

12. Growing through the Word

Biblical material: Matt 22:37, 38; Gal. 2:20; 5:14; Eph.4:14, 15; Heb. 4:2; 5:12-14.

Quotes

- The real influence of the Bible cannot be measured; it is reckoned only in terms of hearts that have been lifted up, decisions that have been changed, the men and women who, in response to its impervious demands, have done justice and loved kindness and walked humbly with God. *J. Carter Swain*
- The Bible rose to the place it now occupies because it deserved to rise to that place, and not because God sent anybody with a box of tricks to prove its divine authority. *Bruce Barton*
- Of all commentaries upon the Scriptures, good examples are the best and liveliest. *John Donne*
- The Bible is to us what the star was to the wise men; but if we spend all our time in gazing upon it, observing its motions, and admiring its splendor, without being led to Christ by it, the use of it will be lost to us. *T. Adams*

Questions

How does the Bible help us to grow? What kind of changes does God expect in our lives? How can reading stories about others cause change in us? What should we be looking for the Bible to do for us? How does God operate through the Bible? Why doesn't God fix what's necessary? Is wanting to grow absolutely necessary?

Discussion/Comment

Jesus said he came so we could enjoy an abundant life (John 10:10). This can only happen if we develop and grow, rather than remain stagnant. Change comes harder to some than other, but the renewing, growing experience is essential. In this the Bible plays an invaluable part, in revealing the how and why of God's involvement with human beings in various places and times. In recognizing the principles by which God operates, and the fundamentals of his government, then we too can identify with right for rights sake.

Many of Jesus parables were about change and growth—think of the sower, the mustard seed, the prodigal son. Jesus sought to confront his hearers with the need to change, for without that recognition there can be no repentance and transformation. He reserved his strongest condemnation for those who thought they were fine, but who were in reality like “whitened sepulchres, full of dead men's bones.” His challenge to all was to wake up and recognize that there was no future unless they changed, unless there was a complete transformation. Only with divine renewal would there be hope for the future, said Jesus, and he came as both the catalyst for and provision of that renewing power. Being “born again” has become a cliché in our language, but when considered in its original and shocking context, it really does describe what God wants for us. And having been born again, does God wish us to remain as newborns? No, like our physical life, God wants us to grow in his grace to become mature, developed individuals who understand and identify with their heavenly Parent.

The Bible helps us to see this. In its case studies of those who have known God, as well those who have not, we can learn lessons about growth and development. Growing towards God as did his friends—Moses, Abraham, Job—leads to convictions as to God's benevolent purpose

to all in his universe. The Bible reveals this God to us in many and various ways—even in the “bad bits”!

For these reasons studying the Bible is vital—not as a routine act or as a requirement, but as an essential part of our growth as Christians. It’s not a book, but a life-guide.

Even here it is not a self-help book. Quite the opposite! It points out that we cannot of ourselves save and heal ourselves. That help has to come from outside of us, from God. Nor is it a cookery book on how to bake a life, full of recipes. Rather it just tells the stories, and leads us to come to our own conclusions as to how to apply the lessons learned. Far from being “morality tales,” God graciously presents in his book all the faults and failings of humanity, together with God’s attempts to help. In that they are attempts, because we often limit God in his ability to help, we see that God repeatedly tries to help us to grow and develop. This healing of God comes as much as we allow it, within the context of our own life-experiences. That is why no two lives are the same, and how Jesus had no “formula” for treating those around him. That should help us be understanding too of those we seek to help through the sharing of God.

Text comments

Jesus defines the greatest “law” as loving God—totally and absolutely. This then leads to our loving everyone else, for God is love and does just that himself. (Matt 22:37,38). Thus growing into love will be a consequence of knowing and being with God—it is an inescapable result. This is what Paul describes as Christ living in me (Gal. 2:20), not that we lose our individuality or responsibility, but that like Christ we do not live for ourselves. This is loving your neighbor as yourself (Gal. 5:14). We are called to teach the truth in love, and *grow up!* (Eph. 4:14,15) without being distracted by childish ideas and interpretations. The Bible itself is of not value unless we trust the Bible and the God it reveals (Heb. 4:2). Nor is it supposed to be “baby food,” but adult material designed to help us think and grow.

Ellen White Comments

There should be a living, growing interest in storing the mind with Bible truth. The precious knowledge thus gained will build a barrier about the soul. Although assailed with temptation, there will be a firm trust in Jesus, through the knowledge of Him who hath called them to glory and to virtue.--TSS 12. {CSW 36.1}

Study your Bibles. Read over and over the wonderful lessons that Christ has given to animate you, to strengthen you, and to aid you in spiritual growth. {PCP 13}

Many are very ignorant of Bible truth, and they do not realize the duty and necessity of becoming intelligent Christians.... We are invited to become learners in the school of Christ. We need to acquire all the knowledge possible. We cannot afford to be ignorant of the things that pertain to our eternal welfare. If all would cease gossip and evil communication, devoting the time to contemplation of Christ and the plan of salvation, they would add the knowledge essential to a growth in grace. We are to add knowledge from “whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report.” God wants us to understand why He has placed us in the world, and given us the sacred burden of life to bear. He would have us develop the faculties of mind and body, that we may be a blessing to those around us, and that His glory may be reflected from us to the world. It is not His will that our powers should be bound up in torpid stupidity and ignorance. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” {PCP 17}

13. The Word of God Endures

Biblical material: Mic. 6:8, John 3:14-17, 10:10, Rom. 4:21, Eph. 2:8, Phil. 4:7, 2 Pet. 3:9.

