

# Three stages of our spiritual state: babies, young men and fathers

1 John 2

by Ernie Brown

## All Christians are expected to grow

The New Testament Epistles, or Letters as we would speak of them today, were written by five different men. Each has his own approach and flavour. The Apostle John looks at the Christian Church as one universal *family*, each member of the family sharing the common life and nature given them by God. This is clearly seen in John's First Epistle. It is here we learn something of the wonder of God's spiritual family.

The first necessary lesson is that we shall not fully enjoy the privileges and meet the obligations implicit in Christianity unless we make personal spiritual progress. It is because these things find their ideal setting in the Christian home and family that the latter are under such grave attack.

Before we look at the details, it might be as well to say that, as in physical development, normal spiritual progress is steady and gradual. It does not happen in fits and starts. Being continuous and gradual, it perhaps cannot be seen from one day to the next, but rather in the medium to longer term. However, for the sake of emphasis, and to recognise necessary features of spiritual progress, the Apostle John was led by the Holy Spirit to highlight three recognisable stages of progressive development, that is, "babes", "young men" and "fathers".

Now, it must be said that spiritual progress is open to all of us. It is the norm to develop spiritually as time goes by. This is true of men, women, boys and girls. We are not intended to serve in the same way, but we are all expected to grow in our souls day by day. Let us remember, then, that John is speaking about something that applies to all Christians. None of us can hide from the implications and challenge.

## Spiritual babes

Let us look at these stages of spiritual development one by one, first of all the babes. As with physical babies, the extra care and attention spiritual babes need to help them to develop on the right lines is recognised in that far more detail is given about them than the other stages of development. Ten verses are devoted to "babes". Compare this with the three and a half verses given to "young men" and the half verse devoted to "fathers". More detail is given about the earlier stages of development, because it is not God's intention that anything previously learned will ever be forgotten, or discarded. Spiritual development, being progressive, builds on what we have learned already and makes use of it. So what is said to the so-called "young men" assumes that we have understood and put into practice the instruction given to the "babes". Indeed, that is how progress is made. Likewise, the so-called "fathers", being fully mature, live in the light of all they have learned and applied during the "babe" and "young man" stages.

Everybody loves a baby. New, fresh, defenceless, vulnerable. Full of potential. Of course, we all want our babies to develop into nice, polite, decent people, hopefully with healthy bodies and

reasonably bright at school, with perhaps some ability in education, music, and so on. It is just the same in spiritual things. We all have some potential to serve the Lord, but a lot depends on how we make use of our gifts and opportunities. Generally speaking, within about two years of a person committing himself to the Lord for salvation, it becomes fairly obvious whether or not he is going to make anything of his Christian life and service. As in all things, some develop later than others. Nevertheless, generally speaking, it soon becomes obvious to what extent our original confession of Christ as Saviour is going to be followed up by total commitment to Him in every aspect of our lives. Certainly, there is a lot we need to learn, and the sooner we begin to learn the better.

From first trusting the Lord Jesus as Saviour, we are able to sing with real conviction and joy:

*I'm glad I'm a Christian,  
I'm trusting the Lord,  
I rest on God's promise,  
Believing His Word.*

*The past is forgiven,  
And now I am free.  
A mansion in heaven,  
Is waiting for me.*

It is wonderful to have that basic understanding and joy. A grand start. But God, having saved us, desires us to learn so much about Himself, and about the Lord Jesus, His beloved Son, and about all His plans. To enable us to make that progress, God has provided us with tremendous resources. From the outset, God gives us a spiritual instinct. He puts His Holy Spirit within us, to guide and direct us. This spiritual instinct gives us the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, well before we can put our finger on chapter and verse to confirm the detail.

He has given us the Scriptures, His written Word, to bring His message in front of our very eyes. He has given us the amazing facility of prayer, access into His very presence, so that we might ask for special help if we have a problem in understanding any particular point. He gives us the joy of fellowship with like-minded fellow-believers, who can help us along the way. Before long, we form impressions about which authors of reliable, written ministry write in a way that helps us to understand what the Lord wants us to learn from any particular passage.

