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Knowing and Growing

2 Peter 1:1-11

If anybody in the early church knew the importance of being alert, it was the Apostle Peter. He had a tendency in his early years to feel overconfident when danger was near and to overlook the Master's warnings. He rushed ahead when he should have waited; he slept when he should have prayed; he talked when he should have listened. He was a courageous, but careless, Christian.

But he learned his lesson, and he wants to help us learn it too. In his first epistle, Peter emphasized the grace of God (1 Peter 5:12), but in this second letter, his emphasis is on the knowledge of God. The word *know* or *knowledge* is used at least thirteen times in this short epistle. The word does not mean a mere intellectual understanding of some truth, though that is included. It means a living participation in the truth in the sense that our Lord used it in John 17:3—"This is life eternal, that they might *know* Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent" (*italics mine*).

Peter opened his letter with a description of the Christian life. Before he described the counterfeits, he described the

true believers. The best way to detect falsehood is to understand the characteristics of the truth. Peter made three important affirmations about the true Christian life.

The Christian Life Begins with Faith (2 Peter 1:1-4)

Peter called it "like precious faith." It means that our standing with the Lord today is the same as that of the apostles centuries ago. They had no special advantage over us simply because they were privileged to walk with Christ, see Him with their own eyes, and share in His miracles. It is not necessary to see the Lord with our human eyes in order to love Him, trust Him, and share His glory (1 Peter 1:8).

THIS FAITH IS IN A PERSON (1:1-2). That Person is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour. From the very outset of his letter, Peter affirmed the deity of Jesus Christ. "God" and "Our Saviour" are not two different Persons; they describe one Person, Jesus Christ. Paul used a similar expression in Titus 2:10 and 3:4.

Peter reminded his readers that Jesus Christ is the Saviour by repeating this exalted title in 1:11, 2:20, 3:2, and 3:18. A *savior* is "one who brings salvation," and the word *salvation* was familiar to the people of that day. In their vocabulary, it meant "deliverance from trouble," particularly "deliverance from the enemy." It also carried the idea of "health and safety." A physician was looked on as a savior because he helped deliver the body from pain and limitations. A victorious general was a savior because he delivered the people from defeat. Even a wise official was a savior because he kept the nation in order and delivered it from confusion and decay.

It requires little insight to see how the title "Saviour" applies to our Lord Jesus Christ. He is, indeed, the Great Physician who heals the heart from the sickness of sin. He is the victorious conqueror who has defeated our enemies—sin,

death, Satan, and hell—and is leading us in triumph (2 Cor. 2:14ff). He is "God and our Saviour" (2 Peter 1:1), "our Lord and Saviour" (1:11), and "the Lord and Saviour" (2:20). In order to be our Saviour, He had to give His life on the cross and die for the sins of the world.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has three "spiritual commodities" that can be secured from nobody else: righteousness, grace, and peace. When you trust Him as your Saviour, His righteousness becomes your righteousness and you are given a right standing before God (2 Cor. 5:21). You could never *earn* this righteousness; it is the gift of God to those who believe. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5).

Grace is God's favor to the undeserving. God in His mercy does not give us what we do deserve; God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve. Our God is "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10), and He channels that grace to us through Jesus Christ (John 1:16).

The result of this experience is *peace*, peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and the peace of God (Phil. 4:6-7). In fact, God's grace and peace are "multiplied" toward us as we walk with Him and trust His promises.

THIS FAITH INVOLVES GOD'S POWER (1:3). The Christian life begins with saving faith, faith in the Person of Jesus Christ. But when you know Jesus Christ personally, you also experience God's power, and this power produces "life and godliness." The unsaved sinner is dead (Eph. 2:1-3) and only Christ can raise him from the dead (John 5:24). When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He said, "Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:44). Get rid of the graveclothes!

When you are born into the family of God by faith in Christ, you are born complete. God gives you everything you will ever need "for life and godliness." Nothing has to be added! "And ye are complete in Him" (Col. 2:10). The false

teachers claimed that they had a "special doctrine" that would add something to the lives of Peter's readers, but Peter knew that *nothing could be added*. Just as a normal baby is born with all the "equipment" he needs for life and only needs to grow, so the Christian has all that is needed and only needs to grow. God never has to call back any of His "models" because something is lacking or faulty.

Just as a baby has a definite genetic structure that determines how he will grow, so the believer is "genetically structured" to experience "glory and virtue." One day he will be like the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 3:2). We have been "called... to His eternal glory" (1 Peter 5:10), and we shall share that glory when Jesus Christ returns and takes His people to heaven.

