



DEAN WELCH - TEACHER

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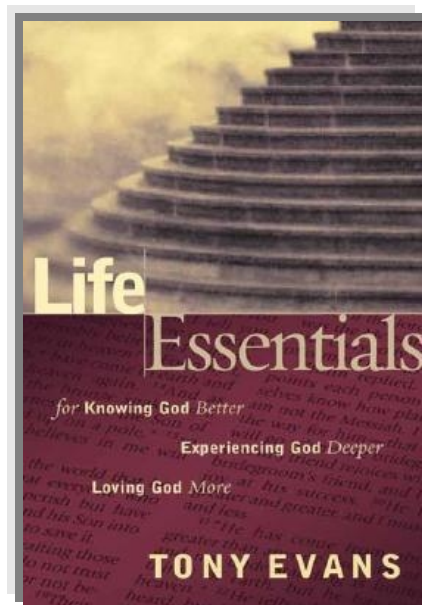
**TIRED OF RELIGION? YOU NEED TO GROW UP!**  
*[BEGINNING THE PROCESS-SPIRITUAL GROWTH – 2 PETER 3:18]*

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# WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

APRIL 22, 2007

FROM THE *MASTER WORKS* SERIES STUDY OF:



## TIRED OF RELIGION? YOU NEED TO GROW UP!

[BEGINNING THE PROCESS-SPIRITUAL GROWTH – 2 PETER 3:18]

**H**ave you ever told someone to grow up? What did you mean by that? As I was preparing for this new study, I've thought a lot about growing up and how wonderful it has been for Beverly and I to watch our two grandchildren grow up. You know, everybody loves babies! I often hear people say, *Oh, they just grow up too fast!* But part of what makes babies so appealing is that they are constantly growing and learning. The real shame is when a baby **doesn't** grow up. We start to worry if everything is alright or if there's a problem. You see, once a child is conceived and born, growth is anticipated, right? That's the way God designed the human body to work. No parents I know are content just to say, *"Well, we conceived a child, and that's all that matters,"* or *"We have a healthy baby, so it doesn't matter if there's no growth."* Parents are excited about their child's growth—that's the only way we can tolerate the 3AM feedings. Growth and development are expected. And guess what, our heavenly Father is also concerned about the growth of His children. So, how do Christians' grow spiritually? [SOME THINK BY LEARNING THE CORRECT BIBLICAL INFORMATION—ENOUGH SEMINARS, BOOKS, DATA, BIBLE STUDY; OTHERS SAYS FOLLOWING A CERTAIN WELL-DEFINED PROCESS—10 STEPS TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH OR 8 SUREFIRE KEYS TO ACHIEVE MATURITY IN CHRIST, ETC; OTHERS BY WHAT YOU AVOID INSTEAD OF WHAT YOU DO—ASCETICISM]

All wrong, but for the next 6-weeks we're going to be looking at God's Plan as we begin a new study from Tony Evans' book, *LIFE ESSENTIALS FOR KNOWING GOD BETTER, EXPERIENCING GOD DEEPER, AND LOVING GOD MORE*. The title on the board is from his book. So many Christians are tired of religion—seeking maturity by going through the motions, doing all the deeds, following all the doctrine and they can't live up to the standard. They feel hollow and empty and long for more—a relationship. Over the next six weeks, we'll be reminded that a flourishing faith comes from a vibrant walk and relationship with Jesus Christ. God wants us to grow up too-spiritually!

So, let's start first with where God actually says He wants us to grow up spiritually. Our foundational verse for this entire study by Tony Evans is taken from **2 Peter 3:18 (NASB)**. It should be added to your list to memorize over the course of this study, if you don't already know it. Listen as I read from the NASB translation: <sup>18</sup>*but **GROW** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."*

OK, so we're supposed to grow and here we learn in two particulars—grace and knowledge of Christ. But, how do we define spiritual growth for this study. Dr. Evans gives a long definition on page 92 of our quarterly—THAT TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS BY WHICH WE ALLOW THE INDWELLING CHRIST TO INCREASINGLY EXPRESS HIMSELF IN AND THROUGH US, RESULTING IN A GREATER CAPACITY ON OUR PART TO BRING GOD GREATER GLORY AND EXPERIENCE HIS GREATER GOOD FOR OURSELVES. Bottom-line, boiled-down version for us is: **More of Christ being expressed in my life through less of me!** Remember what John the Baptist told his own disciples when they asked him point blank what was going on as Jesus' ministry and popularity grew and John began stepping into the background? They questioned why everyone was going to Jesus instead of to them. Listen to these words from **John 3:30 (NLT)**, <sup>30</sup>*He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.* So, we too are growing spiritually when more of Jesus is being expressed through less of our fallen humanity.

