

Grow in Grace and Knowledge • 2 Peter 3:18

Some childhood memories are vividly remembered while others are long forgotten. For many of us one of those experiences is learning to ride a bicycle. At least for me it is. I can vividly remember trying to balance the wheels as an older brother ran along side trying to help me master that skill. At the time I thought I could never master it, but I, like you, have found that even if years go by when you don't ride a bicycle when you get back on it you can still do it.

Part of the learning hinges on a very basic principle: you must keep moving or you fall. It's a principle that applies to the Christian life as well. You cannot keep your balance in the Christian life unless you keep going and growing. Probably every one of us can think of some person we have known who seemed to be on a roll, going in the right direction, but who started to stall out and quickly fell.

Knowing the importance of this simple principle, the Apostle Peter ends his second letter with another benediction that is worth learning and perhaps even memorizing. It's in 2 Peter 3:18 that the apostle writes: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen." The message is simple: the Christian life is for growing - - - specifically in two areas: in grace and in knowledge.

"Grow in grace," the apostle says. But when he says it we need to understand that the grace of which he talks is at the very base of our every relationship with God. It is the tangible expression of God's love. It is the integrating theme of the New Testament. So when you read the New Testament from Matthew through Revelation, if you want to know what is the glue that holds it all together and makes it understandable then you need to look to the concept of grace.

Grace that practically, experientially, for us begins with salvation. So we have the familiar

words of Ephesians 2:8: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

"Gift" is the simplest definition of "grace". God gives gifts to those he loves. The biggest and best of all those gifts is salvation, but that is not the end of God's giving. He gives and gives and gives through all of our lives and all of eternity. It is a theological teaching that cannot be emphasized too much.

To understand capitalism we have to understand something about money. It is at the base of the system. To understand mathematics we have to understand something about numbers. They are at the base of the system. To understand God and Christianity we must understand grace, for grace is the base of the system. We need to understand that God is a loving, generous gift-giver. He wants to give good gifts to humankind.

It is time for another quick Greek grammar lesson. Greek is a highly inflected language so you can tell what the relationship is to all of the other words in the sentence by the inflection of the letters that begin or end the word. English is not a very highly inflective language at all. We still distinguish between

"who" and "whom", but some of us don't always get that right.

The phrase "of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" is in the genitive case in Greek and is grammatically called a "genitive of source". That may not mean much to you in terms of grammar, but it means a lot in terms of grace. The source of grace is "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ". He is where God's gifts come from!

For those of us who live in Minnesota the concept of source ought to be particularly easy to understand. The great Mississippi River that flows through the United States and eventually becomes a huge river as it empties out into the Gulf of

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Mexico, has its source at Lake Itasca in Minnesota. Lake Itasca isn't very big, but it is fed with springs so permanent that the lake level has been known to rise in dry seasons!

Jesus is just like that! The flow of his grace has been known to rise even in the dry seasons of our life. He is the permanent and the inexhaustible source of grace.

But the thrust of 2 Peter 3:18 is not so much to teach about God's base of grace but to challenge us concerning our pace of grace. We are encouraged to "grow in grace". The word "grow" simply means to increase. It is the same word that is often used in the Bible to describe the growth of a tree or a plant. It means to get bigger, better, faster, more. How on earth do you do that? If grace means gifts, how do you "grow in gifts" from God?

What do you think of when you think of receiving gifts? Don't we tend to think of Christmas presents or birthday presents? Or maybe we think in terms of church offerings or bonuses provided by a generous employer. How would someone grow in these things? It doesn't seem to make sense. How can you grow in getting more presents at Christmas or on your birthday? Why would anyone not want more presents, better gifts or bigger bonuses? It just doesn't seem to make sense to say, "Grow in grace." It doesn't make sense because we are sinners, and as sinners we have some built-in reluctance to get gifts from God.

I know a man who is now past retirement age. Years ago he was engaged to a young woman from a very wealthy family. Her father did not like this man. At the wedding reception his new father-in-law walked up to him and handed him a sealed envelope. He took it and put it in his jacket pocket, unopened. When the couple arrived at the hotel after leaving the reception, he took the envelope out of his pocket and opened it up. In the envelope was a check for many thousands of dollars. The young groom left his bride, drove back to the reception and handed the envelope and check back to her father saying, "You can't buy me!"

Whether he was right or wrong is not the point. The point is that he turned down a very generous gift. Some would say he did that out of pride; oth-

ers would call it stupidity. Either way, he turned down grace.

We all do the same thing with God to one extent or another. We want to make it on our own. We are reluctant to be totally dependent on anyone, even on God. We are proud. We are often untrusting, fearful that if we depend on God's grace we'll be left in the lurch and look foolish and be losers. These and other reasons cause us to slow our pace in the growth in grace.

Growth in grace comes by faith. We trust God. We increasingly depend on him. We are willing to take the risk of dependence. We are ready to forsake pride and independence and accept God's amazing and generous gifts.

