiritual education is more than just listening to the divine Teacher talk to us, as surprising as that may be to some. Surely, we must listen to Him, but just as surely, He gives us homework to do, lessons to be worked, spelling words to memorize, multiplication tables to learn, techniques to be mastered. Too many disciples never get far toward the strength that comes from the Word of God dwelling in us, because they aren't willing to do the homework. They dress up their spiritual laziness in fancy terms about "letting the Holy Spirit speak to them," and forget that Jesus not only talked to His disciples, He also sent them out two by two to practice what they had learned, make their mistakes, come back to Him with their wrong impressions, and learn the next lesson²¹.

We spend anywhere from ten to twenty years in schools before we are really ready to exercise some profession that will serve us for forty or fifty years at most. And in these days of declining world economy, we are discovering that those who were the least diligent in their studies have the hardest time in surviving and providing for themselves and their families. We must work if we would master the skills that will serve us for such a few short years.

Why should we be less diligent in learning the skills that will guide us through all eternity? Is it more important to learn to be a doctor, or lawyer, or engineer, than to learn to be a child of the King of kings and Lord of lords? John, who learned at the Master's feet, gave us the right direction nearly two thousand years ago: If you would become strong, then the Word of God must dwell in you. Don't seek for "experiences" or "shortcuts." *Learn the Word!* Not just a verse here and a passage there, but the whole thing, book by book, in all its glorious but tiring detail. Then, and only then, will you "overcome the evil one."

I see this period of spiritual adolescence as divided into two distinguishable stages, just as the characteristics of a child of ten are not those of a teenager at eighteen. Both have progressed beyond infancy; neither has yet attained full maturity. But there are differences, even so.

Spiritual infancy is devoid of responsibility. We are merely receiving, thankful for what we receive, but without the slightest glimpse of what it implies in our lives. But sooner or later we begin to learn responsibility. Not in the sense that we are responsible for producing our spiritual maturity, but in the sense that we are called on to act responsibly, as a result of the maturity that God is producing in us.

The first phase beyond infancy is thus characterized by learning to do what we ought to do. This is beyond any doubt a part of "overcoming the evil one." As you study the Word, you will inevitably be confronted with things that refer to what you ought to do and ought not to do. It is fashionable just now in many churches to disdain "do's and don't's," and we will in fact discover, as we grow in grace, that walking with God is much, much more than that. Nevertheless, it *is* that, among other things.

Those who are concerned only with what they can receive from God never get this far. Whether it is because they are primarily concerned with their personal experiences and blessings, or because they have reduced all of salvation to the receiving of forgiveness and promise of heaven, they think that the path to God does not necessarily have to go through the learning of obedience. They may come to such a conclusion from their own reasonings; they will not learn it from the Word of God.

One discovers from God's Word that our behavior does not produce our salvation, does not earn it for us, does not contribute to it, and does not maintain it, in any way. But one does *not* discover that the child of God is liberated from the requirement of a life conformed to the Word of God. "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, *is a liar*, and the truth is not in him."²² This is not the place to develop the precise theology of this apparent

18 1 John 2:14

19 Proverbs 20:29

20 cf. Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, Psalm 119:148 *et al*

21 Luke 10:1-20 shows the various stages of this process.

22 1 John 2:4 (emphasis added)

contradiction, but the principle is there in the Bible. Though we start out in the Christian life being primarily concerned with what we *receive* from God, we soon come to the point of discovering what we must *do*.

God teaches us, as we discover His Word, not only what to do (and what not to do), but why to do it. His teachings are not mere legalistic requirements; they are the natural expression of the choice to grow in grace that has motivated us since we took our first stumbling steps on the path that leads to glory. We do not need to go through a legalistic stage in learning to do what God wants us to do.

I would like to take a moment, however, to say that many if not most Christians *do* go through a legalistic stage as they progress along the path of God's grace. It is not a truly "normal" stage, in that a proper understanding of where we are going, from the very start, would have prevented it. (An understanding that normally would have been there, I would dare to add, if the preparation for the spiritual life, before the new birth, had been done properly, if a decision had not been precipitated as soon as a person got as far as understanding sin and forgiveness.) But the deficient teaching of the gospel today is such that most of us go through a phase of legalism at one point or another (except those who never get beyond infancy, the mere desire to "receive"). We see God's commandments as "requirements," something the Christian is required to *do*. "You owe God that much, at least," goes the reasoning.

And we do, of course. We owe Him that and much, much more. The error is in thinking that our behavior contributes in the least extent to paying that debt. God requires perfection, because He is perfect in His holiness. My behavior, even as a Christian, is not perfect. It may be sincere, it may be much, much better than my behavior in earlier years, but it is not enough that God can be satisfied with it. He continues, all along, to accept me by His grace, and on the basis of the death of Christ, rather than on the basis of my works.

If I want to talk about what I "owe" God, I owe Him perfect submission and perfect thankfulness, not the faltering, imperfect obedience that I am able to provide. I can never give Him what I owe Him, nor does He expect me to; that is why it is the death of Christ, and not my works, that provides my salvation. Thus, the kind of obedience that I *can* provide, as I learn to do (imperfectly) what the Bible teaches, has nothing whatsoever to do with what I owe Him. I am in His debt, and will always be, infinitely so. That is grace.