I know you realize the importance of spiritual growth—since it's God's command and will for us and the alternative to growth is stagnation and eventual deformity. As I wrote in the weekly newsletter this week, there's a good reason you won't find a hymn called *Backwards Christian Soldiers* in the hymnal – failing to grow is not an option for believers, at least not if we want to please God. Now we know, it's got to be **more of Christ, less of me.**

While searching this week for a story to introduce this new series by Tony Evans, I came across the following headline: **“Man Lives in a Tree after Fight with His Wife—50 Years Ago!”** *It turns out that Gayadhar Parida of India, who is now 83-years old, has spent the last 50 years of his life living in a tree house. He has repeatedly turned down pleas by his wife and children to return home. Parida’s wife said: “We quarreled over a tiny issue and that is why he left me and promised not to live with me and return home until his death. I have tried a lot and forced him to come back, but he has refused all the time.”*

*Parida’s strange home is a makeshift shed on a tree, located about half a mile from his actual house. For many years Parida lived in a mango tree, but was forced to move to his new tree after his old tree collapsed in a storm. Now, one might wonder, what in the world does Gayadhar Parida hope to accomplish by living in a tree house? Parida claims that the unusual lifestyle has helped in his spiritual growth and in overcoming tensions after the estrangement with his wife.*

I don’t think that Parida’s approach is working, do you? So, how does one grow spiritually—what are the ingredients? What’s a man to do (or woman)? We’ve already answered it with our new memory verse from **2 Peter 3:18**. What does it say? <sup>18</sup>*but **GROW** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*”

Did you hear that? Our goal is to KNOW Christ, not just know about Him. Our growth is NOT in the grace and knowledge of a program, a denomination, religion or anything else. Our growth is connected and locked to the person of Jesus Christ. The supply of grace and knowledge come from Him along. Our driving force must be pursuing a living relationship with Christ, which deepens as you get to know Him better. Sort of like comparing the relationship between a husband and his new bride with a couple that have been married thirty years. In the first instance, the

couple know a lot ABOUT each other—but in the second, they truly KNOW each other after 30 years (or they better).

OK, what's the product or result of spiritual growth? Look again at the last part of the scripture from 2 Peter 3:18. This is a crucial phrase here. After instructing us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, look at what Peter wrote: *"To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity."* This sounds to me as if God takes His glory very seriously. He does, which is why He wants us to seek Him and know Him and grow in Him, not just because it's the right thing to do but because each of us wants to be a person through whom He can express Himself and display His magnificent glory.

Bottom-line: Everything exists for the purpose of glorifying God. God said He created mankind for His glory. Listen to these words from **Isaiah 43:7 (NASB)**, *"Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made."* The entire universe glorifies God. **Psalm 19:1** says, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."*

The word GLORY means to be *heavy* or *weighty* and it refers to something of great worth. I recall years ago in the sixties saying, *"That's heavy"* when I heard something that was deep or made a lot of sense to me. So, when we glorify God, we're simply saying that He is a person of great value. We attach weight or importance to Him. Knowing this, our passion and driving force must be glorifying God. So how're you doing?

As I prepared the lesson this week, a thought kept going through my mind—or rather a question that the disciples must have asked—if we commit ourselves to grow God's way, what's in it for you and me? Fair question. We've learned this week that the *definition* of spiritual growth includes God's greater good for us. Again, our answer comes right from scripture. What does it say in **Matthew 6:33 (NIV)**? *<sup>33</sup>But seek first his kingdom and his*

*righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* God will meet the needs of His children—that's you and me.

We've looked the importance of growing spiritually, but let's turn now to the FOUNDATION of our spiritual growth. *An Indian was walking up a mountain when he heard a voice. "Carry me with you," it requested. The Indian turned and saw a snake. He refused. "If I carry you up the mountain, you will bite me." "I wouldn't do that," the snake assured. "All I need is some help. I am slow and you are fast, please be kind and carry me to the top of the mountain."*

*It was against his better judgment, but the Indian agreed. He picked up the snake, put him in his shirt, and resumed his journey. When they reached the top, he reached into his shirt to remove the snake and got bit. He fell to the ground and the snake slithered away. "You lied," the Indian cried. "You said you wouldn't bite me." The snake stopped and looked back, "I didn't lie. You knew who I was when you picked me up."*

We hear the legend and shake our heads. He should have known better, we say. And we are right. He should have. Snakes bite because that's their nature and what they are wired to do. The only way to change this characteristic is if snakes were to undergo a radical transformation of their nature, and that isn't going to happen. In the same way, sinners sin because it's their nature to sin, and the only thing to change that is by a radical transformation of that sinner's nature. But that's where our comparison between snakes and human beings ends, because the transformation of a sinner's nature is not only possible but absolutely essential if spiritual growth is to take place.

