

## GROWTH IN GRACE

by John Angell James

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our  
Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 3:18

The word **grace** is one of the key terms of Holy Scripture frequently occurring, and by the knowledge of which much of the import of the whole volume is unfolded. It signifies *favor*, free and unmerited. "By grace (favor) are you saved," Eph. 2:8. This is the primitive, prevailing, generic sense of the word, and is its meaning in such passages also as the following, and many others—Rom. 11:5, 6; Eph. 1:2, 6, 7; 2:7; Titus 2:11; 3:7. But as in the ordinary use of language we sometimes call the effect by the name of the cause, the word grace is often applied in Scripture to several things which are the consequences and operations of Divine favor; thus the aids of the Holy Spirit are called grace, as in that passage, "My grace is sufficient for you," 2 Cor. 12:9; also 1 Cor. 15:9, 10.

In the passage under consideration, it has a meaning somewhat different from either of these, yet related to them, and signifies **holiness**, as the fruit and effect of God's grace—and the exhortation to grow in grace is a beautiful, comprehensive, and instructive way of saying, grow in *holiness*; advance in *piety*. True, there is a sense in which a believer may grow in the favor of God itself, as well as in its effects. It is said of Christ in his youth, that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and *in favor with God and man*," Luke 2:52.

God, in his love, delights in his people on a twofold account; first, because of the work of his Son, which is *upon* them for justification—and secondly, because of their spiritual graces, inasmuch as these are the work of his Holy Spirit; and therefore the more he sees of this work in them, the more he must love them. On account of their relation as children, he loves them all equally; but as regards their spiritual condition, he loves them in proportion to their degrees of conformity to himself. Hence they may grow in his favor

continually, that is, one person may have more in him, than another, that God loves, and that same person may have more in himself, at one time than another, that God approves. But since this supposes, as its ground, a growth in holiness, which is the object of Divine delight, it brings us to that view of growth in grace, which is the meaning of the passage, and the design of this address—I mean, *advance in piety*.

The explanation of the text is very instructive with regard to several general principles.

1. True religion in the soul is the work of God—it is the operation of God himself as the efficient agent, whoever and whatever may be the instrumentality. It is the grace of God in us.

2. All God's dealings with men, in regard to salvation and its benefits, are the result of pure favor. Man, as a sinner, merits nothing, and can merit nothing—it is *grace* that reigns throughout his whole salvation.

3. In sanctification, God's favor shines as brightly as in justification. God's grace is as rich and free in delivering us from the power of sin—as from its punishment. God as effectually blesses us, and as truly loves us in the work of his Spirit, as in the work of his Son.

4. Sanctification is a progressive work. Growth necessarily implies progress. We cannot be more *justified* at one time than another, for justification admits of no degrees; but we can be more *sanctified* at one time than another, for sanctification admits of *all* degrees.

5. Inasmuch as every operation of God's grace is designed to bless us, sanctification is as much a Christian's happiness as justification, since it is no less an effect of Divine grace. Consequently, to grow in holiness is to grow in happiness.

I now come to the exhortation, and admonish you to **grow in grace**. This implies, of course, that you *have* grace, for without this you cannot grow. Regeneration is incipient

sanctification, sanctification is the progress of regeneration. The former is the birth of the child of God, the latter is his growth. Without life there can be no growth. Stones do not grow, for they have no vitality; and the heart of man before regeneration is compared to a stone. Are you convinced *you* are born again of the Spirit? That the heart of stone is changed into warm, vital flesh? It is to be feared that the reason why so many professors never grow, is because they have no principle of vitality. If you do *not* grow, you may question if you are born again, whether you are anything more than the picture or statue of a child.

Perhaps some will ask what are the signs of growth. Here I would remark that growth may be considered either as general, in reference to the *whole* work of grace in the soul, or to some particular part of it. If we consider the former, I reply, that it is evinced by a general improvement of the whole religious character; an increasing, obvious, and conscious development of the principle and power of spiritual vitality in *all* its appropriate functions and operations; an increase in the vigor and purity of religious *affections*, so that the heart is really more intensely engaged in piety; the inward life is more concentrated, sprightly, and energetic—so that the Christian has more of youthful vivaciousness in the service of God, and is actuated by a more intense and practical ardor.