But we are also "called... to virtue." We have been saved so that we might "show forth the praises [virtues] of Him who hath called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We should not wait until we get to heaven to become like Jesus Christ! In our character and conduct, we should reveal His beauty and grace today.

THIS FAITH INVOLVES GOD'S PROMISES (1:4). God has not only given us all that we need for life and godliness, but He has also given us His Word to enable us to develop this life and godliness. These promises are *great* because they come from a great God and they lead to a great life. They are *precious* because their value is beyond calculation. If we lost the Word of God, there would be no way to replace it. Peter must have liked the word *precious*, for he wrote about the "precious faith" (2 Peter 1:1; cf. 1 Peter 1:7), the "precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4), the "precious blood" (1 Peter 1:19), the precious stone (1 Peter 2:4, 6), and the precious Saviour (1 Peter 2:7).

When the sinner believes on Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to impart the life and nature of God

within. A baby shares the nature of its parents, and a person born of God shares the divine nature of God. The lost sinner is dead, but the Christian is alive because he shares the divine nature. The lost sinner is decaying because of his corrupt nature, but the Christian can experience a dynamic life of godliness because he has God's divine nature within. Mankind is under the bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:21), but the believer shares the freedom and growth that is a part of possessing the divine nature.

Nature determines *appetite*. The pig wants slop and the dog will even eat its own vomit (2 Peter 2:22), but the sheep desires green pastures. Nature also determines *behavior*. An eagle flies because it has an eagle's nature and a dolphin swims because that is the nature of the dolphin. Nature determines *environment*: squirrels climb trees, moles burrow underground, and trout swim in the water. Nature also determines *association*: lions travel in prides, sheep in flocks, and fish in schools.

If nature determines appetite, and we have God's nature within, then we ought to have an appetite for that which is pure and holy. Our behavior ought to be like that of the Father, and we ought to live in the kind of "spiritual environment" that is suited to our nature. We ought to associate with that which is true to our nature (see 2 Cor. 6:14ff). The only normal, fruit-bearing life for the child of God is a *godly* life.

Because we possess this divine nature, we have "completely escaped" the defilement and decay in this present evil world. If we feed the new nature the nourishment of the Word, then we will have little interest in the garbage of the world. But if we "make provision for the flesh" (Rom. 13:14), our sinful nature will lust after the "old sins" (2 Peter 1:9) and we will disobey God. Godly living is the result of cultivating the new nature within.

Faith Results in Spiritual Growth (2 Peter 1:5-7)

Where there is life, there must be growth. The new birth is not the end; it is the beginning. God gives His children all that they need to live godly lives, but His children must apply themselves and be diligent to use the "means of grace" He has provided. *Spiritual growth is not automatic.* It requires cooperation with God and the application of spiritual diligence and discipline. "Work out your own salvation. . . . For it is God which worketh in you" (Phil. 2:12-13).

Peter listed seven characteristics of the godly life, but we must not think of them as seven beads on a string or even seven stages of development. The word translated *add* really means "to supply generously." In other words, we develop one quality as we exercise another quality. These graces relate to each other the way the branch relates to the trunk and the twigs to the branch. Like the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23), these qualities grow out of life and out of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not enough for the Christian to "let go and let God," as though spiritual growth were God's work alone. Literally, Peter wrote, "Make every effort to bring alongside." The Father and the child must work together.

The first quality of character Peter listed was *virtue*. We met this word in verse 3, and it basically means "excellence." To the Greek philosophers, it meant "the fulfillment of a thing." When anything in nature fulfills its purpose, that is "virtue—moral excellence." The word was also used to describe the power of the gods to do heroic deeds. The land that produces crops is "excellent" because it is fulfilling its purpose. The tool that works correctly is "excellent" because it is doing what a tool is supposed to do.

A Christian is supposed to glorify God because he has God's nature within; so, when he does this, he shows "excellence" because he is fulfilling his purpose in life. True virtue

in the Christian life is not "polishing" human qualities, no matter how fine they may be, but producing *divine* qualities that make the person more like Jesus Christ.

Faith helps us develop virtue, and virtue helps us develop *knowledge* (2 Peter 1:5). The word translated *knowledge* in verses 2 and 3 means "full knowledge" or "knowledge that is growing." The word used here suggests *practical* knowledge or discernment. It refers to the ability to handle life successfully. It is the opposite of being "so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly good!" This kind of knowledge does not come automatically. It comes from obedience to the will of God (John 7:17). In the Christian life, you must not separate the heart and the mind, character and knowledge.

