

Growing in Grace

Learning to Walk with God Day by Day

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About This Series

The first year of the Christian life covers more ground than any year that follows it. A person comes up out of the water having settled the largest question there is, and then Monday arrives. The Bible is open, and there's no obvious place to start. Half the people at the building are still strangers. Old habits are standing exactly where they were left. Almost everything is new, and very little of it comes with instructions.

I wrote *My First Year in Christ* for that year. Four workbooks, thirteen lessons each, one for every week of the year. Each workbook takes up a single honest question, the kind that gets asked in a car on the way home rather than in a classroom.

Made New asks what just happened to me. **Growing in Grace** asks why growth feels so slow. **Living as God's People** asks where I fit. **Sent with Purpose** asks why I am still here.

The four move in order, from the inside outward. The first is about **identity**, the second about **formation**, the third about **the body** we have been placed in, and the fourth about **the world** we were left here to serve. Each one also stands on its own. None of them assumes we have read the one before it.

Paul gave the Colossians a sentence that serves as the aim of all four: *just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith*, Colossians 2:6–7. Received, then walk. This series lives in the space between those two verbs.

How the lessons work. Each lesson opens with one big idea and the passages that carry it. Then comes an essay, long enough to say something and short enough to read in a sitting. After the essay, there are statements to complete, questions for discussion, three journaling prompts, and one practice to carry through the week.

The journaling prompts are the part most likely to get skipped, and they do the most work. Nobody grades them, and nobody reads them. Write the honest and authentic answer instead of the good one.

The material works in a class or alone. A group will get the most out of the discussion questions; a reader on his own can take the journaling prompts slowly and lose nothing.

Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible.

Introduction

Why Does Growth Feel So Slow?

The change at the beginning is easy to see. A man is baptized on a Sunday night and by Tuesday half his life looks different. Things he did for years without thinking, he no longer does. He tells people. He's lighter than he's been in a decade.

Then a few months pass, and the pace changes.

The same thing that always set him off sets him off again, and this time he knows better, which somehow makes it worse. A chapter of the Bible goes by, and he feels nothing. He prays for a habit to die and finds it breathing in the morning. Nobody warned him about this stretch, and it lasts long enough that he starts to wonder whether the first part was real.

That stretch is what this quarter is about.

Every Christian who keeps going arrives there. Growth is slower than conversion, quieter, and far less obvious from the inside. That slowness is part of how God works, and the New Testament says so in a way that leaves no room for surprise.

Where We're Going

Three texts frame these thirteen lessons.

The workbook takes its title from a command near the end of Peter's second letter: *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, 2 Peter 3:18. Peter could have told them to try harder. He told them to grow. It is a word for living things, and living things change at a pace they don't set for themselves.

Paul puts our effort and God's work in the same breath: *For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose*, Philippians 2:13. That sentence is just after he tells the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Both verses stand. We work because God is working, and the second is what makes the first possible.

The third text says what is really happening while it seems that nothing is: *we are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory* 2 Corinthians 3:18. Present tense, and passive. Something is being done to us over time, but what is left unsaid is how it feels along the way.

The Four Parts

Part One — What Growth Actually Is · Lessons 1–3 · *What is God doing, and who is doing it?* Growth gets confused with performance early and often, so Part One settles that before asking anyone to do anything. Real change works from the inside out. Grace fuels it rather than excusing us from it. The Spirit of God who lives in a Christian does the work.

Part Two — How Change Happens · Lessons 4–7 · *What really changes a person?* Four lessons on the ordinary process of change: what we think, what we want, what we refuse, and what we practice. God

renews the mind, reshapes desire, then gives us something to say no to and habits that make the next no easier.

Part Three — When Growth Is Hard · Lessons 8–10 · *What do we do when it stops working?*

Discouragement and dry seasons, suffering that raises the question of whether God has left, and the slow schooling of contentment. Paul said he learned to be content, and the word he chose admits how long it took.

