

# Growing To Perfection

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J. B. Phillips' translation of I John 3:1-2 shows striking perception:

Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called "children of God" and that is not just what we are called, but what we *are*. This explains why the world will no more recognize us than it recognized Christ. Here and now, my dear friends, we *are* God's children.

*We are God's children now, not in metaphor, but in fact. A big part of childhood is growth.*

God views His children's growth in the same way that we view the growth of our own children. We view the mental and physical growth of our young people as *expected* and *essential*. We *expect* Mary to grow taller, Johnny stronger. We know that if both are to lead normal adult lives, it is *essential* that they develop greater and greater mental abilities. We view as deeply tragic the cases of non-growth we witness from time to time, children who fail to mature mentally or physically because of disease or poor nutrition.

God looks at the spiritual growth of His children in the same light. He *expects* it so much that He has established it as a basic doctrine of His church: "go on to perfection" (Hebrews 6:1). He knows that growth, the ongoing process toward sanctification, is *essential* to our spiritual well-being. He also understands the tragic, even eternal, consequences our failure to grow can bring.

So important to God is our spiritual growth that He has taken steps to ensure that we understand its nature. This He has done by designing our *physical* lives so that we experience growth *twice*, once as children maturing to adulthood, and again as we help our children go through the same process.

Physical and mental growth are pictures of spiritual growth. What can we learn by studying those pictures?

## Growing Twice

1. *Growth, like everything controlled by law, is orderly.* It occurs in natural stages and is, therefore, predictable. A normal boy does not grow facial hair before he learns to talk. In the spiritual arena, God knows we cannot take the meat of His Word until we can handle the milk (*cf.* Hebrews 5:12-14). We need to start with the basics.

2. *Growth is planned.* One of the most fascinating things we have come to understand recently is that the *upper limits* of some growth factors are DNA-encoded. It appears that physically (and perhaps to a lesser degree, mentally) our *potential is preprogrammed*. For example, because of genetic limitations, a particular individual can grow to six feet two inches, and no higher. However, this does not mean that the individual *must* or *will* reach that height. The height he finally attains will depend on nutrition, exercise and other environmental factors. This explains a phenomenon we have all witnessed: tall parents whose children are even taller! The exceptional nutritional advantages enjoyed by the children permitted them to mature to their full potential.

Spiritual growth, also, is planned. God has called us to an incredible potential. But, we must choose whether or not we will attain to it. We stunt our spiritual growth if we remain diseased by sin. We will not grow if we adopt a wrong attitude when God exercises us with trials. Poor spiritual nutrition, preferring the junk food of this world's philosophies and entertainments over God's Word (*cf.* Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4), will also stunt our growth in Christ.

3. *Growth is slow, but undeniable.* Humans may not reach physical maturity until sometime after the twentieth year. Children particularly perceive growth to be slow, longing to "be grown-up." As imperceptibly slow as it is, over time growth becomes manifest. In the same way, our spiritual growth may not be fast; God does not expect that. Spiritually, we need to grow steadily, little by little, slowly but surely.

4. *Growth occurs in spurts.* There are times when a child does not grow as fast as other times. In adolescence, children often seem to sprout. Spiritually, we may go through times of discouragement, which temporarily arrests our growth. But, if we maintain a good attitude, God will intervene. We will begin to grow again.

5. *Retrospectively, growth is rapid.* How fast our childhood sped by! As slow as growth seems while it is occurring, when we look back on the whole experience, it seems to have taken place so very quickly. It will probably be the same with our spiritual growth. When we become God as God is, we will be able to view a day as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day (II Peter 3:8). Then, what now appears to us to be such painfully slow growth will probably look much faster. We can all take encouragement in that.

### **Growing Into Our Inheritance**

The Old Testament provides a fine example of God's view of growth. Notice how He describes ancient Israel's "growth" into its inheritance, the Promised Land:

I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the . . . Canaanite . . . from before you. I will not drive them out . . . in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land." (Exodus 23:28-30)

We will come into our inheritance, the Kingdom of God, the same way the ancient Israelites came into theirs: "little by little," until we, with God's help, have conquered the enemies: Satan, the world and our own human nature. That is God's idea of growth. There is no other way. Christ compared His Father's Kingdom to a mustard seed, "smaller than all the seeds on earth" (Mark 4:31). But gradually, "it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs" (verse 32).

The Parable of the Talents(Matthew 25:14-30) also teaches us how important growth is to God. To those servants who doubled their talents—a 100 percent increase—God says, "Well done" (verses 21, 23). He calls the servant who failed to grow "wicked," "lazy" and "unprofitable" (verses 26, 30). God expects growth from all of us.

All this talk of growth and children reminds me of my childhood. When very young, I remember wearing jeans several sizes too big for me. At first, fabric bunched up under my belt in front and

back; there was just too much of it. At least a third of the legs were rolled up. But, in time the extra fabric began to disappear as my waist filled out. Less and less of the legs had to be rolled up. Finally, the day came when the pants fit me to a tee—not too large, not too small.

God has given us a great potential. It is too big for us now. We cannot even imagine what it will be like (I Corinthians 2:9), nor can we now handle the power we will have later on. But if we patiently grow, in time the Kingdom will come to fit us perfectly. We will feel at home there like we do in a pair of soft, well-worn denims.