Temperance is the next quality on Peter's list of spiritual virtues, and it means self-control. "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Prov. 16:32). "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls" (Prov. 25:28). Paul in his letters often compared the Christian to an athlete who must exercise and discipline himself if he ever hopes to win the prize (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:12-16; 1 Tim. 4:7-8).

Patience is the ability to endure when circumstances are difficult. Self-control has to do with handling the *pleasures* of life, while patience relates primarily to the *pressures* and *problems* of life. (The ability to endure problem people is "long-suffering.") Often, the person who "gives in" to pleasures is not disciplined enough to handle pressures either, so he "gives up."

Patience is not something that develops automatically; we must work at it. James 1:2-8 gives us the right approach. We must expect trials to come, because without trials we could never learn patience. We must, by faith, let our trials work *for* us and not against us, because we know that God is at

work in our trials. If we need wisdom in making decisions, God will grant that wisdom if we ask Him. Nobody enjoys trials, but we do enjoy the confidence we can have in trials that God is at work, causing everything to work together for our good and His glory.

Godliness simply means "God-likeness." In the original Greek, this word meant "to worship well." It described the man who was right in his relationship with God and with his fellow man. Perhaps the words *reverence* and *piety* come closer to defining this term. It is that quality of character that makes a person distinctive. He lives above the petty things of life, the passions and pressures that control the lives of others. He seeks to do the will of God and, as he does, he seeks the welfare of others.

We must never get the idea that godliness is an impractical thing, because it is intensely practical. The godly person makes the kinds of decisions that are right and noble. He does not take an easy path simply to avoid either pain or trial. He does what is right because it is right and because it is the will of God.

Brotherly kindness (*philadelphia* in the Greek) is a virtue that Peter must have acquired the hard way, for the disciples of our Lord often debated and disagreed with one another. If we love Jesus Christ, we must also love the brethren. We should practice an "unfeigned [sincere] love of the brethren" (1 Peter 1:22) and not just pretend that we love them. "Let brotherly love continue" (Heb. 13:1). "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love" (Rom. 12:10). The fact that we love our brothers and sisters in Christ is one evidence that we have been born of God (1 John 5:1-2).

But there is more to Christian growth than brotherly love; we must also have the sacrificial love that our Lord displayed when He went to the cross. The kind of love ("chari-

ty") spoken of in verse 7 is agape love, the kind of love that God shows toward lost sinners. This is the love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13, the love that the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts as we walk in the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22). When we have *brotherly* love, we love because of our likenesses to others; but with *agape* love, we love in spite of the differences we have.

It is impossible for fallen human nature to manufacture these seven qualities of Christian character. They must be produced by the Spirit of God. To be sure, there are unsaved people who possess amazing self-control and endurance, but these virtues point to *them* and not to the Lord. *They* get the glory. When God produces the beautiful nature of His Son in a Christian, it is God who receives the praise and glory.

Because we have the divine nature, we can grow spiritually and develop this kind of Christian character. It is through the power of God and the precious promises of God that this growth takes place. The divine "genetic structure" is already there: God wants us to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). The life within will reproduce that image if we but diligently cooperate with God and use the means He has lavishly given us.

And the amazing thing is this: as the image of Christ is reproduced in us, the process does not destroy our own personalities. We still remain uniquely ourselves!

One of the dangers in the church today is imitation. People have a tendency to become like their pastor, or like a church leader, or perhaps like some "famous Christian." As they do this, they destroy their own uniqueness while failing to become like Jesus Christ. They lose both ways! Just as each child in a family resembles his parents and yet is different, so each child in God's family comes more and more to resemble Jesus Christ and yet is different. Parents don't duplicate themselves, they reproduce themselves; and wise par-

ents permit their children to be themselves.

Spiritual Growth Brings Practical Results

(2 Peter 1:8-11)

How can the believer be certain that he is growing spiritually? Peter gave three evidences of true spiritual growth.

FRUITFULNESS (1:8). Christian character is an end in itself, but it is also a means to an end. The more we become like Jesus Christ, the more the Spirit can use us in witness and service. The believer who is not growing is idle ("barren") and unfruitful. His knowledge of Jesus Christ is producing nothing practical in his life. The word translated *idle* also means "ineffective." The people who fail to grow usually fail in everything else!