If I understand that, from the start, if that is explained as a part of the presentation of the gospel message (and it *is* a part of the message, though it is too often excluded today), then I will never go through the legalistic stage. Yet most of us do. I did myself, and it was not spiritual death for me. It merely prevented me, for a time, from enjoying the fullness of the riches of God's grace in that area. It is not the end of the world, or of our spiritual lives, as long as we get over it. As we continue further on the path of glory, we can leave the legalism behind.

But we will never leave the behavior behind. As we learn from God's Word that the Christian can and must live a certain way, though we do it from the best possible motives of desiring only to profit from our fellowship with God, without the slightest idea of somehow contributing to our justification by our works, yet we will do it. The Bible never contemplates anything else. Jesus and all the apostles taught this message in very clear terms. It is faith that saves, by God's grace²³, but the faith that saves is a commitment to a life with God, a life that will, among other things, include a certain way of behaving²⁴.

This stage, too, can become a trap, if one thinks of it as the final goal. The trap of infancy was in thinking that the joys of infancy (receiving something from God) was all there is to the Christian life. The trap of spiritual childhood consists of thinking that the characteristic of childhood (doing what God has called us to do) is the pinnacle of Christian maturity. We can think all too easily that when we come to do what we ought to do, we have done all that needs to be done: We have "arrived." We do not always understand the principle that even when we have done all we ought to do, we are still unprofitable servants²⁵. Our value to God is not in what we do for Him, but in His love for us. If we fail to understand that, we fall into the trap of legalism, and stay there, dreary year after dreary year.

This is where "do's and don't's" become a problem: when we think that is the whole point of the Christian life. There are some who teach that the essence of salvation is receiving forgiveness and the promise of heaven, merely on the basis of the doctrines we believe. They are at best spiritual infants (if they are indeed even alive spiritually), though they may have doctorates in theology, or be pastors of immense churches. They have never gotten beyond what God can and wants to give us. But there are others who teach that the essence of salvation is in a transformed life, a life that does what God wants us to do. These dear brothers are spiritual children, though *they*, too, may have their impressive "qualifications."

As my children grow, they learn that Daddy does not just give things to them. He expects them also to do certain things. He even punishes them if they don't, so much is he convinced that they really ought to do those things. That, too, is a part of growth. Nor do I intend for them, as they grow, to stop behaving the way I have trained them, in their childhood, to behave.

Nevertheless, how deficient would be their knowledge of me if that was all I was to them, if they thought that was all I wanted for them, if I was nothing more than "the one who makes the rules." They would be little better than those who think that a father is merely a provider. But they will pass beyond this stage, and discover much, much more.

Again, I do not disdain them for it, for this too is appropriate in its time. My heart is touched as I see them trying to "please" me, trying sincerely to do what is right, because it makes Mother and Daddy happy. Bless their little hearts, they do not

23 cf. Ephesians 2:8-9

24 cf. Ephesians 2:10 – the continuation of the thought of the preceding verses

25 cf. Luke 17:10

even do it simply to avoid spankings (at least not always). They are truly happy to obey; they think that is such a nice thing they are doing for their Daddy, and since they love me, they want to do what makes me happy.

Though they do not know it, I do *not* find my joy simply in their doing what they ought to do, and I do *not* require this behavior of them primarily for me. It is not for *my* good that I require it, but for *their* good. They are not offering a service to *me* in learning to obey, though they think they are, but to themselves. They do not understand that at present, and I do not expect them to understand it.

Nevertheless, I hope that when they are twenty years old they will not continue to think that the whole point was to keep Daddy from punishing them. In just that way, we must not look down on those in spiritual childhood who think they are really “doing something for God” when they do those things that He instructs us to do for *our* benefit. This mistaken idea may be an entirely appropriate expression of a simple but sincere love for God, a degree of love that is entirely normal at a particular stage of spiritual growth. But neither must we encourage those who never get beyond that, those who after years of walking with God are still thinking that way, teaching it in their classrooms or preaching it from their pulpits. Childish behavior is touching, from children, for as I have said, they will never be children again. But it is much less amusing from those who should have learned long ago that doing what God wants us to do is by no means the whole point.

Phase Three: Becoming Like the Father

There is thus another level to spiritual adolescence, the third major step on the path of grace, that is also a part of the general phase that John calls “young men.” This new dimension of spiritual growth comes when we go beyond what we *do*, and learn also to *be* what we ought to *be*. The grace of God does not merely transform our behavior, it transforms our hearts, our essential character. We learn behavior that is not accomplished for behavior’s sake, but that flows from a new heart. And though it is possible, on our own, to do what we think God wants us to do, that is not in itself a spiritual transformation. (How many people, sincerely committed to some sect devoid of spiritual life, have learned behavior that is to a large degree in accordance with what the Bible teaches?) The transformation of the heart that marks this level of spiritual maturity, however, does not and cannot come from us. It is God’s work: “By the grace of God I am what I am,”²⁶ even though “I labored even more than all of them.”²⁷ The labor did not produce the transformation; the grace did.