Having babies around the house can be a very wearing, even messy business. But it is a happy problem to have. Many childless couples would love to have the noise, the smell, the worry, the sleepless nights that new-born babies bring along with them. Spiritually, it is just the same. Let those of us who are a little older, and hopefully a little more mature, bear this in mind. Before we get too upset when keen youngish believers do things in a way that might upset our mature sensitivities, let us remember that many Christian groups who have not been troubled by newcomers for a long, long time would love to have an injection of new life in the form of spiritual babes and younger people.

You know, it is very difficult being a baby. Those giants who tower over you all your waking hours, are never satisfied. They spend months apparently encouraging you to stand up and walk, then as soon as you do so they say, "Sit still!" Then, having made all sorts of funny noises, accompanied by all manner of funny faces, when you do realise what they want and start talking back to them, they say, "Be quiet!" It is certainly a hard life being a baby. It is just the same in the spiritual realm.

## **The young men**

What about the young men? This is where the trouble starts. Every opportunity must be given to young people to stretch themselves in the Lord's service. Every allowance must be made to help them through their growing pains. Responsibility should be passed on to the next generation

sooner rather than later. But, I would certainly say this to those who are beginning to develop spiritually:

Firstly, do not assume you know it all — you don't!

Secondly, do not throw overboard as useless all that the previous generation held dear. The older Christian can echo the words and sentiment of Psalm 37:25, "I have been young, and now I am old".

Thirdly, yield not to temptation. To use Bible language, the lust of the flesh appeals to the body. The lust of the eye appeals to the soul. The pride of life appeals to the human spirit. Satan will appeal to every part of you. Be constantly on the alert. "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7).

Fourthly, major life-long commitments, such as marriage, where your spiritual home should be, ways of serving the Lord, can only be resolved by prayer and the Word of God. Indeed, a prime feature credited to the young men is that they are strong in the Word. Health, strength and vigour are clear characteristic features of young men, at that phase of natural life, more than any other class of person. If that is not true when you are a young man, it is most unlikely that it will ever be true later in life. So in the spiritual realm! If you are not strong in the Word when you are young, you never will be when you are old.

And being strong in the Word, like anything else that is worthwhile, does not come overnight. It involves prayerful study of the Scriptures, steadily, systematically, over a long period, if necessary burning the midnight oil, sacrificing other things you might well enjoy, if time and opportunity permitted. A healthy, balanced diet of good spiritual food and an appropriate amount of suitable exercise, that is, serving the Lord in some way, will produce good, steady, vigorous spiritual growth. As the Apostle Peter says in his First Epistle: "As new born babes desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2)

## **Spiritual fathers**

As to spiritual fathers, it is clear that this term is used to indicate full spiritual maturity. The lessons of the earlier stages have been learned well, and put into practice in their lives. They have gained a deep personal knowledge of God over the years. The wisdom that comes from experience has become evident in the wise counsel they are able to give to those less experienced than themselves. The Christian community is a spiritual family. Spiritual maturity, where it is evident and given opportunity to express itself, is a wonderful blessing for the whole Christian family.

Now, these stages of development are dealt with in chapter 2 of John's First Epistle, verses 12 to 28. Where is the foundation laid? What is the basis for this development? We have to go back to chapter one to find out.

## **Biblical basis for growth**

John begins his Letter by saying (and I try to paraphrase the first four verses): "We know what we are talking about, you know. We were there when it happened, when it all began, when Jesus submitted to the baptism of John the Baptist, and commenced His public ministry. It began that day on the banks of the River Jordan, and came to a climax on the Cross of Calvary. We Apostles are speaking from personal experience. We were with Him for the whole of that period. We saw in Him the full declaration of Who God is, and what He wants to teach us about Himself. And now that we know something about it, we Apostles want you to share in this joy, too."

