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SERIES: GROWING AND GOING

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TITLE: Growing in Knowledge and Maturity Pt. 2

You can see that **to grow in knowledge, you'll need to be dependent upon God's Word.** Why? It's **God's blueprint for your life. God's Word brings life to the fullest. And God's Word brings coherence to the world around us.**

Now I also understand that it's sometimes hard knowing where to start when you read the Bible. It's sometimes hard to understand what you're reading. So I want to offer you some steps on how to read the Bible for all of its worth: How to mine the Scriptures for all of their wealth.

Have you ever read a verse or a passage of the Bible and asked, "What does that mean?" or "What does that have to do with me today?" I have. In fact, I still do, as I prepare for this message and do my own home study! This is a discussion of hermeneutics. What is that? It's a fancy way of saying, the art and science of studying the Bible.

So, how do we interpret what we study? Let me offer you four steps to interpreting the Bible.

- 1) Remember, there is only one meaning. Each letter or book of the Bible was written to a specific person or people, in a specific place, at a specific time, for a specific purpose. Why does that matter? Because we should never ask the question of "What does that verse mean to me?" or "What does that mean to you?" There is only one meaning, and it's contained in the original writer's intent and context.
- 2) Remember, there's a gap between you and the original writer and their audience. Think about that: There is a range of 3500 to 2000 years between the original audience and us. That means there's a world of difference from the people, places, events, and way of living. That's not a problem. That's really not a barrier too far to conquer. It's just important to help us interpret the intended meaning of a verse or passage.
- 3) Remember, there are timeless principles in these verses and passages. Take, for example, an often misinterpreted verse: Jeremiah 29:11. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**" Many will read this and say, "Sweet! God's got a plan for me, and it's really good: Maybe some good health, some wealth, maybe even a little topping of joy." But is this the correct way to interpret it? Is what I just said the timeless principle? Let's think about this for a moment. Jeremiah was speaking words of encouragement and hope during the final siege of Jerusalem. Judah was being disciplined for their disobedience, yet God was giving them hope in a hopeless situation. So if that's the context, what is the timeless principle? Pastor John MacArthur nails it when he says this: "There is something

far greater and eternally significant that we learn from this story in its true context. God does not abandon His people! In spite of their sin, God was relentlessly faithful to His covenants regarding Israel's future and His promised Messiah. Not even Babylonian captivity could prevent His promises from coming to pass."¹ What is the timeless principle? God does not abandon His people. That's the timeless principle.

- 4) When we understand the principle, from that flows the application or even applications. Now there may be many applications for a principle. We all live in different cultures and countries. We all come from different backgrounds and live different lives. How we apply the principle may look different. Take Jeremiah 29:11 again. We know that God does not abandon His people. Well, as His child, we know that no matter what situation I put myself in, my ultimate hope is in Christ. Therefore, my hope is in Christ and my eternity rests with Him. Nothing will change that. Knowing and believing that impacts how I act and react to all the situations around me.

How should we study the Bible? **Remember the meaning. Remember the differences. Remember the principle. And: Remember the application.** Do these four things, and you'll be understanding Scripture in no time.

So now you that you know how to study the Bible, you can grow in knowledge, which will provide God's blueprint for your life. It will bring you life to the fullest. And it will bring coherence to the world around us.

And this is just one characteristic to be rooted in Christ. The second characteristic to be rooted in Christ is: **We need to be growing in spiritual maturity.**

Now, what do I mean by growing in spiritual maturity? It means becoming more like Christ and less like our old selves: To sin less and be obedient to God more; to move from spiritual infancy to being a fully devoted follower of Christ. How do we grow in spiritual maturity? First, **we recognize who we are in Christ.** Who are we in Christ you wonder? Paul gives a short answer in 2 Corinthians 5: he says, *we are new creations!* No more old self, instead, hello new self.

Paul provides a fuller answer in Romans 6 (NASB):

⁶knowing this that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷for he who has died is freed from sin... ¹⁵What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!... ¹⁷But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Rom 6:6-7, 15, 17-18).

We were once slaves to sin: greed, anger, lying, sex, adultery, pornography, drugs, alcohol, gluttony, selfishness, pride, abuse - you name your poison - we have been a slave to it. But in Christ, He has shattered the chains to those old sinful ways. You have a path out, and that path is powered by your identity in Christ.

¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B150925/frequently-abused-verses-did-god-promise-you-prosperity>

Christ takes us and He moves from death to life: From sinner to saint; From slave of sin to slave of righteousness; From enemy of God to child of God. We truly are a new creation. Our growing in maturity is simply living out what God has already made real. We are new, and we are free!