This helps us avoid the trap of the Pharisee, proud of his godly behavior: “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.”²⁸ Too many Christians, stuck for years in the legalism of spiritual childhood when their experience of God should have allowed them long since to attain to a greater knowledge of God, talk like that. They are proud of their behavior, and look down in scorn at those whose behavior does not measure up.

Nor are they entirely wrong in their evaluation of their lives. The life-style of the Pharisee in Jesus’ illustration *was* much more impressive, much more conformed to the behavior taught in God’s Word, than the life-style of the filthy tax-gatherer who, in his guilt and dismay, could only cry out, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”²⁹ He didn’t deserve that mercy, and he knew it, but he received it anyway, and thus began to follow the path that leads to glory and great joy. He, too, will have many things to learn – and many traps to avoid – as he goes along. He may even, for a while, go through a “Pharisee” stage himself. It has happened to more than one. But it is tragic when someone just stays there, year after year basing their hope of eternal joy on their good behavior.

There are very subtle ways of doing this. “There, but for the grace of God, go I,” though it acknowledges a dependence on God’s grace, may still in some cases be just another way of saying, “Thank you God that You made me better than that other, who is not as good as I am.” The problem is still the same: Such a person is still stuck at the level of doing what he ought to do, and being proud of himself for it.

Doing what God instructs us to do is part of “overcoming the evil one” by the strength that comes from the Word of God dwelling in us. But so is overcoming the pride that is based on our doing. Thus, as we grow even further in grace, as we learn even more from the Word, we discover that *being* is more important than *doing*. Not in the sense that we will choose between them, because *being* what God wants us to *be* can only result in *doing* what He wants us to *do*. But we will learn that it is the being that is important, not the doing. The doing is not an end in itself; what we *do* should flow from what we *are*.

At this point, God is more than a provider, more than a lawgiver. He is also instructor and creator and counselor and guide, making us into something we have never been, something much greater. And that process will continue on into eternity. What John said had not yet appeared was not just what God will *give* us, not just what we will *do* in terms of truly transformed behavior, but “what we shall *be*.”³⁰

Nevertheless, though we cannot yet grasp it, we know that “we shall be like Him.”³¹ We will be “conformed to the image

26 I Corinthians 15:10

27 *ibid*

28 Luke 18:11-12. The entire narrative to which reference is made covers verses 9 to 14.

29 Luke 18:13

30 I John 3:2 (emphasis added)

31 *ibid*

of His Son.³² Our salvation will do much more for us than transform our behavior, and the essence of the gospel is *not* that change in life-style. Our salvation will transform our very beings, and make us fit to live in the glory that is to come.

Phase Four: Really Knowing the Father

Just as a youth, in his teen-age years, learns those habits and attitudes that prepare him for adulthood, so spiritual adolescence prepares us for the next stage. When we have fully grasped that the life of grace is not just in what we do, but much more importantly in what we are, we stand at the very door of spiritual adulthood. Though we have not yet attained it, yet we are finally prepared for it.

Of what does that spiritual adulthood consist? John writes to those he calls “fathers”: “You know Him who has been from the beginning.”³³

Interestingly enough, the stage that lies beyond adolescence in many ways resembles early childhood. One of the characteristics of the spiritual little child is that he knows the Father; the primary characteristic of the spiritual father is that he knows “Him who has been from the beginning.” Both of them, then, amount to knowing God. This is not surprising in a sense, because John expects that in the very presentation of the gospel will be the notion that the goal of it all is knowing God.

Those who are stuck at the level of infancy are preaching a gospel that is primarily oriented towards what we can receive from God: forgiveness, blessings, or spiritual experiences. Thus, their “converts” are “premature babies,” who will struggle for many years, perhaps, before they discover the important truth that the ultimate goal is God Himself, not those things He gives us (even if they are essential things, such as forgiveness and eternal life).

Those who are stuck at the level of later childhood are preaching a gospel that is primarily oriented towards what we should do as Christians: salvation means letting God direct what you do. This varies from extremely legalistic formulations to presentations that are much more subtle, but they all come down to the same thing in the end. Here again, those who are “converted” by such a message are premature spiritual children, who will struggle for years with legalism before they finally discover (if they ever do) that the goal was not a transformed life, but a relationship.

The transformation in behavior, and even the transformation in what we *are*, are secondary side-effects. Not secondary in the sense that they are not essential, but secondary in the sense that they flow from something else, something that is much, much more important: the personal relationship with God.

That is why John characterizes this level as that of spiritual “fathers.” Fathers are those who are ready to beget and raise children. When children, barely beyond puberty, have children themselves (something that happens all too often in the immoral society in which we are living), they do not know how to raise them, how to love them, how to care for them. Spiritually, when someone who has never really gotten beyond the first steps of the Christian life gets into a position of preaching the gospel or pastoring a church, merely because he has been saved for a while, learned the things that Christians do and the way they talk, and gotten the diploma that says he is qualified, the results will be equally disastrous. Such preachers will of course pay lip-service to “knowing the Lord,” to a personal relationship with God. No one who takes the Bible seriously can fail to notice that the Bible teaches that. But they will not grasp, or teach in evangelism, that that personal relationship with God is not just “one aspect” of salvation, it *is* salvation. All the rest flows from it, without exception. When you have learned that, really grasped it in terms of what it implies not only about the means of salvation but about the goal of salvation, then and only then are you ready to assume a position of responsibility as a spiritual father. And the result will be that from the beginning, converts will know that salvation means knowing the Father.