Part Four — Growth in Ordinary Life · Lessons 11–13 · *Where does all this happen?* Wisdom for the decisions nobody prays over twice, faith at a desk and a kitchen table, and a closing lesson on looking back over a year and giving God the credit without pretending we sat still.

Four Principles to Watch For

Growth is gradual, and the pace is not an accident. When a lesson seems to be asking for more than we have, check what God has already put in place before checking our own effort.

Grace fuels obedience. *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age,* Titus 2:11–12. The same grace that saves is the grace that trains. Paul says it in one sentence, and this quarter never separates the halves.

God changes what we want, and not only what we do. *Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires,* Psalm 37:4. Behavior can be forced for a while. Desire cannot, which is why God works there and why it takes time.

Discipline serves the relationship. Prayer, Scripture, giving, and the rest are the path and never the destination. A Christian can keep every habit on the list and still be a stranger to the One the habits were meant to bring him near.

A Word About Grace

Two misunderstandings can spoil a quarter like this one.

The first treats grace as the door. It got us in, the thinking goes, and now the walking is on us. That reading makes the Christian life an audition after the part has already been given, and it leaves people exhausted and never finished.

The second runs the opposite direction and treats grace as permission to stay where we are. If God has accepted us as we are, why press for anything? Paul answers that in Titus. The grace that appeared is the same grace that instructs us to deny godlessness and to live sensibly in the present age. One appearance, two actions, and no gap between them.

We are not growing in order to be accepted. *We grow because we already are.*

How to Get the Most Out of This Quarter

Read the passage before the lesson. Every lesson is built on one to three texts. Reading them cold, before anyone explains them, is worth more than any other five minutes you'll spend on the lesson.

Write your answers down. The journaling prompts are private on purpose. Several of them cannot be answered honestly out loud in a group, which is exactly why they're printed instead of asked.

Expect a flat week. Some weeks the lesson will land and some weeks it won't. Lesson 8 is about that, and it is placed in the middle of the quarter for a reason.

Give it all thirteen weeks. Part Four assumes Part One. The last lesson asks you to look back at a season you won't have unless you stay for it.

Paul ended a letter to a young church with a line worth keeping in view for thirteen weeks: *Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely*, 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Then the promise underneath it: *He who calls you is faithful; he will do it*, 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

He will do it. The work in front of us this quarter is real, and it is never the only work being done.

PART ONE

What Growth Actually Is

What is God doing, and who is doing it?

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

— Ephesians 2:10

Growth is often confused with performance early on, so we settle that before anyone is asked for anything. Real change works from the inside out. Grace fuels it rather than excusing us from it. The Spirit of God who lives in a Christian does the work. Then watch the order in Paul's sentence. We are his workmanship first. The good works come second. God had them ready before we got here, and Paul makes a point of saying so. These three lessons stay in that order, because the ten that follow depend on it.

LESSON 1

What Spiritual Growth Is (and Isn't)

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. — 2 Peter 3:18

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit. — 2 Corinthians 3:18

Spiritual growth is God changing who we are from the inside out, slow on purpose, and far easier to see in a year than in a week.

The Ledger We Bring with Us

Ask someone baptized nine months ago how they're doing, and watch them do arithmetic.

He is counting. Days since the last time he lost his temper. Chapters read this month against the chapters he read in February. Sundays he wanted to be there against Sundays he made himself go. Somewhere in that tally he arrives at a number, and the number tells him whether he is growing.

Nobody taught him to count like that; he learned it everywhere else. School graded him, work reviews him, and the app on his phone tells him he is on a streak or has broken one. That is how progress gets measured in every other part of life, so the ledger comes to church with us.

That ledger is honest about some things and blind to others. It can count what we do. It cannot see what we are becoming. Two men can read the same chapter on the same morning, one because he wants to hear from God and the other because he'll feel guilty if he skips it. The ledger records both the same way. God does not.