In this state of **GENERAL growth in grace**, FAITH becomes more simple, unhesitating, and confiding; less staggered by difficulties, less beclouded by doubts and fears, and more able to disentangle itself on its way to the cross—from self-righteousness, and dependence on frames and feelings.

**LOVE** to God, though it may contain less of glowing emotion, has more of fixed principle; and is more prompt, resolute, and self-denying in obedience.

**JOY** in believing, if it has not so much occasional rapture, has more of habitual, calm, and tranquil repose.

**RESIGNATION** to the will of God is more absolute, and we can bear with less perturbation, agitation, and chafing of

mind—the crossing of our will, and the disappointment of our hopes.

**PATIENCE** and meekness towards our fellow creatures and fellow Christians become more conspicuous and controlled. At first, the believer can scarcely ford a shallow of troubles—but now he can swim in a sea of them; formerly he was oppressed by the lightest injury—now he can bear a heavy load; once he could scarcely endure the unintentional offences of his friends—now he can forgive and pray for his enemies.

An increase of **HUMILITY** is a sure and necessary sign of spiritual growth. At first we were ready to think many worse than ourselves—now we are as ready to think all better than ourselves. Then we saw some of our defects, and they appeared small—now we see many, and they are affectingly magnified. Then we knew little but the sins of the 'conduct'—but now the corruptions of the 'heart' are continually abasing us. He who is growing in humility is growing indeed; for the growth of grace is as much downward at the root, as upwards in the spreading and towering branches. "Other virtues aspire upwards—but humility looks downwards. We say of the others, the higher they grow the better—but humility is best at the lowest. Faith and hope have a holy ambition, they look not lower than heaven, nothing can content them but an immortal crown; but humility pleases herself with abasement, and you shall find her with Job in the dust, in that school of morality. Yet even there she grows, and that in the favor of God—the deeper she roots, the higher she sprouts."

**ZEAL** increases with everything else, and he who grows in grace, advances in love to God's service, being more constant in attendance upon God's house, advancing from pleasure on sabbath-day ordinances—to delight in weekday ones; and from regular private prayer—to habitual ejaculatory prayer.

The beauty and purity of external **HOLINESS** advance in proportion to internal spirituality and heavenly-mindedness; and the profession becomes more and more free from the spots of even God's children.

**CONSCIENCE**, instead of becoming more dim in its vision, acquires greater power of perception to discern the criminality of even little sins—and a greater delicacy of taste to loathe them.

**LIBERALITY** becomes more diffusive, and covetousness is mortified by a longer acquaintance with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**LOVE**, that heavenly virtue, without which the greatest gifts are but as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, bears not only a richer crop of blossoms—but of good ripe fruits. From loving a few, and those of our own party, we go on to the spirit of the apostle, and say, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." Those who are outgrowing the prejudices of party and of ignorance, and are rising higher and higher in the strength and stature of love, give, perhaps, the fullest proof of all, of growth in grace.

This is *general* growth in grace; for grace in one word comprehends all others—it is the genus of which all Christian virtues are the species. Faith is grace; penitence is grace; love is grace and so are patience, humility, and zeal—so that when we are called to grow in grace, we are not restricted to any particular disposition—but enjoined to practice them all.

But there is also a **PARTICULAR growth in grace**, or a growth in some particular branch of a Christian duty, to which I would now direct your attention, as of some consequence—and that is **our advance in those things wherein we are more than ordinarily deficient**. Almost all people have, in addition to their other sins, some one sin which may be called their *besetting sin*, or some neglect which may be called their *prevailing deficiency*. Now the mortification of these sins, and the supply of these defects, should be considered as our especial aim, object, and duty; and nothing can more decisively mark our improvement in religion than the putting away of these habitual corruptions, and the taking up of these neglected branches of Christian obligation. And as deceit lies in generals, I am persuaded that many who use this phrase, not only in conversation but

even in prayer, and who suppose that they are sincere and earnest in asking to grow in grace, are at the same time taking no pains to mortify their besetting sin; and while holding some vague and indefinite notions about spiritual advancement, forget that, in their case, to grow, means to put away that one sin especially.