Oh, you can and should share with your friends what God means to you long before that. Let no one think that because he does not have the years of experience that lead us to that point in the path of grace where we really understand the implications of the message, that sharing Christ around us is not for us. Nevertheless, if you are still a child in the faith (which is perfectly normal, in its time, as we have seen, and no reason to be ashamed), or still a youth, let those who respond to your testimony be actually led to Christ by someone who has proven himself in terms of really understanding what it means to know God. Don’t be afraid to tell your friends, “I’m just discovering all this myself, but if you’re really interested, let me introduce you to someone who can really explain it to you.” There is a world of a difference between the faith of a child³⁴ and childish faith³⁵. Those who think they are competent for a position of spiritual responsibility, when they have not yet reached spiritual maturity, will do no service to anyone by preaching a deficient message.

So from the start, the message should be preached by those who know that salvation is more than receiving something from God, more than doing what we ought to do, more even than being what we ought to be. It is knowing God. And thus, spiritual infants will be characterized from their very earliest days by “knowing the Father,” because their spiritual fathers were people who had come to understand that the whole point of salvation is knowing God.

And yet, though spiritual infants know the Father, though they truly have a relationship with Him, they still do not know all that much about Him. As we have seen, they know Him essentially as a provider, who gives them such wonderful blessings.

As the years go by, God will be much, much more to them. Not because He has grown, but because they have grown.

32 Romans 8:29

33 I John 2:13

34 cf. Matthew 18:1-4

35 cf. I Corinthians 14:20

As C. S. Lewis once wrote about our relationship with God, “Every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”³⁶ The more we grow, the more we discover about God. We realize, after the difficult passage through spiritual childhood and adolescence, that salvation is, after all, knowing God, just as we thought it was when we started out. We leave the legalism and spiritual pride behind, and though we continue to do the things we ought to do, though we continue to become what we ought to become, yet we learn that none of that was the point. The point was to know God.

God then becomes more to us than ever before, and yet we have not received anything more than we ever had. It is in this sense that, from the very start, we were complete in Christ³⁷. Not that we understood all we needed to understand, but that we had *Christ*, and we need nothing more.

So we learn more of Him, and what we learn is that He has been that all along. “You know Him who has been from the beginning”. From the beginning of your spiritual life, from the beginning of time, from the beginning of eternity (if that means anything), He has always been what He still is, what we are discovering Him to be. We know much more of His eternal power and love and being. We have a relationship, not merely a religion. We still don’t know all there is to know of God, but we surely know Him much, much better than when it all started out. He is still a provider, still a law-giver, still a counselor and guide, but He becomes, more than ever and more than anything else, a friend.

And that allows us to put all the rest into perspective. He gives us things because He loves us, meaning that He has a relationship with us. He expects us to do things, not as an end in themselves, but in order that we may know Him, and help others to know Him. He transforms us so that we may know Him better, and will finally transform us into something we cannot yet imagine, so that we may know Him perfectly in eternity. All the rest, at every stage of spiritual growth, was simply to permit and enrich the relationship.

We do not despise the early years, when we were so impressed with what He gave us, or the later years, when we were so impressed with what we did for Him. We realize that that was a part of the process of growing up: the earliest stages on the path that leads to glory, but a part of the path, even so.

And in a sense we have never left those things behind. We are still forgiven, we are still receiving blessings from God, we are still learning His Word, we are still doing the things that are consistent with His Word, we are still overcoming the evil one, and becoming what we ought to become. Now, probably more than ever before, in every one of those areas. So we treasure having learned them. We thank God for directing us when we didn’t yet know enough to really understand where we were going. Oh, we may have known it intellectually, especially if it was all properly explained to us from the very beginning, but we didn’t really *know* it. And we are thankful to God for having guided us anyway.

But we enter into a level where we really understand the why’s of all those things, and no longer see them as ends in themselves. The goal is not forgiveness, or heaven, or blessings, or a changed life. The goal is God Himself. Nothing else. Nothing less.

Throughout this growth, a couple of processes have been underway, without our necessarily even realizing it, and by the time we get this far, they have changed us, and our walk with God, in significant ways.

The first one is that we have progressively become less and less centered on ourselves. In the first stage, that was all that mattered. “God gives *me* such wonderful things.” We are receivers, consumers, self-centered, enjoying a salvation that is essentially man-centered.

This is not laudable, but it is normal. If you have raised children, you know what a baby is. A baby does not do anything for you (though you may derive immense joy from him; even so, he is not making the slightest effort to give you that joy). He merely consumes. He eats food and takes your time and uses up your diapers. Who ever criticized a baby for that? (Maybe some do; if so, they have no business being parents. They haven’t a clue what a baby is supposed to be.) That’s the way babies are.