But even when we know God is good, that he wants to give us gifts and that we ought to overcome our reluctance and pride with faith - - - even then we are still slow to grow in grace. That is why Peter goes on and says not only that we are to grow in grace but also that we are to grow in knowledge.

There's an old adage that says, "There is power in knowledge." That is particularly true here. The Apostle Peter in his second epistle is big on knowledge. In 2 Peter 1:3-4 he writes,

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Knowledge is the way to power and to "everything we need for life and godliness". If we have knowledge we are on our way to all we need in life! Knowledge is the way to great promises, escape from corruption and partaking of the divine nature.

Information can make a great difference in life. When I was a teenager I bought a 1941 Plymouth Coupe for \$50.00. (I wish I still had it; I think it would be worth a great deal more today!) After working on the engine one day it wouldn't start. It turned over and over but wouldn't fire. I ran the

battery down. I tried booster cables. My father pushed me with the family sedan (his bumper slipped under mine and smashed in his grill!). Still it wouldn't start. Finally someone showed me that the little ground wire was off the ignition coil. I put it on and the car started. All I needed was information about coil ground wires . . . then it was simple.

We've all been lost looking for some address or location. We've had times when we've spent many minutes, maybe even hours, looking for someplace only to find that we were only a few blocks away from it. We simply lacked the information we needed to find it. But when we got that information we were able to easily locate what we were looking for.

It is the same with life. There are people who are living in sin and defeat, eternally lost. All they need is some information about Jesus Christ—that he died on the cross, that he was buried and that he rose again. And that simple faith in him turns a lost sinner into an eternal saint.

There are Christians who live powerless and defeated lives when all they need is some information about the filling and control of the Holy Spirit and they could be changed into men and women of spiritual victory.

We all need to know information about God and the Christian life. We need to know what the Bible says. It's an area where we need to grow and where we can grow! That's why it's important to personally study the Bible every day and memorize it. That's why it's important to attend a church where there is consistent and systematic teaching of the Bible, to listen to sermons and take notes. That's why it's important to take advantage of opportunities to grow in knowledge through courses, seminars, books and other "grow in knowledge" opportunities.

Measurable growth in knowledge is critical to growth in grace—which is wonderful! But knowledge is more than information. You can have a

Ph.D. in agriculture but the information won't do you much good if you don't get your hands in the soil. We all know people who "know" but don't "grow"!

Our growth needs to move beyond head-information and include experience with Jesus Christ. It is growth in the "knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." The way we grow in knowledge of Jesus Christ is to share life's experiences with him. Let me try to communicate a concept that I think is powerful and profound but not easy to simply explain by using an analogy.

Because I have known my wife Charleen all my life, we have shared many experiences together. We grew up in the same general area and went to the same church from childhood so we know many of the same people and have shared many of the same experiences. We started dating in adolescence and became best friends. We were married. We

have had children. We have had times when we have cried together over things that are too private to tell anyone else and we have had times of exhilarating joy and celebration. As a re-

sult of all of that I have come to know her very, very well.

But even though we have spent much of a lifetime together there are still things about her that I do not know because there are some experiences that we have not yet had. We have not yet experienced grave illness in our immediate family. We have not yet experienced retirement or old age. So while I could guess, and probably pretty well, what it will be like to go through those kinds of experiences with her, we have not yet experienced them together. So there are areas for growth in our relationship, new experiences to be had and new journeys to be traveled.

In much the same way we as Christians have opportunities to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. But understand that with him we can share an intimacy far greater than the closest of husbands

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and wives in the longest and best of marriages.

Through each chapter of life we come to know Jesus Christ more. We grow to know him through the innocence of childhood, the transitions of adolescence, the strength of mature adulthood and the ebbing of life in old age. We experience him through marriage and children, through singleness and childlessness, through careers and successes, through health and illness, through dreams and disappointments. All of life's experiences provide opportunities for us to experience Jesus Christ and grow in the knowledge of him.

And when we have that perspective then all of life is viewed differently because then we quit this business of saying everything has to be perfect, the way I want it to be. When we have the perspective that says every experience of life is an opportunity to know Jesus Christ and to share that experience with him then even the negative experiences of life become opportunities for growth.

Don't limit yourself to knowing him only in the good times. You will learn a dimension of him and experience his grace in a different but wonderful way through the hard times, the difficult decisions and the distresses as well. Even illness and death are opportunities to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. As hard as they are, they may well be your grandest of all opportunities to know him and grow in him.

But there is more to it than that. Let me try to

describe how it all fits together. We learn information about God. That enables us to correctly learn from the experiences we have with him. We grow in knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ through information and experience. And through the information and the times we experience him working in our lives we grow in accepting his grace. The more grace, the more knowledge; the more knowledge, the more grace. All of life becomes a growing together in grace and knowledge.

We grow and grow and grow in grace and knowledge until we say as Peter ends his benediction: "To him be glory both now and forever. Amen."

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