If a person is constitutionally covetous, or passionate, or proud—to grow in grace is to become liberal, meek, and humble. If they have neglected family prayer, or week-day services of religion, or the right discharge of any social duty, or private prayer—to grow in grace means, in their case, to supply this defect. And perhaps we can better ascertain whether we are growing, by inquiring into the state of our souls with regard to these besetting sins or defects, than by examining the wide range of the whole Christian character. In going round the whole circle of duty we are apt to become confused, and we arrive therefore at no definite conclusion—but in concentrating our attention upon one point, we can better determine whether or not we are making progress. If we are growing in this one point, we are in all probability growing in others; and, on the other hand, it is this general growth that aids us in the particular one, just as the cure of one specific disease in the body is aided by the improvement of the general health, and the cure of the specific disease reacts on the general health.

I shall now point out **the MEANS of growth.**

And here it is of importance that I should remove a too prevailing **MISTAKE**, I mean the supposition that as growth is carried on by the influence of the Holy Spirit, it is a matter of pure *sovereignty* on God's part to grant it—and of privilege on ours to enjoy it. God's Spirit, I admit, is necessary—but he has promised to grant the Spirit in answer to believing prayer; and if we have him not, it is because we do not ask, or else we ask amiss. It is, therefore, our *duty* to grow, as well as our privilege. It is in fact a sinner's duty to *live*, and of course it is a believer's duty to *grow*. The promise of the Spirit does not constitute the ground of obligation—but only provides the efficient means of discharging it.

There are **some methods which God uses**, besides those which we ourselves are to employ, to which for a moment I would advert. **Sometimes he afflicts his people**—severely and variously afflicts them—and what for? To promote their growth in grace. "Every branch in me," says the Savior, "which bears fruit, he prunes, that it may bring forth more fruit," John 15:2. It is delightful assurance to the sorrowing disciple, and withal instructive and directory, to be told that affliction is only a pruning-knife to cause the vine to grow the better, and to be more fruitful. Afflicted Christian, are you, then, growing in grace in your sorrows? If not, you are losing the very end of them.

Having heard what God does, now hear **what you are to do for your spiritual growth.**

In speaking of the means which you are to employ, I will illustrate the subject by a figurative, though, I hope, not too fanciful representation. Taking up the very common simile by which a Christian is set forth in the word of God, I mean **a fruit-bearing tree**, I will show what is essential to the growth and fruitfulness of such a plant.

**It must be PLANTED in a good and congenial soil.** This is your privilege, for you are planted in the courts of the Lord's house, in the church of the living God, and this, like a rich and fruitful soil, contains all advantages and helps for growth—here are public ordinances, and returning sacraments, which we should constantly, devoutly, and anxiously attend—here is the communion of saints, which the more we cultivate, the more we shall be strengthened—here is doctrine to instruct, pastoral oversight to guard, and discipline to correct. Value and improve your church privileges, then, if you would advance in piety.

The growth and fruitfulness of a tree depend much upon **proper NUTRIMENT being supplied to the roots**—and so does the growth of the Christian; and that which nourishes the root of his piety is the word of God, daily read, correctly understood, cordially believed, spiritually meditated upon, and judiciously applied. The apostle, when setting forth the growth of grace by another metaphor, says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may

grow thereby," 1 Pet. 2:2. Good books alone will not do; hearing sermons alone will not do; we must have the pure word. The reason why the trees in the garden of the Lord do not grow to greater height, stature, and fruitfulness, is because the soul is not sufficiently fed by knowledge—these two are united in the precept—"Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;" we are to grow in grace and in knowledge, which means *by* knowledge.

**A tree requires *PRUNING* if it grow and flourish;** and so does our soul. We must mortify sin. Grace cannot grow in a heart where corruptions are allowed to sprout profusely. Could a grape-vine flourish and bear fruit, if all kinds of parasitic weeds were allowed to spring up and entwine around its branches? Impossible! Just as impossible is it for piety to advance, if the corruptions of the heart are permitted to reign unmortified. It is of *heart-sins* I now more particularly speak; sins of temper and disposition, pride, envy, jealousy, malice, revenge, impurity; sins of distrust, rebellion, unbelief, discontent; too many of which are often found in the hearts of professors. Vain and hypocritical are all prayers and wishes for growth in grace, if we do not assiduously apply ourselves to the crucifixion of the flesh, with the affections and lusts thereof. And we must also clip the luxuriance of our earthly affections.