Growth presupposes that a birth has taken place. Spiritual growth presupposes that a spiritual birth has taken place. When does this occur for the believer? [CONVERSION] What do you receive when you're born again? [WHEN A SINNER PLACES HIS OR HER FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST ALONE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN, THEY GET THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE.] This actually results in the believer receiving a new nature

to replace the sinful nature. **Conversion** is the basis or foundation of our spiritual growth.

Conversion is of such a radical character that Paul wrote these words in **2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)**. *<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* When you receive Christ, everything becomes new at the core of your being and it is this new life or new nature that gives you the disposition and the capacity to know and serve God rather than serving sin and self.

Now, as you digest what I just said, I know some of you may be asking yourself this question: *“Dean, if I have this new nature on the inside of me that gives me a great capacity to know God, where is it?”* Now, what you’re really saying is, *“When I look at my life, I can’t seem to locate this wonderful spiritual reality and drive you are talking about.”* And, if you are a genuine believer, that new nature from God IS THERE! It has perfect DNA with all the encoding necessary for you to grow into a mature spiritual adult—though it may be buried under old ways of thinking and acting. But it’s there and needs to be nurtured. That’s what spiritual growth is—the process of nurturing and developing the new nature that God gave us.

The whole concept about our new birth as believers is that our old self is gone. We go through a radical transformation at the time of conversion, but we already have everything we need to change our lives. Turn to **2 Peter 1:3-4 (NLT)** and let’s confirm this idea from God’s Word. *<sup>3</sup>By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. <sup>4</sup>And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires.*

Whenever I teach about the radical character of conversion, I think of caterpillars and butterflies. [Have you ever read about how a caterpillar transforms and becomes a butterfly?](#) I don't really like insects, so caterpillars are ugly to me. But once they break free of the cocoon of their old nature and become butterflies, the transformation is incredible. What was once ugly is now beautiful. A creature that could only crawl can now soar. WOW! This transformation requires a growth process, and that isn't always easy. There's a lot of struggle involved in changing a caterpillar into a butterfly, but the result is worth the effort. A butterfly is not just a *"fixed-up caterpillar"*, but a new creature with a new capacity for life.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we really need to remember that God gives us everything we need to grow at the point of our conversion. In his book, Tony Evans tells the story about Mr. Yates, the man who was given a farm but couldn't afford to keep it up and was being forced to sell it. But just before he sold the farm, some men came to Mr. Yates and told him they had reason to believe there might be oil on his property. They asked for permission to drill, which Mr. Yates readily granted, and they hit a gusher. All of a sudden, the destitute farmer who was about to lose his place became a millionaire.

But in the truest sense, Mr. Yates became a millionaire the day he was given the farm. HE JUST DIDN'T KNOW IT, because he didn't know about the treasure that resided deep in the heart of his own farm. And because he was unaware of his riches, Mr. Yates spent all of his time and energy concentrating on what was visible above the surface, struggling to maintain something that was more than capable of maintaining him.

This is a picture of the way far too many of us as Christians live. We already have all we need within us to grow—to become spiritually mature, because every believer has the Holy Spirit living inside and because of the work God has done in our heart and mind. But, I also have to be honest and tell you that you are going to struggle at the same time. You see, having a new heart

and mind means you get an entirely new set of tastes, attitudes, and desires that are directed toward God. And when these new things come into contact with your old sinful self, CONFLICT is inevitable.

Think about what Paul said about the conflict between the old and the new in **Romans 7:15-17 (NLT)**. Follow along as I read the words that are so familiar to us and that each of us can surely identify with: *<sup>15</sup>I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. <sup>16</sup>But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

Sound familiar? What Paul discovered was that when he came to Christ, his entire orientation changed. He had a new heart—just like you and I each got at our conversion. We've all gone through a heart transplant. God doesn't deal in bypass surgery, which leaves the old heart in place and simply goes around the problem. Recall what we just read about becoming new creatures from **2 Corinthians 5:17**, *he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* If you know Christ, you have a new heart, not just a patched up, bypassed old heart.

With our new heart, we see that spiritual growth does not primarily depend on what is happening around you, but on what is happening on the inside of you. Growth comes from the inside out, which is the way God designed all of his creation to function. Full-grown oak trees don't just appear. Neither do full-grown Christians. But all the requirements for growth are there.

Spiritual growth is the process of expanding and releasing what is on the inside so it becomes visible on the outside. What God often does is apply the HEAT and the PRESSURE to bring about this release. That's why our greatest times of spiritual growth are almost always our times of greatest trial.