But as a child grows, he begins to be just a little less of a consumer. He begins to participate a bit in things he can do for himself, and later still, in things he can do for others. In the same way, spiritual childhood, the stage where you learn to do what you ought to do, is less man-centered than infancy. The primary criterion is no longer just receiving something from God, but doing something for Him. (Or thinking we are, anyway, even though He is not “served by human hands, as though He needed anything.”³⁸)

Still, this is primarily man-centered, even if somewhat less selfish. Though our preoccupation is with what we do and no longer only with what we receive, it is still what *we* do that is the focus of our attention. Salvation, in the teaching of those who are stuck in spiritual childhood, is primarily a question of yielding to God, of letting Him direct your behavior. The whole point is to change *your* actions, *your* habits, *your* attitudes. The message is thus man-centered after all.

As you learn that salvation is primarily “being” instead of “doing,” this is attenuated even further, but the principle remains very similar. We realize that the goal was not merely to change our actions and habits and attitudes, but we still think it

³⁶ *Prince Caspian – The Return to Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. Copyright 1951 by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York. First Collier Books Edition 1970, page 136:

“‘Aslan’ [the lion, who represents Jesus Christ], said Lucy, ‘you’re bigger.’

“‘That is because you are older, little one,’ answered he.

“‘Not because you are?’

“‘I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.’”

³⁷ cf. Colossians 2:10

³⁸ Acts 17:25

was to change *us*. We are still the focus of salvation.

But when we come to the level of spiritual “fathers,” characterized primarily by knowing God, we see that that was not the point. Salvation originates with God and comes from God, but the whole point is to produce a path that goes the other way. God has come to us, so that we may come to Him. We turn the lens around, as it were, and look through it from the other side. The whole point was to know Him. Salvation is more God-centered than it has ever been. It is not primarily what I receive, nor what I do, nor even what I am, but who God is. My joy is in Him, not in what He gives me, or what He teaches me to do, or what He has made me to be. All of that is only so that I can know Him better.

There is another process that has been underway in these stages, and that is that we are progressively ridding ourselves of a burden. This process, unlike the preceding one, did not start out at the very beginning (unless we were brought to Christ through legalistic teaching that immediately put us into the second, behavior-oriented stage, and held us there). At the very beginning, we enjoyed the life of the little baby: privileges without responsibilities. And it is proper to enjoy that as a baby; never again will you be able to do so.

But as soon as we got beyond infancy, we began to load ourselves down with responsibilities too big for us, in most cases. Legalism is a burden “which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.”³⁹ Once you have studied enough of the Bible to discover all that your heavenly Father wants you to do, in all sincerity you are very likely to try to please Him by doing it just as diligently as you can. Which is normal enough, even admirable. And yet it is also absolutely impossible.

And so we go further, and discover that the goal was not primarily in what we do but in what we are. And that reduces the load a bit, in various ways. But as we go even further, and discover that it is primarily knowing God, that reduces the load even further. The works we do, the person we become, are merely the changes that flow spontaneously from a heart that longs to know God, not something we need to produce ourselves. They will surely be there if the heart really desires God, but they are not ultimately our responsibility. Our responsibility is to know God. The commandments in the Bible are not primarily requirements, but directions, for the heart that really wants to know God, and desires only to understand what that means.

That takes an incredible load off of us, while at the same time preserving us from falling back into the trap of infancy, thinking that the whole point is what we receive, without that implying any change in us. The attitude that motivates spiritual liberty is in some ways superficially similar to the attitude that motivates licentiousness, just as the behavior that flows from spiritual responsibility is in some ways superficially similar to the behavior that flows from legalism. But they are nevertheless not at all the same. Freed from the law, we have only one desire: to know God. And consistency with that desire implies that we draw near to God; there is nothing either complicated or mysterious about that. Thus, our behavior will change. Not because we are seeking to change it (that was legalism), but because we are seeking to know God.

This is the beginning of spiritual maturity. This is the level of spiritual “adults,” those John calls “fathers.” We know God, as He has in fact been all along, and we know that that was the point all along, even though we didn’t fully understand it.

I would like to comment at this point on the fact that Christ is our Lord. I have taught for many years, despite the fact that some do not agree with or approve of the concept, that Christ cannot be our Savior without being our Lord. I am glad that there are those today who are teaching this loudly and publicly, even though I am not sure they always understand that term in precisely the way I do.

What does it mean for Christ to be our Lord? Or, in terms of the stages we have seen, at what point does He become our Lord?

From the very start. And He never ceases to be. A lord is a master, an owner. In that sense he is a provider, for the one who owns a slave must supply all the slave needs to live. He has no other source of goods. Thus, if Christ is our Lord, He is our provider.

A lord is also someone who directs. Thus, when we do the things Christ wants us to do, we are discovering another aspect of His lordship. It would be wrong to think that He is not Lord until we got that far, for that is failing to understand that as Lord He also provides. But it would also be wrong to think that when we do what He wants us to do, we have fully grasped the principle of His lordship, for He is much more than that.

Where Christ as Lord becomes much more than a human master is at the level of making us into something better than we have ever been. The difference is that a slave owner is not primarily motivated by the good of his slaves, while Christ is primarily motivated by our good. Thus, He creates in us a new heart, transforms our very being. That is not something *other* than His lordship; that is a part of the fact that He is Lord.

And as Lord He is also our friend, and thus in knowing Him, we are not concerned with something other than His lordship. In fact, we *must* not think that knowing Him is unrelated to His lordship, or we will not know Him as Lord. We will try to think of Him as a “buddy,” as our “man upstairs.” It is when we know Him as Lord, and the King of glory that He is and always will be, that we truly know *Him*, for that is who He is.

