

## **Steps To Spiritual Maturity**

‘I could not talk to you as spiritual men but as to nonspiritual, or as to mere infants in the new life in our Messiah. I fed you with milk not meat, for you were not yet strong enough and even now you are not strong enough for you are still of the flesh and under the control of carnal impulses’ (1 Corinthians 3:1).

Prolonged spiritual childhood is carnality, and it is often mentioned in the scriptures. Being carnal had reduced the Corinthian people to the status of spiritual babes. There was no distinction between carnality and spiritual babes, because carnal people act childishly. If a person doesn’t grow as they should in Christian character, then they are immature babes. Growing up as a Christian does not mean being able to quote many scriptures; it means to produce fruit or good Christian character. Having a good memory for scriptures does not signify maturity. If a Christian goes whimpering off to the church leadership about silly trivialities, they are childish and that signifies immaturity. At this early stage of their Christian walk, weaker people are more likely to give up their faith (Matthew 13:19 to 21).

If we wrong any person and can’t humble ourselves and go to put things right, that is immaturity. The sin of pride is there. Christianity has to be of the heart, not head knowledge. A person is a babe when he can’t eat strong spiritual food. How many Christians love the excitement and joy of the house of God and see a lot of miracles but can’t take the discipline of the leadership? Some can’t take the solid word of truth where a strong foundation can be laid so God can bless that life, He cannot work through that assembly, adjust their relationships in terms of discipleship, touch their materialism, their lifestyle, their rich houses, their carpeted floors, all their modern appliances, and their late model cars which they will tell you they need. If these same ‘babes’ could see the Christians in Africa for example, who are dressing in bark because they have no clothes, and cannot easily access fresh drinking water, how they would react? How would they like to have one Bible shared amongst 5000 people like pastors do in some areas in China?

The Corinthian church had many gifts but they also had many problems caused by immaturity. Gifts given by the Lord are not a sign of growth, but of grace. Maturity is knowing how to handle the gifts to glorify God and to edify the whole body of believers. The scriptures say the doctrine of the carnal man is unstable. ‘So then we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro between chance gusts of teaching and wavering with every changing wind of doctrine following unscrupulous men in every shifting form of trickery in inventing errors to mislead. Rather let our lives express truth and let us grow up in every way’ (Ephesians 4:14 & 15).

‘Do not be carried about by different teachings for it is good for the heart to be established by means of grace’ (Hebrews 13:9). ‘Even though by this time you ought to be teachers of others, you actually need someone to teach you over again the very principles of God’s Word. You have come to need milk not solid food or meat. For everyone who continues to feed on milk is obviously unskilled in

the doctrine of righteousness, for he is a mere infant; but solid food is for full grown men who can discern between good and evil' (Hebrews 5:12 to 14).

A mature Christian will show the fruits of the Holy Spirit. 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and those who have crucified the flesh with its appetites. If we live by the Holy Spirit let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not be carnal and vainglorious, conceited, competitive, irritating one another, envying and being jealous of one another' (Galatians 5:22 to 26).

The story of the elder brother of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11 to 32, shows a very immature man who complained about the father's welcoming home party for the prodigal. Many Christians are like that. They don't realise Jesus has made the way of deliverance for them, nor do they realise they have an inheritance. They are still struggling to gain the victory. They don't have to gain the victory for it has already been given to us by the blood of Jesus, so all we have to do is walk in that victory. Some people take a long time to grasp the concept of deliverance from sickness, spiritual weakness, sin and carnality; and walk in the liberty of salvation. 'Whom the Son sets free is free indeed' (John 8:36). At this stage of spiritual growth, there are still people who walk away from their faith when things get tough (Matthew 13:22).

The scriptures need to be understood by the mind but experienced by the heart. How does one know how or in what areas they need to grow up in God? By seeking the Word of God and asking the Holy Spirit to reveal those areas. Spending time with the Lord, being completely silent in His Presence; waiting for His word to come, worshiping, fasting, listening to Christian music, attending church on Sundays and being involved in church activities will all help with spiritual growth. Once a person feels they can't get enough of God's presence even after spending hours with Him, that individual is growing up. If every Christian spent two or three hours reading His Word, praising, worshiping and praying, every single day, we would have very few spiritual infants.