So how does the New Testament measure this? It never hands us a scale; it hands us a word.

Peter Says Grow

Peter is at the end of his second letter, and he has spent most of it warning about people who will pull a church apart. His last instruction before the closing line is a caution: *be on your guard, so that you are not led away by the error of lawless people and fall from your own stable position*, 2 Peter 3:17. Then comes the remedy, and it is not a defensive one.

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

He could have told them to hold the line. He told them to grow.¹

Grow is a word for living things. It is what a seed does in the ground. It is what a child does between one school year and the next. It is what Luke says the word of God did in Jerusalem while the number of disciples multiplied. *Grow* brings its own pace along with it: wheat cannot be argued into being ready in July, and no farmer has ever gotten a field to hurry.

None of that leaves us passive; Peter puts *grow* in the imperative, and two chapters earlier he is blunt about effort: *make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness*, 2 Peter 1:5. He wants those qualities *in increasing measure*, 2 Peter 1:8. Increasing. Even where Peter presses hardest on what we are to do, he describes something that grows over time. Effort and growth are never competitors for the Christian. Peter asks for both in the same breath, and he never suggests that the first sets the pace for the second.

What Is Being Done to Us

Paul says the same thing from the other side.

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Look at the verb. *Are being transformed* is passive.² We are not the subject of that action. Our part of the sentence is the looking, and the transforming is being done to us while we look. The phrase *from glory to glory* has stages built into it, one measure at a time. Whatever God is doing in a Christian, he is doing in installments, and the sentence assumes there will be another one after this.

Notice also what Paul leaves out: he never says how any of it feels along the way. The verse simply describes what is happening, not what we will notice happening. Those are two different questions, and only one of them comes with a promise.

So why would God work slowly when he could work quickly? Because he is remaking a person, and a person is not a machine. A machine can be repaired over a weekend. A character is grown.

The Farmer Who Sleeps

Jesus told a parable about this, and only Mark recorded it.³

The kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day; the seed sprouts and grows, although he doesn't know how, Mark 4:26–27.

The farmer is not idle: he scatters at the beginning, and at the end he brings out the sickle. In between he goes to bed. Night after night he lies down over a field he cannot supervise, and the seed does what seed does without consulting him. Then Jesus adds something: although he doesn't know how. The man is not being scolded for his ignorance; that is simply the arrangement. The work he can do he does at the two ends of the season, and the part he cannot do takes up every week in between.

Paul described his own work in a church the same way, and he was talking about people rather than barley: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth*, 1 Corinthians 3:6. Two men worked hard. Neither one grew anything.

This is also why the person most likely to see change in us is the one who sees us twice a year. We stand too close to our own progress to watch it happen.

Three Things That Get Mistaken for It

The first is feeling: a week when Scripture opens up and prayer comes easily feels like progress, and a flat week feels like backsliding. Feeling is real, and feeling is weather. Lesson 8 gives a whole week to this, because the flat stretch usually lands somewhere in the middle of a quarter like this one.

The second is information, and Hebrews draws the line plainly: *solid food is for the mature — for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil*, Hebrews 5:14. Trained by use. A Christian can learn a great deal in twelve months and come out the other end the same man with a larger vocabulary.

The third does the most damage, because it reads the evidence backward. We assume that a growing Christian struggles less, when in fact he often struggles more, or at least notices more. A conscience that has been sharpened finds things to be sorry about that it walked past two years ago. Sins we used to defend start to bother us. Words we would not have heard ourselves say stop us in the doorway. That discomfort is what a working conscience feels like from the inside. It reads like failure, and it is evidence.

Where to Look Instead

If the ledger is the wrong instrument, put it down and ask better questions. How long does it take you to come back now, compared to a year ago? What do you do with a sin you used to defend? Who are you at home on a day that has gone badly? What would the people who see you at Christmas say about you if nobody asked them to be kind?