Thus, it would be a terrible mistake to think that Christ’s lordship is related only to the second stage of Christian growth. From the very beginning we know Him as Lord, or we do not know Him at all. But if we think that His Lordship is only in His directing our actions, then we are very likely to get stuck at the level of doing His will, and have a hard time coming to the point of spiritual fathers, when we discover that the whole point was in knowing Him.

Phase Five: Known By the Father

But does the path that leads to glory end there? No it doesn't. John himself was far beyond any of those levels. That was why he could address himself with the same authority to spiritual fathers as to spiritual children. He had progressed even further in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. So what is the next step?

The next step is in discovering that though the goal may be to know God, that is not the essence of our salvation either. For years I spoke so easily and openly and almost flippantly of my relationship with God. "I know God; that's the whole point of salvation." How I rejoiced in knowing God. After years of struggles with legalism and a salvation that was not really satisfying, I was learning that the goal was not there. The goal was in knowing God, and my elation in discovering it was sincere and genuine.

But little by little I came to the realization that, much as I hate to admit it, I *don't* know God. Not really. Not that I was wrong about the goal; the goal of salvation *is* knowing God. But I am not there yet. Not even close.

This is what Paul teaches in Phil. 3:7-14. He explains in very clear terms that what motivates him, what he sees as the ultimate goal, is knowing Christ. Not just receiving something from Him, not just doing something for Him, not just being transformed by Him, not just knowing things about Him, but *knowing Him*. And then he also admits that he hasn't reached that goal yet. And those two points, the fact that the goal is knowing Christ perfectly, and the fact that he is not there yet, define his whole Christian life: He forgets what is behind (the blessings and the victories, and also the legalism and the foolish, immature thinking when he thought he knew it all, both before and after his conversion) and moves toward what lies ahead, the "upward calling," the day when he will be called into the very presence of God, "holy and blameless and beyond reproach."⁴⁰

In fact, as I have come to understand, my knowledge of God is very superficial at present. I have the firstfruits of the Spirit, not the totality of understanding the implications of living in intimate communion with God. I am saved in hope, nothing more⁴¹. The day will come when I have that perfect relationship with God, but what I have now is not nearly as impressive as I thought for many years.

And this takes the two processes mentioned earlier even further. It is less man-centered than ever, and it is less of a burden than ever.

It is less man-centered, because even in thinking that salvation is knowing God, it is still *we* who must know Him. But that is not the basis of salvation. My salvation does not come from my knowledge of God, but from His knowledge of me⁴². I know Him a little, but He knows me perfectly⁴³. And accepts me in love, even though He knows how far short of His perfect standards I fall. He does not need to be impressed with what I do for Him (and I don't see how He could be); that is not the point. He knows me and loves me, and my salvation is based on that and that alone. My behavior is transformed, not as an end in itself, but because I desire to know Him. And my behavior is still very imperfect, because my knowledge of Him is very imperfect. My fellowship with Him is not nearly as profound as I have often liked to think. What I have too often taken for moments of profound communion with God were only strong emotions that welled up in me as I learned various things from Him. Those emotions are good and valid and encouraging, but they do not indicate the level of spiritual growth that I thought they did. And yet God loves me anyway. My salvation is based on the fact that He knows me, not on my ability to know Him. Salvation is truly God-centered: It is from Him, and about Him, and to Him.

And it is in that that the burden of needing to "perform" is less than ever. I do not need to "do" in order to be saved, I do not need to "be" in order to be saved, I do not even need to "know" in order to be saved. I need to be known. The day will come when I know as I am known⁴⁴, but it is not yet. For now, my knowledge is as imperfect as my behavior, but God knows me anyway. The relationship is perfectly established, from His side. I am learning little by little to profit from it, but though I do so imperfectly, that is not cause for alarm. I enjoy knowing God better and better, but I am not "producing" my salvation by that process. I am just discovering a salvation that is already perfect in Him, a relationship that comes from Him, not me.

One of the characteristics of spiritual youth is the fact of being strong. John said to the young men, "You are strong." It is in youth that we are the strongest, physically, and that we are the proudest of it. In much the same way, it is the spiritual youth, the one who has gotten beyond childhood but who has not yet entered into maturity, the one who is still primarily concerned with what he does for God, who is the surest and proudest of his spiritual strength. It is at that period that we like songs and messages about "being strong for God." They make us feel good, because that is what we think we are.

But every true believer comes to the point, after years and years of experience with God (when he can no longer blame it on spiritual immaturity), where he discovers that he is not nearly as strong as he liked to think. And in place of "Let's be strong for God" he discovers a different message: "You have a right to be weak for God, even to be content with weakness, for it is when you are weak that His strength is perfected in you."⁴⁵ Paul didn't write those profound insights when he was still an unconverted Pharisee, nor even when he was a young believer, not very far beyond what he had learned on the Damascus road. He wrote them after about twenty years with the Lord, and about ten years in the ministry. And he wrote them, it is worth

40 a point which he makes elsewhere, in Colossians 1:22

41 Romans 8:23-24

42 see, for example, I Corinthians 8:3 and Galatians 4:9

43 This is the idea expressed in I Corinthians 13:12.

44 *ibid*

45 cf. II Corinthians 12:9-10

noting, to young believers who, having just recently gotten beyond the stage of spiritual infancy (some of them at least; others were still very much concerned with what they had received from God) were beginning to think they were pretty strong spiritually. Stronger, in any case, than the older brother who had become their spiritual father by teaching them the message of salvation.

