

The Growing Family of God

1 John 2:12-14 I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one.

Every now and then, I will preach a sermon, and I know that someone has been discouraged by it. Not because it is untrue, or that I was unnecessarily harsh, but because the standard put up in the Word of God seems incredibly daunting. Not only that, but you can never say everything in a sermon. Every sermon is somewhat incomplete. And sometimes, the sermon leans hard on the side of what God requires, and not as hard on what God has supplied. Other times it is the reverse. But as a pastor, I know every Christian needs both. We need both firm, uncompromising confrontation with the commands of God, and gentle encouragements about the grace of God. If you have too much of one, your congregation will either begin to faint under a sense of crushing weight with no relief; too much of the other, and they take the grace of God for granted and make light of His demands.

John is very much the pastor. In this Scripture we see his pastor's heart. John does something quite different here. He is not simply giving us signs of life, one after another. Instead, he now writes something more poetic in style. What is he doing, and why is he doing it?

More than anything, John loves his readers. He speaks to them now as a pastor. He has been writing a pretty firm and uncompromising letter: life or death, light or darkness, love or hatred. He's been saying, you're in the light or you're not. You have eternal life or you don't. And in so doing, he's been telling believers about the high standard of holiness God expects: confess your sins; obey His commandments; imitate His life; love the brethren as Christ loved you. John, as a pastor, knows that when you have been firm and unyielding, you also need to be encouraging and comforting.

What he seeks to do is to comfort, encourage and motivate believers. The way he does that is to remind us that we are all at differing stages of maturity. Although John writes in an absolute way ("he who is born of God does not commit sin"), he recognises we are all works in progress. We do not reach maturity in a day. You see, we're a family. There are only two families in the world: God's and Satan's. If you are in God's family, then there are signs of growth. In a physical family, there are different ages and different roles. So in the church of God, there are different levels of maturity. That also means we need to recognise those differences and respect them.

He also wants to encourage us by reminding us of our resources in Christ. He is setting up these incredible standards of life: love others like Christ did, live a holy life. And I want you to know that if the New Testament did not tell us what God does for us, and what He puts into us, and what He promises to give us, then its standards would be the most discouraging thing in the world. God never tells you to do something without first giving you all the resources you need to carry it out. God first says, this is what I have supplied for you; this is what is now true of you; this is what belongs to you; now live it out. Become what you are. Work out what I have worked in.

So what John is going to do here is divide Christians up into three different levels of spiritual maturity: little children, young men and fathers. He is not excluding female believers; he is simply using these terms as general ways of referring to maturity. Also, these terms do not correlate to physical age. The thing about spiritual maturity is that you can

grow at different rates. You can have an eighty-year old man who is a new Christian and is therefore one of the little children. You can have a lady in her mid-forties, who is in the young man stage of Christian growth. You can have a man in his twenties, who is in the father stage of Christianity. We grow at different rates, depending on how we apply ourselves to the means of grace. We are also saved at different physical ages, and all this influences our spiritual state. He is going to have a message for the little ones, a message for the young ones and a message for the fathers.

I. The Message to the Little Ones: You're Saved and You're Sons!

1 John 2:12 I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.

Who are the little children? The word in the original means small children. The idea is babies, infants, little children, and the youngest in the family. Who are the youngest in the family of God - those who are new believers, those who have recently trusted Christ as Lord and Saviour? They are just beginning this new life of knowing Christ and making Him known.

It is a precious time. The little ones in families are a delight because of their simplicity, their wide-eyed wonder at the world, their curiosity - so new believers are a delight in the same way. They are delighting in their salvation. The Word of God is to them a new world of truth to be explored. They ask the most direct and precious questions. They pray the simplest and most direct prayers. They are a wonderful part of any church. Indeed, when a church does not have newer believers, there is a kind of coldness that goes with it. All the more reason to invite people with our lips and our lives, to share the gospel with them, that we might have more infant believers filling our church with their enthusiasm and joy and zeal.

John writes to newer believers, and he says to them, this is true of you: your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. That doesn't mean it isn't true of the other two groups, for it is. John is simply taking the precious truth which new believers know with all their heart: my sins have been forgiven! I have been saved!

The word for *forgiven* in the original is in what is called the perfect tense, which means it is a completed act in the past, with results in the present. The day you trusted Jesus Christ as Saviour, your sins were forgiven you. How many of them? All of them. In fact, when Jesus spoke His last words on the cross, before committing His Spirit to the Father, He spoke in the perfect tense: it is finished. It has been accomplished. It has been paid in full.

The results continue into the present. Jesus Christ continues to cleanse you of all your sin as your Advocate. You can continue to confess your sins because of that assured cleansing and forgiveness. But you can know you are forgiven and accepted by God.

And this must be one of the differences between someone truly saved, and someone in religion. Ask an unbeliever if his sins are forgiven, and he will say, "I hope so. I'm trying my best. I hope one day God will be merciful to me. I'm trying to store up merit for that day." But that is all wrong. The believer knows my sins have been forgiven.