None of those can be scored, and every one of them can be answered honestly. The answers will tell us more about a year than any streak ever did.

There is also a place to stand while we answer them. Peter's preposition is worth a second look, because we grow *in* the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Grace is the ground we grow on, and it was put under us before any of this started. It is not what we are measuring, and none of us is on trial for the pace.

A year from now, something will be different about us, and most of us won't be able to pick out the week it changed. The farmer never could either, and Jesus told the story that way on purpose.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement.

1. Peter's command in 2 Peter 3:18 uses a word for _____ things, which grow at a pace they do not set for themselves.
2. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, the verb *are being transformed* is _____, which means God is the one doing the work.

3. Paul said that he planted and Apollos watered, but _____ gave the growth.
4. In Jesus' parable the farmer scatters the seed and then _____, and the soil produces the crop by itself.
5. Hebrews says solid food is for those whose senses have been _____ to distinguish between good and evil.

Answers⁴ are at the end of this lesson.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. Think of something you once learned to do well — a job, an instrument, a sport. How did you know you were getting better? Who noticed before you did?

2. When someone at church says a Christian is "growing," what do people usually mean by it?

Core

3. Read 2 Peter 3:18. Peter had any number of ways to close this letter. Why do you think he closed it with the word *grow*?

4. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, what are we doing and what is God doing? What difference should that make during a slow season?

5. In Mark 4:26–29, the farmer works at the beginning and at the end and sleeps in between. Where does that leave our effort? What would it look like to scatter seed and then go to bed?

Deeper

6. A sharper conscience will find more to be sorry about, not less. Why is that so easy to read as failure? What would it take to read it the other way?
7. If someone asked you for evidence that God has been at work in you over the past year, what would you point to? Why is that question hard to answer out loud?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Think back twelve months. Describe one ordinary situation — a conversation, a temptation, a bad afternoon — that you would have handled differently then. Just describe it. Don't decide yet whether it counts.
2. What are you really counting? When you privately decide you are doing well or doing badly as a Christian, name the measure you use. Where did you learn to measure it that way?
3. Slow change has a way of talking us into conclusions about ourselves. Write down what you have quietly concluded about yourself because growth has taken longer than you expected. Then write 2 Peter 3:18 underneath it, in full.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Write 2 Peter 3:18 on a card and put it where you will see it first thing in the morning.

Then keep one line a day for seven days. At the end of each day, write down one thing you did, said, or let go of that you would not have a year ago. Some days the line will be blank. Leave it blank and keep the card up.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 2 – The Role of Grace in Change, Titus 2:11–14; Romans 6:1–4

Lesson 1 called grace the ground the growing happens on and left it at that. Lesson 2 asks what grace does once we are standing on it.

Paul had already heard the objection: *What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply?* Romans 6:1. Somebody had done the math and decided that more sin meant more grace. Paul answers him with a burial.

Read Titus 2:11–14 and Romans 6:1–4 before the next class. In Titus, mark every verb attached to grace, and count how many of them are about training rather than pardon. In Romans, notice how quickly Paul leaves the question behind and starts talking about what has already happened to us.

¹ The verb is *auxanō*, used throughout the New Testament of things that are alive — the wildflowers of Matthew 6:28, the child in Luke 1:80, and the spreading of the word itself in Acts 6:7 and 12:24. It is not a word for effort. It is a word for what living things do while they are being fed

² *Metamorphoumetha*, present passive. The same verb stands behind the transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2, and behind Paul's call to *be transformed by the renewing of your mind* in Romans 12:2, which Lesson 4 takes up. The present tense carries ongoing action; the passive voice names someone else as the one acting.

³ Mark 4:26–29 appears in no other Gospel. It sits between the parable of the sower and the parable of the mustard seed, in a run of three parables about growth that no one can see happening.

⁴ 1. living · 2. passive · 3. God · 4. sleeps · 5. trained