**If a delicate and tender tree flourish, it must enjoy the WATCHFUL CARE of the gardener.** We must feel concerned for its growth, often examine it, and remove from it whatever would hinder it from thriving. It must be protected from injury by damage from man and beast; devouring insects must be removed; and all noxious things must be kept off and put away. **Nothing is so delicate and tender as grace in the soul of man. It is a heavenly exotic, and exposed to numberless injurious influences, and requires therefore the most anxious and ceaseless vigilance of its possessor.** No duty is more frequently enjoined in Scripture than *watchfulness*; none is more needed. The increase of piety must be matter of deep and trembling solicitude.

**The LIGHT and WARMTH of the SUN are essential to**

**the growth** of vegetable life, and those trees flourish most which are placed most fully in the solar beams. And is not Christ the orb of our spiritual day, the Sun of righteousness, whose effulgence is necessary to our growth? Place yourself, then, in the warm, bright splendor of his beams, by the contemplation of his glory, and meditation upon his love.

**Grace grows best near the cross.** Let your religion be full of Christ. Dwell upon his Divine glory as God; his perfect holiness as man, and as our example; his mediatorial office and work as Prophet, Priest, and King. Daily come to him by faith. Yield your heart to his constraining love. Feel him to be precious as he is, to those who believe. Search for him in the Scriptures. Look for him in ordinances. Make him the Alpha and Omega of your thoughts. The more your minds are conversant with Christ, the more your piety will increase, for he is the sun that ripens our graces.

Nor can vegetable life be preserved without **MOISTURE**. Running streams, and fruitful showers, and the dew of heaven, are essentially necessary. In allusion to which God has promised the dew of his grace, the pouring out of his Spirit, as the early and the latter rain. It is only as the Spirit of God helps us by his influence that we shall grow—but this influence will be granted to any extent we desire and ask for in believing prayer. The promise of the Spirit is not to make us indolent—but diligent; give yourselves then to prayer, and let the burden of your prayers be for more grace. "Prayer," says an old author, "is a key to open the gate of heaven, and let grace out—and prayer is a lock to fasten our hearts, and keep grace in." In vain do we expect those alms of grace for which we do not beg.

And now, dear friends, examine yourselves. *Are you advancing in the Divine life? Is it your desire, your constant and earnest desire to grow, or are you contented to be as you are? Do you feel it to be more and more a matter of solicitude, and are you even afraid of being no holier than you are? Do you hunger and thirst more than you did after righteousness? Do you take more notice of God in everything than you did, in providential dispensations, and in the means of grace? Is your religion more vigorous at the root, and more abundant in its fruits? Do you grow, not only more tenderly conscientious in little things—but more*

*universally* conscientious in all things? Is piety, while more retiring for private exercises, more diffusive in its public influence; does it come more abroad with you out of your closets, into your houses, shops, and relationships? Does it dwell with you more *at home*, and journey with you more constantly *from home*? "Does it buy and sell for you, and has it the casting vote in all you do?" Are you more punctual, lively, serious, and happy in ordinances? Do you abound more than you did in the most self-denying duties of religion? Are you more resolute in mortification, more ready and patient in cross-bearing? Is your conscience more quick to discern sin, and more easily wounded by it? Do you find your sorrows more to arise from your sins, and less from your trials, than you did? Do you find the spirit of love gradually supplanting the spirit of fear? Are you more zealous, liberal, and public spirited than you were? Try yourself by these things. Here are signs of growth, clear, decisive, unequivocal.

Do you need motives? How many are at hand. Since growth is the law of life, what strong proof can you have of life without growth? Growth is both your duty and your privilege. Think of the advantages you possess for increase. Consider how long some of you have been planted. Remember what God expects from all his culture. See how much others have outgrown you. Recollect how soon growing time will be over; and how exactly the degrees of glory in heaven will be proportioned to the degrees of grace upon earth.

Professors, I beseech you be not satisfied with much talk about religion, and little practice. "It is no good sign for a tree when all the sap runs up into the leaves, and is spent that way; nor in a Christian, when all his grace is thrown off in words. What are leaves to the fruit? Rather give us fruit on a low shrub, than a tree that can reach the clouds, with nothing but leaves. The cedarly tallness of some trees with a glorious flourish of leaves is goodly to the eye; but the kindly fruit of the lower plants is more acceptable to the taste. The eminence of some notoriously zealous professors may make them much admired; but the good fruits of mercy in men, silent, and less notable, makes them more beloved. The former may grow in applause—but the latter grow in

grace—and *this* growth, O Lord, give me and my people.

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