DISCUSSION:

N: So let's invite Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney in to talk about living out what God has already made real. Okay, so what does that look like in your life today, to live out the reality of who you are in Christ?

C: It's everything. I was spiritually dead and facing eternal separation from God. It's a pretty big deal. But now, it's gone. All the old things have passed away and all these things have become new in my life, because God said so. So no matter what life brings, no matter how evil intrudes, God has a plan, and His ultimate plan is right on schedule, and it can't be stopped. So how's that for confidence?

N: What say you Arnie?

A: Well, you know, I look at it like we're short-termers. We're here for a short period of time, and God's called us here for a purpose. We've got to have our eyes open. We've got to be hitting the ball. And I think a lot of the things that are going on today make us take a look at ourselves, and I see at least a lot of self-focus - not for necessarily motivating - but for depression, and "Poor pitiful me; I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't." You would think people would reflect more on having impact before they die, but I don't see that. I see almost the opposite of that.

N: Hmm. Yeah. This is one of the greatest frustrations it's been for me as a pastor - is watching people flounder in their faith - not believing the reality of what Christ has done. He says, *you are a new creation. The old things have passed*, you know, embrace the new. So what is it? Why do people struggle so much with this?

A: You know, it's amazing. And I probably shouldn't say this, but I will anyway. I work with a couple of researchers that do research on the Christian community. And we're starting to see in the COVID-19 surveys, and looks, is that there is a small element - a small but significant element - of mature believers that are stopping engaging their Bibles. One of the firms was asking to quote me, about how people - mature believers - are becoming stronger during COVID-19. And they wanted to quote me in this big thing they're doing. I had to say, you know, we're actually finding a trend where mature believers - there's a small but significant group - that are actually moving away from being engaged. So it's like the battle takes the toll, and it's pretty challenging.

N: Yeah. I think there's a major disconnect today with Christians, in the fact that they aren't getting into the Bible, they aren't developing themselves. And so what's happening is they're not gaining a right Christian worldview. And so we, as believers, are called to be people of the Word, daily getting into the Scripture, renewing our mind, so we can live out the reality of who we are. Does it take time? Yes. Can it be a challenge? Sure. But if we are going to be all that God has called us to be, then we have to take it one day at a time, one passage at a time, and come back to the Bible.

To grow in spiritual maturity, the first thing we do is to recognize who we are in Christ and because of that **we will follow God's blueprint for our lives.** We can't just know that it's God's blueprint for our lives. We need to actually follow it. That's the natural outflow - is actually living it out, by following that blueprint - not out of obligation, but out of love.

[Ephesians 2:10 \(NASB\)](#) says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them."

The moment you turned from your sin and turned to Christ, He prepared the way for you to walk; He prepared a blueprint for your life; a better way of living in a fallen world; a way that we can live out the Kingdom of God, here and now, in a community of believers.

God prepared a way to live among people who are far from God. You see, when we love our enemies and do good to those who hurt us, it matures us. By loving our enemies and doing good to them, that is producing good works. We will mature when we pray for people who are different than us. That's a good work. That's part of the work that He prepared beforehand. When we love people sacrificially, we are doing those good works: We are growing and maturing. When we follow God's blueprint for our lives, we'll mature, because we'll follow in the footsteps of our Savior.

Jesus told His disciples, "[If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it](#)" (Matthew 16:24-25, NASB).

Christ was willing to give up everything – He suppressed His divine qualities. He experienced every temptation and adversity we do. He even was willing to give up His life – the ultimate sacrifice. As people who are saved by God's grace, as people who are His masterpiece, we will follow God's blueprint for our lives - we too must be willing to give up everything for Him. This daily posture of sacrificial living will mature you in profound ways. But this sacrificial posture acknowledges and embraces the last truth to grow in spiritual maturity. **And that is, you'll experience trials and adversity.**

One of my least favorite verses comes from James 1. [James 1:2-4](#) says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." We will experience trials; Hard times; Persecution; Adversity. But I want to tell you something - when you experience persecution for Christ, that is an indication you're doing something right for Jesus. Growth means pain. Growth means strain. And God isn't going to remove it from your path, because it is beneficial for you. James says, it produces endurance. It gets you ready for the storms of life, and the windfalls too!

So God allows this adversity for our benefit. Because God loves us, He won't prevent the strain. No parent would tell the little baby, "Now, quit trying to lift your head. Just lay there and don't strain. Don't let that neck lifting steal your joy. Lay and atrophy." That's silly! Parents allow

their babies to struggle to lift their heads, so they can hold them strong later on. Parents allow their babies to struggle to crawl, and walk, though it will be frustrating and painful at times, because it matures the baby. But it's hard for us as parents watching, and it's also hard for us in our faith.