The first necessity, John goes on to say, is to have your sins forgiven. It is *sin* that prevents you from seeing straight. As long as your understanding is darkened by sin, you cannot know God. And how can your sins be fully dealt with? Oh, says John, the remedy is at hand. "The blood of

Jesus Christ God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin", and every kind of sin (1 John 1:7). How can we be sure that the price paid, the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, confirmed by the shedding of His precious blood, is acceptable to God as discharging the full debt we owe as those who have sinned against Him? John uses a special word to remove any remaining doubts we might have. "Christ is the *propitiation* for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

That word *propitiation* is very special. In the Book of Exodus, we are told that God instructed Moses to have built a pictorial lesson book for the people of Israel. It was called the Tabernacle. The centre piece and focal point of this system was a piece of furniture called the Ark, the Ark of the Covenant. This was a rectangular box, made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold. The lid for the box was made of pure gold. The Ark was to be a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It was intended to teach the nation of Israel, and us, that the Lord Jesus is both fully God and perfect Man, and that only through Him could men be made right with God and draw near to God. As He Himself said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me" (John 14:6). To do this, the Lord Jesus must first become Man. That is, He must enter into a condition in which it was possible for Him to die. In His death, He substituted Himself, as a sin-offering, for all sinners, that is, people like you and me.

The value to God of His death is effective towards all those who believe that He loves them, and gave Himself for them. As we read in Romans 3:22, "The righteousness of God is unto all, and upon all them that believe". That is, it is available, *potentially*, unto all, and rests, *effectively*, upon all those who believe that Jesus died for them and rose again. We can be absolutely confident that this is true, because we learn from Romans 4:25, "He was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification."

Now the point is this. Once a year, on what was called the Day of Atonement, the High Priest of Israel took the blood of a freshly sacrificed animal and sprinkled the blood upon and in front of the lid of the Ark. The lid was called the Mercy Seat. The lesson was this. God was righteous in showing mercy to the people of Israel for another year, because the sacrifice had been offered and applied exactly in accordance with God's detailed instructions. Symbolically, the price that God demanded to cover their sins had been fully paid. This provisional process and transaction was called *atonement* as far as Israel was concerned.

*Propitiation*, a fuller term, describes what is true in Christianity. The full price has been paid, not provisionally, for a year, as with Israel, but effectively, for ever, in the death of Christ. So, John is able to say, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the whole world." That brings in a further important point. Sin is so dirty, it has contaminated the whole of the world in which the sins have been committed. The value to God of the death of Christ is sufficient not only to cover all the sins that have been committed, but also to cleanse the whole world and environment in which the sins took place. What a tribute to the value of the work of the Cross.

## **An Advocate**

One more major consideration comes into this portion. It is not to be considered *normal* for a Christian to commit sins. The Bible looks at sinning by a Christian as a rare exception, and by no means inevitable. "These things write I unto you, that ye sin not" (1 John 2:1). When we trusted Christ as our Saviour we were brought into the family of God. We became His children. He is our Father. Nothing can break that link of family relationship we have with Him. This is not a claim to sinless *perfection*. It is a statement that if, inadvertently, we do commit a sin, the *remedy* is instantly available. We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous One. He points to the witness of His precious blood and testifies to its eternal value. God the Father accepts the Advocacy of His Son on our behalf. Our family link with God as Father is maintained intact, not in virtue of anything we have done, but because of the value to God of the precious blood of Christ, the evidence that He really died.

The distinction is plain. Our link of family relationship with God as Father is secure on the basis of the work of Christ at Calvary on our behalf. However, while that link of *union* can never be broken, the link of *communion* can be and is broken by sin. Communion, disturbed when we sin, is restored when we repent and confess our sin. This is easy to understand when we think about it. If we harbour unconfessed sin, how can we possibly enjoy communion with our blessed Lord, or our God and Father? When we repent and confess our sins, what peace floods into our souls. The barrier is removed. The joy of communion is ours once more.

Then in First John 2:12 the Apostle says, "I write unto you, children, because your sins are forgiven you *for His Name's sake*." There you are, he says. The work of Christ upon the Cross has brought you into the family of God. You are His dear children, not for your own sake, but as a tribute to the love of God for His own Son. Nothing can alter that. But, he says, that is not the end. It is a glorious beginning, which will stand for ever. But on the basis of that beginning, there is so much to learn. And then he begins his outline of how spiritual progress towards spiritual maturity is possible and the way in which it takes place — which, I think, is where we began our study. Let us each commit ourselves to make gradual, steady progress towards spiritual maturity, in the enjoyment of all that God has done for us in Christ.

John ends this chapter with a timely reminder. Christ is coming again. Let us so live, and serve, that we shall not need to be ashamed before Him at His coming.