“In youth, you want to change the world; in old age, you want to change youth,” someone has said. How true it is, even spiritually. When you finally get beyond the first hesitating steps of infancy on this road that leads to glory, you think you have done something exceptionally fine. You think you are strong in Christ, and ready to conquer the world. But as you grow, you discover, not how to be stronger and stronger, but that you are much weaker than you thought. And you may wish very much that you could teach that to the spiritual children, who are so proud of their legalistic accomplishments for God.

But you can't. Not really. Oh, you can share it with them, so they know intellectually where they are going, but they won't really understand it until they get there themselves. That is not as bad a thing as you might think. The point is not to get to the end of the path as quickly as you can. The path started out an eternity ago, when God foreknew us, and planned for our salvation. And in His infinite patience, He will draw it to a conclusion only in eternity. There is little point in “hurrying” on a path that leads from eternity to eternity.

Don't get stuck along the way, even so. Don't think that any of these levels, not even the last one, is the finish line. But don't disdain them either, for yourself or for others. Learn all you can about God, at each step of the way. For He *is* a provider, and He *is* a lawgiver, and He *is* an instructor, and He *is* a friend. He is all that, and much, much more.

How much more? We can't possibly know. But He is infinitely more. Of that we can be sure.

On Into Eternity: To Be With the Father

I do not know the nature of the path from this point on, but I am sure it gets better and better. I will probably discover some of it even in this life, for it is quite likely that I will yet live another 20, 30, or more years before God calls me to Himself.

And the discovery of the glory of God will not end even there. That's where it really begins. When we “stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,”⁴⁶ we will all discover more of God than we ever imagined. We will all enjoy Him more than we ever thought possible. And though we will receive tremendous blessings from Him, though we will behave just as He wants us to behave, though we will be what He will have caused us to become, though we will know Him perfectly, we will discover that none of that was ever the goal. *He* was the goal, from the very beginning. And what better goal could there ever be?

This is the path that leads to glory, for it is the path that leads to God.

Afterword: fifteen years later

I have done very little with this study during the last fifteen years, and have come back to it after a long break. I didn't even remember some parts of it, and actually found it quite interesting to read what I had written back then.

During these years, so much has happened. My children have grown up (and are still as much of a joy to me as they have ever been, though the *way* in which I enjoy them has of course changed significantly) and God has led me along many paths that I never would have expected when I wrote this.

There are some parts of it that I would write a bit differently today but I have decided to leave it as it was (except for some minor changes in wording that are more of an editorial nature than actual modifications of the content) and include instead the thoughts of someone who has, in theory at least, progressed 15 years further on the path that leads to glory. In particular, I would like to respond to the comments I included about what further stages of this path I might discover in the ensuing years.

My life and my ministry have progressed significantly during these years. I was not quite 40 years old when I wrote this; now, I am past 50. My children were in elementary school then. Now, I am hoping for some grandchildren in the relatively near future. I was working primarily as assistant pastor in a church-planting effort then. Today, my ministry has changed radically, as God has allowed me the privilege of touching lives in places and ways I never dreamed of then, in a number of different countries. I have seen people who were young believers when I wrote these words, or who had not yet even come to Christ, grow to the point of carrying on extensive ministries themselves. Others friends, who already had quite a bit of ministry experience then, have now become some of the pillars of the church, even at an international level. One would expect, then, that I would have discovered something of “the next level” of Christian growth, beyond the fifth level described here.

But the overall impression I have is that that has not happened. Not that I have not learned any more of God's grace; on the contrary, the continuing discovery of God's grace has been such that I am overwhelmed by His greatness and His mercy in allowing me the privilege of serving Him. But I do not have the impression that I have discovered what can honestly be

46 Jude 1:24

described as a level of spiritual maturity beyond the fifth level described in these pages. That level was characterized by the realization that our standing before God is based much more on Him than on our own choices, understanding or experiences. And it seems to me that that is still where I am today.

I would say instead that I have experienced what I would call a *deepening* of that fifth level. I am more convinced than ever that we stand before God, not because we know Him but because He knows us. What we have done for Him, what we have known of Him, what we have received from Him, what we have experienced with Him, is not nearly as impressive as we probably thought. A child is quite proud of managing to build a sand castle that does not fall down immediately. A great scientist is humbled by the immensity of the universe and realizes that his greatest achievements are almost insignificant compared to the vastness of that universe. In the same way, the more we grow in grace, the more we realize that we have much less to brag about, in terms of our spiritual accomplishments, understanding and experiences, than we probably thought. And yet, that doesn't matter. God matters. His grace is sufficient for us.

In light of that, if I wrote the preceding pages today, I would probably write them just a little bit differently. I would probably emphasize more the fact that what we think we are doing for God and with God is not as impressive as it seems. We have not received nearly as much from Him as He has to give us. Our obedience is not nearly as complete as we like to think. We have not been transformed nearly as thoroughly as we probably believed. We do not know Him nearly as much as we think we do.