Some of the most effective Christians I have known are people without dramatic talents and special abilities, or even exciting personalities; yet God has used them in a marvelous way. Why? Because they are becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. They have the kind of character and conduct that God can trust with blessing. They are fruitful because they are faithful; they are effective because they are growing in their Christian experience.

These beautiful qualities of character do exist "within us" because we possess the divine nature. We must cultivate them so that they increase and produce fruit in and through our lives.

VISION (1:9). Nutritionists tell us that diet can certainly affect vision and this is especially true in the spiritual realm. The unsaved person is in the dark because Satan has blinded his mind (2 Cor. 4:3-4). A person has to be born again before his eyes are opened and he can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). But after our eyes are opened, it is important that we increase our vision and see all that God wants us to see. The phrase *cannot see afar off* is the translation of a

word that means "shortsighted." It is the picture of somebody closing or squinting his eyes, unable to see at a distance.

There are some Christians who see only their own church, or their own denomination, but who fail to see the greatness of God's family around the world. Some believers see the needs at home but have no vision for a lost world. Someone asked Phillips Brooks what he would do to revive a dead church, and he replied, "I would preach a missionary sermon and take up a collection!" Jesus admonished His disciples, "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest" (John 4:35).

Some congregations today are like the church at Laodicea: they are proud that they are "rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing," and do not realize that they are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). It is a tragedy to be "spiritually nearsighted," but it is even a greater tragedy to be blind!

If we forget what God has done for us, we will not be excited to share Christ with others. Through the blood of Jesus Christ we have been purged and forgiven! God has opened our eyes! Let's not forget what He has done! Rather, let's cultivate gratitude in our hearts and sharpen our spiritual vision. Life is too brief and the needs of the world too great for God's people to be walking around with their eyes closed!

SECURITY (1:10-11). If you walk around with your eyes closed, you will stumble! But the growing Christian walks with confidence because he knows he is secure in Christ. It is not our profession of faith that guarantees that we are saved; it is our progression in the faith that gives us that assurance. The person who claims to be a child of God but whose character and conduct give no evidence of spiritual growth is deceiving himself and heading for judgment.

Peter pointed out that "calling" and "election" go together. The same God who *elects* His people also ordains the means to *call* them. The two must go together, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation. . . . Whereunto He called you by our Gospel" (2 Thes. 2:13-14). We do not preach election to unsaved people; we preach the Gospel. But God uses that Gospel to call sinners to repentance, and then those sinners discover that they were chosen by God!

Peter also pointed out that election is no excuse for spiritual immaturity or for lack of effort in the Christian life. Some believers say, "What is going to be is going to be. There is nothing we can do." But Peter admonishes us to "be diligent." This means "make every effort." (He used this same verb in 2 Peter 1:5.) While it is true that God must work in us before we can do His will (Phil. 2:12-13), it is also true that we must *be willing* for God to work, and we must cooperate with Him. Divine election must never be an excuse for human laziness.

The Christian who is sure of his election and calling will never "stumble" but will prove by a consistent life that he is truly a child of God. He will not always be on the mountain-top, but he will always be climbing higher. If we do "these things" (the things listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7, cf. v. 8), if we display Christian growth and character in our daily lives, then we can be sure we are converted and will one day be in heaven.

In fact, the growing Christian can look forward to "an abundant entrance" into the eternal kingdom! The Greeks used this phrase to describe the welcome given Olympic winners when they returned home. Every believer will arrive in heaven, but some will have a more glorious welcome than others. Alas, some believers "shall be saved, yet so as by fire" (1 Cor. 3:15).

The word *ministered* in 2 Peter 1:11 is the same as the word *add* in verse 5, and is the translation of a Greek word that means "to bear the expenses of a chorus." When the Greek theatrical groups presented their dramas, somebody had to underwrite the expenses, which were very great. The word came to mean "to make lavish provision." If we make lavish provision to grow spiritually (v. 5), then God will make lavish provision for us when we enter heaven!

Just think of the blessings that the growing Christian enjoys: fruitfulness, vision, security—and heaven's best! All this and heaven too!

The Christian life begins with faith, but that faith must lead to spiritual growth—unless it is dead faith. But dead faith is not saving faith (James 2:14-26). Faith leads to growth and growth leads to practical results in life and service. People who have this kind of Christian experience are not likely to fall prey to apostate false teachers.