Why? Because we were good? Because we were turning over a new leaf? No, because of His name's sake. That means God forgave you because of Himself. He forgave you because of His own character and His own purposes. God forgave you because of the perfection of Jesus Christ, laid down for you on the cross in your place. I am so glad that my salvation was not a matter of my first pleasing God in some way before He would forgive me. If there was something in me, then the

verse would read, 'your sins are forgiven you because of your deeds'. But that would be like all false religion. The religion of the Bible is that God gets all the glory by being the source of all good things. God saves me for His name's sake.

Isaiah 43:25 "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins."

And if God saved me for His own reasons, then I am assured. If I am saved by my works, then I should fear, because my own works might disqualify me. But if He forgave me for His reasons, then He has also promised to keep me saved for His reasons.

That leads us to something else which John says new Christians know is true of them:

I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father.

New Christians know that they are saved, but with that, they know that they are sons and daughters of God – children who now know God as Father. A different word for little children is used here, meaning infants, those nursed and instructed by parents.

John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

Once again, it is the perfect tense. You have come to know in the past – a completed act, with present results. There was a day you were born into His family, and He became, and is still, your Father.

One of the earliest reflexes that infant children have is to recognise the face and voice of their parents. Amongst their first words are 'Mama' and 'Dada'.

Galatians 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

Indeed, when little children are worried or scared, they immediately begin calling out for mommy or daddy. Something very interesting happens to true believers. Before salvation, a person might sometimes call out in an emergency, God help me! They may cry out to God, and call Him "God". But something interesting happens, without our being taught this. In times of distress, we find ourselves saying "Father!" There is a family connection that goes deeper than we can explain. We know that God is now Father, and when we are lonely or afraid, or even overjoyed, we call Him "Father". And just like infants want to be carried by Father, or hang on his leg, or sit on his lap, so new believers know they want to be around the Father. There is an intimacy now. There is a relationship of love.

So if you are a new Christian, rejoice in your salvation and your sonship. Rejoice in your forgiveness and your new family and make sure you keep feeding.

1 Peter 2:1-3 Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

Now while we rejoice over new believers, as much as we rejoice over new babies, there is a natural expectation for growth. To see a little baby in a pram makes us coo and smile. But to see a bearded, hairy, 6-foot, 90kg man, stuffed into a pram with a bottle of milk in his mouth, would be a sad and

even grotesque sight. In the same way, the Bible expects growth, and expresses great disappointment when it doesn't occur.

1 Corinthians 3:1 1 Corinthians 3:1 ¶ And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.

Hebrews 5:12-13 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

So, unless you stunt your own growth through disobediently neglecting the means of your own growth, you should progress into the next stage, the stage John calls 'young men'.

II. The Message to the Young Men: You're Strong and You're Standing!

1 John 2:13 I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one.

1 John 2:14 I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one.

Who are these 'young men'? The word in the original meant a youth, a young man, reaching the prime of his powers. When our children are passing from cute to handsome, from pretty to beautiful, they're becoming young people. They're starting to feel their own strength. They like to help carry things and lift things. Set them free on a field, and they love to let those muscles go and sprint. They're thinking for themselves. They're forming their own opinions. They like to argue more.

Proverbs 20:29 The glory of young men is their strength, And the splendor of old men is their gray head.

But they're a joy to our hearts as well, aren't they? It is a marvellous thing to see children turning into young men and women, heading for that journey of being men and women who earn their own money and raise their own families.

Well, in the church of God, the same kind of thing happens. Christians go from the nursing stage, to a stage of strength and independence. If a Christian keeps feeding on the Word of God, he becomes more and more ready to take on the struggle for the faith.

One of the perils of babes is that they are easily led astray. Little children are gullible.

Ephesians 4:13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

So whereas when you are newly saved, you are so content to know you are saved and a child of God, and happy to just sit at the Father's feet, now when you grow up, you start to notice that people have objections to your beliefs. People want to entice you back into the world. Your own flesh seems to war against you. This is the stage when you start fighting some battles. You take in the Word, you read up on false teachings and false religions, you begin to understand correct doctrine, you start to hunt down sin in your life. You're not just enjoying a bottle of milk, you're swinging a sword.

So John says to Christians in this stage: you are strong, the Word of God abides in you, and you

have overcome the evil one. You're strong and you're standing. To put it another way, you are an overcomer. The word here is, once again, in the perfect tense. You have overcome in the past, and the results are still with you.

1 John 4:4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

1 John 5:4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith. ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Christians do not fight for victory; Christians fight from victory. Christ has overcome the devil, and we are in Him, therefore His victory is ours.

Hebrews 2:14 ¶ Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,

Colossians 2:15 ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Therefore, as we take up the whole armour of God, we enter into the victory that is already ours in Christ.