Quotes

- To the Bible men will return; and why? Because they cannot do without it. *Matthew Arnold*
- If we would destroy the Christian religion, we must first of all destroy man's belief in the Bible. *Voltaire*
- A single line in the Bible has consoled me more than all the books I ever read besides. *Immanuel Kant*
- The books of men have their day and grow obsolete. God's Word is like Himself, "the same yesterday, today and forever." *Robert Payne Smith*

Questions

If the Word of God is so enduring why are so many people ignorant of the Bible? What sets the Bible apart from other ancient writings? How would you point to the enduring relevance of the Bible to those who have no idea of what the Bible says? Why was/is the Bible necessary, especially from the point of view of the great controversy? Will we still need Bibles in heaven?

Discussion/ Comment

As we come to the end of this quarter on the Bible, what conclusions do we draw? We may say that the Bible "is a good thing." We may conclude it is reliable and helpful. But as we have previously noted, unless it makes a difference in the way we think and live, it is all pointless. That the Word of God endures is surely significant, but of far greater importance is the way we use the Bible and how its lessons impact who we are.

Is it really true, as Matthew Arnold observed, that we cannot do without the Bible? Often our lives seem to say that we are quite prepared to do without it. At this point we may be tempted to make some renewed commitment to Bible study. All well and good. But rather like New Year's resolutions, such a commitment may not last past January. Bible reading plans can be helpful. The idea of reading a chapter a day may work. Devotional guides have their part. But unless we see that the Bible is *essential* to us then these will only be devices to try and force us to read the Bible. Instead of all such programs, would it not be better to ask what questions most concern you and start looking in the Bible for answers—or even more questions? As John Newton observed, "Only God is permanently interesting," and the Bible helps us to discover God. Even perceived problem issues can be a place to start, for at least we know we are genuinely interested in them. Hopefully these are more than side-issues, but more important aspects of how we understand God's character.

For example, a small issue that makes you wonder about God. The pastor last Sabbath preached on Matthew's account of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree. He developed the theme that when Jesus approached he saw a lot of leaves, but no figs. He was hungry. So he commanded that the fig tree never should ever bear fruit again, and it withered, to the amazement of his disciples.

His conclusion was that even though we develop a lot of showy foliage, if we do not bear fruit, then we are unworthy and unproductive, and that we are liable to wither away if God should come looking for fruit. A sermonic illustration, certainly. But my wandering mind took

me over to the parallel passage in Mark. Mark tells the same account, and maybe Matthew was using that. But Matthew omits a rather significant observation that Mark made. He tells us that when Jesus went looking for figs, he found none, *because it was not the season for figs!* Now that changes the perspective some. It's hardly surprising not to find figs when it's not the time for figs to even be there. So what does this say about God and his intent towards us? That he expects the impossible? That God has unreasonable demands? That we should be producing fruit even out of season? A minor story, perhaps, but with some intriguing issues revealed. There are plenty of questions in the Bible, and what we should do is not simply to read, but to think and search for understanding. For ultimately it is through knowing and trusting the God of the Bible that we can accept his gracious love and look forward to an eternity with him.

Text comments

What is good, and what does God require? He replies, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8 NIV). An interesting set of "requirements," which are far more relational than observance-based. Similarly, to those who would wish to establish a mechanical, rule-based system, Jesus himself points to the true reasons that are based in the character of the God of love (John 3:14-17). Consequently this means that condemnation—whether self-imposed or by others—no longer applies! The God of promise can deliver (Romans 4:21); it is his gracious gift that saves us, as we trust in him (Ephesians 2:8). God's peace guards us, as we place ourselves completely with him, identifying with his ways and principles (Philippians 4:7), for he desires everyone to come to him and be changed so they can truly be salvation-healed (2 Peter 3:9).

Ellen White Comments

Our Sabbath schools are nothing less than Bible societies, and in the sacred work of teaching the truths of God's word, they can accomplish far more than they have hitherto accomplished. The Sabbath school, when rightly managed, possesses marvelous power, and is adapted to doing a great work, but it is not now [1889] what it may and should be. {TSS 29}

Conversational Bible Study: Dialogue between Ellen White and her son W.C. White...

Elder White: "I have heard you say, Mother, that we should have more teaching and less preaching; less preaching and more teaching. Speaking of the matter of getting the people together and having Bible readings."

Ellen White: "That was the way in Christ's day. He would speak to the people, and they would call out a question as to what that meant. He was a teacher of the people."

Elder White: "Then at one time I remember very distinctly about your saying that, 'as we approach nearer the end I have seen our camp meetings with less preaching and more Bible study; little groups all over the ground with their Bibles in their hands, and different ones leading out in a free, conversational study of the Scriptures.'"

Ellen White: "That is the work that has been shown me, that our camp meetings would increase in success and interest. There are those that want more definite light. There are some that take [a] longer time to get hold of things and get what you really mean. If they could have the privilege of having it made a little plainer they would see that, and would catch hold of that. And it would be like a nail fastened in a sure place, and it would be written on the tablets of their hearts." {VSS 234-5}