The scriptural steps of spiritual maturity are water, milk, meat and oil. If we slowly grow up through the steps, we see that God is building His church, step by step. The first step, water, is for washing and drinking. Washing: Consistently reading the Bible washes us spiritually. This 'water' is figurative or spiritual. The Bible is the cleansing water of the Word (Ephesians 5:26), Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:14; Revelation 19:13), He came with water and blood (1 John 5:6), He gave His blood (Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19), we are washed by His blood (Revelation 1:5), the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). The water of the Word washes us clean from sin when we give our lives to Jesus. After our salvation, we must then be baptised in real water, so we can see that water is very significant in our salvation. Jesus Himself is the Saviour and the Head of His body, the church, because He gave Himself up for the church, so that He might cleanse the church, by the washing of water with the Word, that He might present the church to Himself in glorious splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such things. This mystery is very great' (Ephesians 5:22 to 27 then 32). Paul was speaking about the relationship of our Messiah and the church. He was comparing it with marriage. When we look at this passage of scripture, verse by

verse, we can equate the church and the picture of the Marriage of the Lamb, with earthly marriage.

Verse 22: Wives need to be submissive; the church needs to submit to the authority of Jesus.

Verse 23: Husbands are the head in a household; Jesus is the Head of the church.

Verse 24: Wives are to subject themselves in everything to their husbands; so too the church is subject to Jesus.

Verse 25: Husbands are told to love their wives; Jesus loved the church so much He gave Himself up for her.

Verse 26: Jesus sanctified the church by washing her with the water of the Word.

Verse 29: Jesus nourishes the church as a husband provides nourishment for his wife.

Verse 32: The God-given sanctity of marriage was given as an example of the church as being the Bride of the Lamb.

Drinking: The water quenches our thirst for God (Isaiah 55:1; Revelation 21:6; 22:17). 'Listen, everyone who is thirsty! Come to the waters ...' (Isaiah 55:1). 'To the thirsty, I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of Life' (Revelation 21:6). 'The Holy Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who is listening say, "Come!" And let everyone come who is thirsty and whoever will, let him come, take of the Water of Life without cost' (Revelation 22:17).

Moving on from the watery steps, we come to the 'milk'. 'You have come to need milk, not meat, for everyone who continues to feed on milk is obviously unskilled in the doctrine of righteousness, for he is a mere infant' (Hebrews 5:12 & 13). 'Like newborn babies, you should crave the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may be nurtured and grow into salvation, since you have already tasted the goodness of the Lord' (1 Peter 2:2 & 3). 'I fed you with milk, not meat for you were not yet strong enough for it' (1 Corinthians 3:2).

As brand new baby Christians, we began our walk by listening to preachers tell us all about the Word of God. Most of it went right over our heads. When we first begin to read the Bible, it too leaves us wondering. As new baby believers, we are not expected to know more than the basic doctrine of salvation. New Christians are called babes or infants. Jesus called His disciples babes, yet they were all strong, adult men, but they were new babes in the New Covenant (Matthew 11:25). In another place, Jesus called young Christians, lambs (John 21:15). Then John calls them little children (1 John 2:1, 12 & 28). As a new Christian, we need a long time to grow, just human babies do. The milk of the Word nourishes us until we learn to 'walk' in the Lord, unaided. So the first step is as a spiritual baby, then a little child. After we learn to walk in the Lord, we are called 'boys' or 'lads' or young men (1 John 2:18). As we grow spiritually and learn more, so the steps of spiritual growth as mentioned in the Bible become deeper, more interesting, more exciting and we begin to get to know more about God's personality. Once we become 'children' rather than 'babes', God begins His discipline and we grow faster, spiritually. Paul says he couldn't talk to the people as spiritual men, but he had to speak to them as though they were spiritual infants because they were too carnal and unspiritual, behaving like unchanged people. They were arguing amongst themselves and Paul told them off (1 Corinthians 3:1 to 23). We need to

grow up in God, mature and see things through spiritual 'eyes', not through worldly eyes. God will tolerate carnality in a new Christian for a while, but eventually He will start to deal with us as sons and purge the sinfulness out of us. Jesus said His words and teaching cleansed and pruned the disciples (John 15:3). Then later on He said He couldn't tell them everything He wanted to because they weren't ready for it (John 16:12).