Romans 16:20 And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Once again, these things are true of all of us, whether we are just starting out, or have been in the faith for many years. All believers have the Word of God within, and are strong and have overcome Satan. But it is those who are emerging out of infancy that especially start to notice the battle, and the weapons, and their God-given strength.

So, as a young and growing Christian, remember, not only are you forgiven and a child of the Father, but He has equipped you with strength, with the Word, and with a guaranteed victory. So don't give up. Stand! If the thought of waging this battle against sin and the world seems to be draining, John wants to encourage you by saying – you are strong! You have already won! Don't give up when victory is guaranteed.

But also a word of caution. Sometimes, when you reach this stage, you become rather impatient with other people. You become impatient with unbelievers who just don't get it! You become impatient with church leaders who don't seem to be moving fast enough, and getting things going aggressively enough. You become impatient with what looks like a lack of zeal in the spiritual leaders and sometimes, you get impatient with the baby Christians who don't seem to care about all the controversies. And if you're not careful, you take it upon yourself to frighten the new Christians with all the false doctrines and false ideas that are out there and you tell them they ought to know these things.

That's a lot like youths in the physical realm, isn't it? Teenagers are often impatient with their elders, certain that they have just lost the plot and do not understand the world as well as they do, and that most of them are half-asleep. And teenagers are very often less than gentle with the children, trying to scare them or intimidate them with knowledge they themselves have only recently learnt.

So, in the church of God, you have to be careful as you grow up in the Lord, that you take care to

treat both the little children and the father properly. The younger Christians need care, encouragement, not confusion and conflict. The fathers deserve your respect and trust, since they have already fought the battles you're just beginning to grapple with.

To the strong young ones, the Bible exhorts you not only to keep feeding, but to be serving. Paul tells Titus to instruct young men to be sober-minded. A serious kind of mind only comes when we give ourselves to the ongoing service of God's people. A group of energetic Christians, with their heads filled with notions, and no humility to wash feet are going to turn into one big sparring match.

III. The Message to the Fathers: You're Settled and Satisfied!

We come to the last group that John addresses: Fathers.

1 John 2:13 I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.

1 John 2:14 I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning

So who are the fathers? Fathers are Christians who have passed through the infant stage, passed through the young man stage, and are now in a place to be spiritual leaders. At the infant stage you are learning more than anything else. At the young man stage you are serving and beginning to take on more spiritual responsibility. At the father stage you are to be a spiritual parent to others. You have to nurture the little children, and admonish them. You have to temper the young men where necessary. You have to spar with the young men, correct their imbalances, point them in the right direction and harness their energy.

So what does John say of the fathers? Perhaps the greatest thing of all: You know Him who is from the beginning. Who is that?

1 John 1:1 ¶ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life --

Jesus Christ. You have come to know Jesus Christ. Again, perfect tense. You have come to know Him in the past, and you still do. This is the knowing by experience. You have walked with Him, lived with Him, obeyed Him and served Him, and in so doing, you have proved Him. You have proved Him to be everything He is said to be in the Scripture.

See, whereas the little child knows the Father, as we progress, we come to a deep and rich love for our captain and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Our faith becomes more and more Christ-centred.

We see something of this progression in Ephesians 3:

Ephesians 3:14-19 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

First in verse 16, we are strengthened by the Spirit. He takes the Word of God and matures us. As a

result, Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. This means we're experiencing the sweetness of abiding in Christ and He in us. He is welcome in our lives and dwells there abundantly. The result is a life rooted and grounded in love, and coming to comprehend the love of Christ, that four-dimensional, beyond knowledge kind of love, which brings us to fullness. There is a deep settledness here, and a rich satisfaction.

Philippians 3:8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

When I think of an Old Testament illustration of someone who had come to this point, I look to Enoch.

Genesis 5:21-24 Enoch lived sixty-five years, and begot Methuselah. ²² After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. ²³ So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. ²⁴ And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

Just like little children have the danger of remaining infantile, and young men face the danger of being destructive, so fathers face the danger of becoming complacent people who want to be waited on and served, more than anything else. They face the danger of becoming critical spectators, the proverbial grumpy old man, who scoffs at all efforts, criticises everything, and sits on the sidelines with his arms folded.

Certainly the world might force you to retire from your job after 65, but there is no retirement for believers. You are never redundant as a Christian. And the way fathers avoid becoming crusty old men is by nurturing the little children, and training the young men.

If you have been in the faith for a long time, and have fought the battles, learnt sobriety and temperance, then nurture the little one and temper the young men.

All of these things are true of all believers. Every believer can say, my sins have been forgiven. I have come to know the Father. The Word of God dwells in me. I am strong in Him. I have overcome the Evil One. I have come to know Jesus Christ. At different stages in your Christian life, you'll be more aware of some of those truths than at others. But they are all true of you.

So don't be discouraged. These are your resources. Don't be discouraged: we don't reach maturity in a day. Feed. Grow. Serve, and ultimately lead.