**(SHOW POPCORN)** This is the way it works with popcorn, Did you know that popcorn pops because the heat applied to the kernels

causes the moisture inside of them to build up pressure? The moisture is changed to steam, and as the steam rises it presses against the shell of the kernel, which breaks under the pressure and releases the corn inside. Popcorn kernels don't look like much before they are heated, and if you try to eat one, you may break a tooth. But put them under heat and you'll find out there is a lot more on the inside than you thought. Now the popcorn is useful and satisfying because it grew under pressure into the tasty food item it was designed to be. Delicious popcorn is the realization of the potential that was there all along.

See, when He saved us, God put deep within us a new nature made in His image and gave us a new heart. When the Holy Spirit begins to heat up your new nature so that the steam of your new life begins to rise and bursts through the outer shell called your body, then you will begin to explode with new growth and the good stuff on the inside will be manifested. Lasting spiritual growth comes through internal transformation, not just external reformation. Listen to what Paul said in **Galatians 5:16 (NLT)** about this: *<sup>16</sup>So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.*

We've talked about the importance of spiritual growth and the foundation for spiritual growth, but what's the **KEY** to spiritual growth? **IDENTITY**. Why does Dr. Evans say identity is the key to spiritual growth? A man's identity is a critical commodity, especially in today's information driven society. Your identity has great commercial value not only to you but to someone else who might try to steal it and use your name and credit line to run up a stack of bills. Identity theft has become so pervasive that when a friend of mine recently moved and ordered new checks, his bank recommended that he not print anything on them except his name and address to minimize the chance of someone misusing his information.

Having a clear identity is so important to our human make-up that some people go to great lengths to try to gain an identity they think will make them acceptable to a certain group. These

people may buy designer jeans or a certain kind of car in order to appear affluent. I remember reading recently about a string of cases in which several high profile public figures were found to have lied on their resumes to help them obtain a new position.

Besides trying to buy an identity, another common mistake many people make is linking an identity with their activity. We do this when we identify ourselves by our profession or trade. Christians are especially prone to this trap because we often reduce the Christian life to a set of activities that we either perform or avoid. I heard someone say recently that before he was saved, he thought that Christians were people who didn't smoke or drink or go to cocktail parties. People today often think it to be all about a performance, instead of a relationship with Christ.

Confusing what we do with our real identity is an easy mistake to make, but the confusion is still lethal if we want to grow and thrive in our daily walk with the Lord. False identity leads to false growth. We need to remember that the moment you placed your faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, God implanted a new nature deep within your being. This new nature, also called the new birth, is the reference point for your identity. Turn to **Galatians 2:20 (NLT)** and follow along: ***20My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

This incredible verse contains all that we really need to know about our identity as believers, condensed into one power-packed capsule. If you can absorb and apply what this verse teaches, you are well on your way to growing spiritually, because your identity IS the key to your spiritual development. *So, if our identity is in Christ, what kind of mind do we have, and where do we really live? What difference does this make?*

I've met many frustrated Christians over the years. And when I talk to them, more often than not I find out they are frustrated because they are trying so hard to live the Christian life, but it

isn't working. Dr. Evans has a solution for this: QUIT TRYING TO LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE! You can't do it. It's impossible. The harder you try to do what God wants you to do, the flatter you will fall on your face. You see, Jesus is the ONLY PERSON who ever lived the Christian life successfully—and the good news is that He offers to live His lie in you! God never asked you to be a Christian in your own power. But He does expect you to yield your body to Christ as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1) so He can express His perfect love, power and holiness through you. That's what it means to be identified with Christ. Anything less than this is like me putting my car in neutral and then flooring the gas pedal. I'll make a lot of noise, but I won't get anywhere.

We know that our identity is with Christ. He is our reference point. And through Jesus, there is nothing you cannot do. Remember how Paul put it in **Philippians 4:13**, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* Give me the fingers of Mozart, and there's no musical piece I cannot play. Given me the mind of Einstein, and there is no mathematical formula I cannot unravel. Give me the arms of Hank Aaron, and there is no homerun I cannot hit. Give me the life of Jesus Christ, and there is no victory I cannot achieve.

One final point, the Christian life is not passive. It's not just *"Let go and let God."* We don't just sit back and cruise along while Christ does all the work. He is our life, for sure, but He does not live it apart from us. The new life we received from God operates through our bodies and personalities. Christ can supply all the power we need, but not apart from our will and our mind. Grasping your identity in Christ will free you up to really grow spiritually and there's no victory you can't achieve. Remember spiritual growth is not a program, but a relationship with a loving God.

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