Perhaps it is better that I didn't write them that way. I was by no means a young believer when I wrote this study. I was not even a beginner in the ministry. But I was still able to remember much more distinctly the exciting discoveries of spiritual life as God directed me, changed me, corrected me, taught me, and made me just a little bit more what I ought to be. Those stages of Christian growth were more recent then than they are now. That probably allowed a much more vivid description of what motivates us as we pass through the various stages than if I re-wrote that part today.

I did not mention it in the study, but I worked on this with my older brother, Ted, whose mastery of English was better than my own. He went over the text for me and offered quite a number of corrections and suggestions. At the same time, this was one of the things God used to help him get his own life straightened out. When he was offering useful criticisms of this text, he was in prison and his life was quite messed up. But by God's grace, he was able to reaffirm his commitment to walking with the Lord and put much of his life back together.

I feel free to mention this today because he has since gone on to be with the Lord. The reason I mention him is because I feel that he has given one of the best descriptions I have come across of what this "deepening" of the fifth stage of Christian grace is all about. He would probably be very surprised to hear that, but that is my clear impression.

I learned much from him in those years after he got out of prison, more than he ever realized. He continued to blame himself to a great extent for some lasting problems in his family, and although that was difficult for him, it also allowed him to understand, perhaps more clearly than most of us, that he was accepted by God entirely by grace. He certainly had no problem any more with the spiritual pride that so often characterizes those who think they have done impressive things, learned so much, or gone through such great experiences with God.

Shortly before he died of cancer, Ted shared with me a vision he had had that, to me, really expressed his understanding of grace.

In the last e-mail he ever sent me, he wrote:

"Between wakefulness and sleeping is a 'twilight zone' the experts call a 'hypnagogic state.' Do you ever have dreams while in that state? I do. Perhaps once a week, sometimes more often, I will become aware of scenes or sounds while my conscious mind is still (barely) active enough to recognize them as disjointed from reality.

...

"Very, very rarely, three or four times now in the last fifteen years, I have one of these that I treasure as a gift from God, a special message full of symbolism that I ponder for days and thus cause it to continue.

...

"I was very depressed as I drifted off to sleep that night. I was earnestly praying to Jesus for His healing touch. Suddenly I found myself kneeling a few feet from the bank of a flat, gently gurgling river perhaps a hundred yards wide. I understood that I had walked many miles to reach that point, but I was not kneeling from exhaustion, only from a desire to worship humbly as I prayed.

"... It was as though I had come to the far, outer reaches of my own strength and resources. Eyes open but looking downward, I continued my prayer from before the dream began. 'Lord Jesus, my soul is in agony again. I long for Your touch to heal me.'

"Then a Man appeared in my field of vision. I did not look up to see His face, or anything above His waist, but I could see Him as He quickly glided across the water.

...

"I looked up just a little, and this time I saw His feet. ... They were clad in sandals with straps around His ankles and over the base of His toes but nothing over the tops of His feet. In the middle of this large open area on each foot, there was Light.

...

"Gingerly, I reached out with just my right hand. ...

“This, unfortunately, is as far as the dream progressed. Never did I see His hands or face. Never did I actually touch His feet, only the glow emanating from the nail scars. ...I still long to return to that place, where He comes when I kneel and pray, to learn – in His time – the rest of this lesson.”

These are the words of a man who knew the depths of his own unworthiness, but who had come to the point of a very deep love for Christ and a hunger for His grace. “I long to return to that place, where He comes when I kneel and pray...” The humble adoration of the sinner who knows he doesn’t even deserve the privilege of bowing at the feet of our Lord is probably the lesson that we need to learn the most, but the one that is the hardest to learn. It is hard to get beyond our selfish concern with His blessings in our lives. It is even harder to get beyond our legalistic concerns with how faithful we have been in obeying Him. Hardest of all, probably, is getting beyond our conviction that we have done so much for Him, that we are somehow “worthy” because of our perceived faithfulness.

That is the glory to which the path leads. Not that we shall reign with the Lord in power, but that we shall bow at His feet in humble adoration, knowing that even that is a privilege far beyond what we deserve. Anything more that He chooses to give us will simply be an even greater grace, not something we have “earned” by anything we ever did. We will know as we are known, and what we will know is that it was never about us, never about what we did or experienced or knew, but about Him. About the One whose grace is sufficient for us, now and for all eternity.

*When I stand before the throne, dressed in beauty not my own,
When I see Thee as Thou art, love Thee with unsinning heart,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know, not 'till then how much I owe.*

(Robert McCheyne, 1837)

Those words were penned long before I was ever born, but the author understood the path that leads to glory. At the end of the path, we will know we never had anything to be proud of. We didn’t know nearly as much as we thought, we didn’t do nearly as much as we believed, our experiences didn’t go nearly as far as we pretended. Everything we did, everything we experienced, everything we learned, was all limited by our own inability to rise very much above the self-centeredness of the flesh. And yet, despite all those limitations, God *did* allow us to progress, to become His children, to serve Him, even. His grace alone made it possible for us to advance along the path that leads to glory, and it is appropriate that we humbly bow before Him in recognition of that. We owe it all to Him. All of it.