After a few years, we come to the next step in our spiritual growth. The next step is the need to go on to meat or more solid spiritual food. 'Meat is for full-grown men; for those whose senses are trained to distinguish between what is good and what is evil' (Hebrews 5:14). At this level we should be able to seek out the deeper oracles of God, written in the Bible for ourselves. We should be past the stage where we believe everything the pastor says, just because he says it. We should be able to search both Old and New Testaments and cross-reference scriptures. We should be able to line up the latest sermon from church with the scriptures. The Bible should be making a lot more sense than before because the more we read, the more the Lord opens our spiritual eyes, and so the more we can see. Jesus said, "Blessed are your eyes because they do see, and blessed are your ears because they do hear" (Matthew 13:16). Jesus was speaking about spiritual eyes and ears. The things of God are foolish to the natural, nonspiritual man, and it takes time to learn and discern the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The next step is also 'meaty'. It is when we get to the point where we can teach others. The Bible calls mature Christians, fathers (1 John 2:13 & 14). It is a time when the Lord expects mature Christian behaviour and He will no longer tolerate immaturity or bad conduct. We are to be examples of Christianity to the outside world, our families and especially, to new Christians in the church. This is the time where we are aware that God is watching every move. He always has been, but we are more aware of it. We become more aware of the sin nature that lurks in our bodies. We strive to become as holy as a mere humans can be, because we know our purity brings us closer to God. We are also aware of the greatness of our Creator and are able to have long, involved conversations with Him. He tells us secrets. He becomes more real than ever before. We can experience His kiss on our cheek, His wonderful perfume filling the room, we can see the warmth and love in His eyes. He becomes a real Person. We are far more aware of what He expects of His people in the terms of holiness, honesty, kindness and other attributes He has, that we are to attain to. This is when He reveals the weaknesses in our character that He disapproves of, and the new fresh clean aspects of our character are exposed. At the same time, we are able to search the scriptures in a much deeper way and get to know God in a deeper, more mature way. He becomes our whole life, our breath, our constant companion and our lifeblood. This is the point where we know we can never live without Him, and there are no more stumbling blocks. If people make it to this stage in their walk with the Lord, they are much less likely to slip away (Matthew 13:23).

Another step is the 'oil' of the Holy Spirit. This can come at any time in our lives, or any time in our walk with God. Some people receive the Holy Spirit the day they receive Jesus as their Saviour. Other people are not filled with the Spirit for many years afterwards. Some are baptised in water before being baptised in the Holy Spirit, others receive the Holy Spirit before baptism in water. Every person is

different and there is no set sequence for receiving the Holy Spirit, but once we do, we receive power to do God's will. We receive the 'fire' to get out there and preach. We receive the guidance we need (John 16:13). Praying in tongues, or praying in the Spirit gives us the strength to live in this sinful world without being tainted by sin (Jude 1:20, 24 & 25). We receive answers to problems and questions we often want to ask God. We receive the power to walk by faith, walk in the Spirit and walk in a totally new way of life. All we have to do is ask, receive by faith and learn to listen to His still, small voice.

If you are a new Christian and are wondering why the Bible is so hard to understand, hang in there because God will show you new things in His time. Just as we wouldn't overload a young child with information they are too young to understand, so God also doesn't overload us with information we can't yet absorb. Be patient with yourself, and allow God to reveal the steps and stages of spiritual growth for you, slowly, as you are able to deal with each new piece of information. It gets better, more interesting and more exciting as God slowly reveals things to you; things you would never have dreamed possible.

Amen and God bless you.

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