Now not only will our suffering produce growth and maturity, but that spiritual maturity also produces spiritual empathy. Listen to what Paul writes in Second Corinthians 1: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.” (Vs. 3-6, ESV)

Did you catch what he just said? When we experience pain and suffering, God can use that, and will use it, so that we can minister to other people. Trust me, I would never wish cancer upon anybody. And I know because of what my son has gone through as a cancer survivor, my wife and I have ministered to so many parents who watched their children suffer because of cancer. Like any marriage, my wife and I have gone through great marital problems. You name the problem, chances are we've gone through it. Is that meaningless? Absolutely not - we're able to minister to young couples, seasoned couples, and well-experienced couples - not because we do it perfectly, but because we have gone through so much - because we have experienced so many trials. I don't know what you've gone through, but listen, your trials are not meaningless. Leverage your trials to grow your spiritual maturity and your spiritual empathy. Those trials are there to grow you up, and to make you effective ministers of the Gospel.

So, if we're going to mature, we'll recognize who we are in Christ. We'll follow His blueprint. And we'll experience trials and adversity.

There are two characteristics of a person who is rooted in Christ, and these will help you get growing, so that you can get going. You see, when we are **growing in knowledge**, we'll be the ones in life who other Christians look at, and say, “That's the kind of faith I need: one that is rooted deep in Christ; One that is ready to withstand the storms of life, no matter how big or small.” When we are **growing in spiritual maturity**, we'll be the ones in life who are beacons of hope in a world that is lost, broken, and in need of a chance to rebuild. When we are rooted in Christ, we'll show the world there's better way of living in a world of storms and despair. It's my prayer, as the people of God, we'll grow in knowledge and maturity **all to the glory of God**.

N: Now, why is this so important? Let's bring in Cara Whitney and Arnie Cole for some practical perspectives. Cara, for anyone listening today, who is feeling like their faith is at a standstill, or they're just spiritually stuck, give them some encouragement and maybe a next step for growth.

C: I actually went through something like this Nat. So I'll tell you what I did. I actually struggled with the *why* too, and I determined that I was spending too much time serving ministry, and not in my relationship with Christ. So even though I knew that God was there, I just wasn't feeling Him. Jesus was my best friend, and I realized I missed Him. So I got into the Gospels to rekindle our relationship, particularly John, and I listened to sermons, and a lot of worship music. If you're feeling that way, dig in, until you start feeling Him there again - He's there. I guess I will equate it to, I can read all the books on how to have a successful marriage, but if I'm not spending any time with my spouse, what good is any of that? So maybe you're just too analytical.

N: Yeah. About twice a year, I'll read through the Gospels. And I like to use the terminology - I like to walk with Jesus - because it's getting to see what He did, listen to what He said, and just see Him in a fresh perspective every so often. And you're exactly right. We would have a lousy relationship with our spouse, if we never invested in the relationship and spent time. And the same is true for our relationship with God. He's always there. So the question is, are we going to pursue Him? Are we going to let it coast, as so many of us do so often.

Arnie, let's talk about trials for a moment, because you've had a lot of them, as many of us have, and I know many of our listeners have had, but how have you leveraged those trials for good?

A: I think through the trials, and especially maybe for you older listeners, there's going to come a time - and even for you younger listeners too - when your health gives out. And one of the things that I've learned from the trials is: Stop - whether it's COVID-19, worrying about tomorrow, worrying about your health - stop being distracted from what the Lord has called you to do. And that's the big thing. I just had that brought to my attention, in a really sharp way, this past week, when I was in the hospital. And most old people - and when you're in the hospital, you talk about your health, you know - and I just followed my thing: Shut up. And this nurse was talking to me, and all of a sudden, and I don't know what I said, but she said, "You know, I lost my sister six months ago in a car accident, and my parents are devastated, and so am I." It was like, "Thank you, Lord." You can't get distracted with all of this stuff - whether you're worried about COVID-19, you're worried about yourself, or all of that - to miss a tremendous opportunity. Because the inclination - especially if you're old and have health issues - is yak, yak, yak about your health to them - and in a hospital, that's what they do anyway - but really, there's opportunities out there, if you can stay focused on Jesus. And I don't know what happened - I think the Holy Spirit just put my "shut up" rule. You know, it was a tremendous opportunity. Let me put it that way.