

Growing in the Gospel

Week 23: June 4-10 – *Acts 17; 1 Thessalonians 1-4*

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Helpful Resources

Map of Paul's Missionary Journeys (p.59)

Making Sense of It All

- The Big Picture

We have followed the Apostle Paul and his team as they traveled from Asia Minor into Macedonia and Greece, taking the gospel into Europe. They've bounced from city to city — Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens — preaching Christ and planting churches. In each location, both Jews and Gentiles received Christ and began to grow in Him. But what does it mean to grow in Christ? How do we grow in Christ, and when is the process of growing complete? Through both Paul's life and letters (i.e., *1 Thessalonians*), we have an example worthy of imitation. In this review, we will consider what it means to grow in the gospel.

- Stages of Growth

1. **Receiving the Gospel** (*Acts 17:4, 11, 12, 34; 1 Thess. 2:13*): At some point in our past, the Lord planted the seed of the gospel in our heart, and we put our faith in Christ for salvation. God opened our eyes to the truth, gave us the faith to believe, and drew us to Himself by His great love for us. At that moment, our life was changed, as we became a new creature, free from the penalty and power of sin.

Take a minute to recall your salvation story. How did it happen? Who was involved? How did you respond, and what change(s) did you experience?

2. **Growing in the Gospel** (*1 Thess. 1:3; 4:1-7*): Since salvation, the Lord has been sanctifying us. Sanctification is the process of growing in Christ, being conformed into His image (*Rom. 8:29*). Though we were made holy internally in God's eyes (positional sanctification), our new spirit is trapped in our sinful flesh (body). Therefore, progressive sanctification is the gradual process of demonstrating externally what has happened to us internally. While God has enabled us with His Spirit to grow, we cooperate with Him in this process by practicing the spiritual disciplines (*1 Tim. 4:7*). The rate and maturity of our growth is largely dependent on our personal discipline.

What are some of the spiritual disciplines that enable spiritual growth? Whom has God used in your life to enable growth? How have you witnessed the sanctification process? Compare your life today with your life at the time you were saved.

3. **Living Out the Gospel** (*1 Thess. 1:6-9; 2:10-12; 3:7, 8*): As we grow in the gospel, we will become a living example of the Christian life. We will be imitators of Christ, thinking, acting, and speaking more like Him. The character of Christ, called the fruit of the Spirit, will be evident in us (*Gal. 5:22, 23*). As we imitate Christ, we also become a worthy example for others to imitate. The old life passes away, and all things become new.

Who are the imitators of Christ in your life? Are you an example worthy of imitation?

4. **Sharing the Gospel** (*Acts 17:16-34; 1 Thess. 2:3-9*): As we grow in Christ, we begin to obey His commandments. For example, He said, "Go into all the nations and make disciples..." (*Matt. 28:19*). Not only will our life be an example of Christ to others, but we will openly share the good news of salvation with others (called evangelism). We will develop a burden for the lost and a desire to give them the gospel (like Paul). The joy of our salvation will be contagious, and the Lord will use us to bring others to Him.

How has the Lord used you to share Christ with others? Are you actively seeking ways to share your faith? Review *1 Thessalonians 2:1-12*. What are some of the characteristics that should describe how we share our faith?

5. **Persevering in the Gospel** (*1 Thess. 1:6; 2:1, 2, 13-20; 3:1-13*): Our spiritual enemy hates the gospel, and he does not want us to succeed in growing spiritually or in sharing our faith. Therefore, Satan will make life difficult for us, doing his best to discourage us, distract us, or destroy us. But the Lord promised always to be with us through difficult times. In our weakness, He makes us strong and able to endure; and our faithfulness during difficult circumstances encourages others to be faithful.

What difficulties have you experienced that have challenged your faith? Whose faithful walk with the Lord has encouraged you to be faithful? What else has helped you endure?

6. **Excelling in the Gospel** (*1 Thess. 4:1*): Though we are all familiar with the gospel growth process, we often become complacent in our journey. Complacency is defined as self-satisfaction with our current situation or condition. Complacency can lead to apathy or mediocrity, just going through the motions, maintaining the status quo. But we must resist complacency, for our sanctification process is never complete. There is always room for improvement or growth; and when we think we have arrived at our destination, we plateau. We become stagnant or stale. Paul challenges us to "excel still more," to "press on to the upward call of God" until we reach the finish line (*Phil. 3:12-14*).

Have you ever experienced spiritual complacency? What are some steps to take to avoid complacency and "excel still more"?

7. **Completing the Gospel** (*Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:17; Col. 3:20, 21*): Though our spiritual journey seems long and difficult, it will end one day, when we are united with Christ. Our sanctification process will end with glorification, when our sinful flesh is replaced with new bodies, and we are finally made like Christ — sinless (called permanent sanctification). What a day that will be! Until then, be encouraged, "He who began a good work in us will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (*Phil. 1:6*).

The Bottom Line

From salvation to sanctification to glorification, we are to be growing in the gospel day by day.

Questions to Consider

1. What would you say to a person who is not experiencing growth in the gospel? What would be your diagnosis and prescription?
2. If your spiritual journey was plotted out on a graph with ups and downs, what would it look like? Where are you at today — going up, going down, or leveled out?