

The Path of Spiritual Maturity

By Arnie Boedecker

Sometimes the Bible is confusing. You know what I mean? Don't get me wrong – most of it makes perfect sense, but there are those occasional passages that make you scratch your head in bewilderment. Stuff like discussing head coverings for women “because of the angels” (1Cor 11:10), Jesus “preaching to spirits in prison” (1Pet 3:19), people being baptized on behalf of the dead (1Cor 15:29) and the devil fighting over the body of Moses with the arch-angel Michael (Jude 9). I guess what I'm saying is that there are some passages I'm just not sure I will fully understand in this lifetime. For a while, another passage that always seemed a bit strange to me was a section in John's first epistle that just seemed to be randomly plopped in to place. It reads:

I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

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 evil one.

I have written to you, dear 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 lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1John 2:12-14)

This is one of those passages that seem to appear out of nowhere, and had nothing to do with what was just said or with what followed. Even the style seems a bit odd and out of place. What's with the repetition? But then I began to look a little closer to what was actually being said in this passage, and I was amazed by it's content. Once I got past the distractions of it's odd placement and strange format, I was able to see it a little more clearly. Don't get me wrong... I'm not claiming to have this passage all figured out, but hopefully what I share here will be of some value to you.

In case you too are confused by the format, allow me to summarize what is being said in this passage while removing the repetition and formatting: John says he is writing to the “little children” because they have experienced the forgiveness of sins and know the Father. He is writing to the “young men” because they have overcome the Evil One, they have strength, and because the Word abides in them. Finally, John is writing to the “fathers” simply because they know the One who is from the beginning.

It seems clear to me that the terms “children”, “young men”, and “father” probably carry more a meaning of spiritual maturity than actual age. But, then again, there was probably a far greater correlation of actual physical age to spiritual maturity in John's time, so while such a distinction was probably largely irrelevant in John's time, the distinction becomes important in our own time.

That being said, as I meditated upon this passage, two main themes seemed to come to light. First is the primary role played by each of three groups... The little children primarily “receive”, the young men primarily “achieve”, and the fathers primarily just “be”.

Little children primarily “receive”. They have received forgiveness by the finished work of the Cross, and they now know the God of the Universe as intimately as a loving Father. As little children, it's all about receiving from a Daddy who has it all.

Young Men primarily “achieve”. They are beginning to live out the reality of their growth in Christ by overcoming sin and temptation. They are beginning to use their newfound spiritual strength. The Word implanted within them is beginning to bear fruit in their lives. They are actively living out the New Life and gaining spiritual ground. As young men, it's all about achieving, advancing and overcoming.

Fathers primarily just “be”. They have grown to a point that includes but goes far beyond merely receiving. They have also moved beyond the doing and gaining and achieving to a place of just being. They have come to know, not just the Father God, but the Eternal God – the God of the Ages. And having come to know this Eternal God, they begin to manifest His character, which displays a far-reaching wisdom, which transcends the limited concerns of this world. They are no longer urgently trying to receive from God or achieve for God, but are content in just being in

God and with God.

The other main theme I find in this passage has to do with the process of spiritual maturity. Since this passage breaks down spiritual maturity into three phases, this also helps us to understand what is essential to progress further in our spiritual walk.

We all begin with the need for forgiveness and to know the infinite love of Father God. When we live in the reality of those truths, we are free to begin to live out the Christian Life, one in which we find increasing freedom from the snares of the Enemy, as God's Word begins to fulfill itself within us. We tap into a previously unknown Strength, and we taste of the victory over sin and temptation. We find our desires and priorities being transformed and we begin to discover whom it is God has made us to be. This journey is a long one, as we surge ahead only to fail and discover previously unseen weaknesses within ourselves. We also begin to operate in our unique giftedness, only to discover we are still in need of His Strength if we are to advance at all. But as we fail and learn and develop, we find that we can truly be spiritual fathers to others. There is wisdom gained in the Journey, and as spiritual fathers, the younger see elements of God in us without our even knowing it.

Does not this path help us to better understand why there is so little real maturity in much of the church today? Since further progress can only come as each stage is fulfilled, the hindrance to additional spiritual growth becomes clear. Personally, I think it all hinges on how we begin.

The first stage of our Journey begins with two simple ideas: "Forgiveness" and "Knowing God as Father". Many of our churches today trumpet the need for forgiveness, to be sure. They detail how because of Jesus' death on the Cross, we can "be right with God" and have our sins forgiven. But what of the message of God as Father? By focusing so exclusively on the need for forgiveness, the church has often neglected to connect us with a God who loves us so very much. In fact, often the way the message of forgiveness is proclaimed actually seems to work against the message that God loves us like a Father. The message often becomes: The Cross was needed, not because God loves us so much, but because He is so very angry with us.

And, having begun to understand only half of what is essential at the first stage; rare is the person who moves beyond that first stage. Few ever really see God as Father. And even their own forgiveness becomes something to which they merely give "mental assent" to. They think that because they "said a prayer once" that they can be certain of salvation. Few seem to know forgiveness as a living reality that they actually experience. I mean, how many Christians can say that they experience such a reality of their own forgiveness that they can literally taste it? In contrast, how many Christians continually doubt the reality of being forgiven and need to be reminded of the prayer they said so many years ago, and be told that they don't need to "feel it" but only have "faith"?

And what becomes of the later stages of maturity? Without experiencing the full reality of the first stage, the "young man" stage never becomes a reality either. Instead of real victory over the Enemy, and real freedom from sin, we are often taught to outwardly conform our behavior to simply appear more holy. Instead of genuine transformation, we are taught to live by principles. Instead of Spiritual Strength, we do the best we can with our own will power. Instead of the Living Word abiding within us, we do all we can to spend time in the Word – listening to sermons, attending Bible-studies, forcing ourselves to have a quiet-time to read a five minute devotional. But all of this seems to make little real difference in our spiritual maturity. We are busier, but not more mature. And how many genuine spiritual fathers do we have to follow? Are they not as rare a commodity as you can think of? In order to be a true spiritual father, one would have had to travel through the Journey of the young man...tasting of genuine victory, being truly transformed and molded by the Spirit of God through both success and failure. And without genuine spiritual fathers among us, the role of "elder" in our churches to day are often filled by the "nice guys" and the "successful businessmen" instead of those who truly spiritual leaders. In the same way, those who lead and pastor the church may be able to educate the congregation about the Greek meaning of a certain text, but how many who teach and preach appear to have actually lived out and experienced the text on which they are teaching? It seems to a large degree, we have often replaced genuine transformation and experience with merely a formal education.

I fear we may have created counterfeit substitutes for each of the later stages, because we never got the first one right. We might know a bit of the reality that contains "forgiveness", but instead of seeing God as a loving Father, many in the church are still really afraid of God – afraid that we displease Him everyday by the things we do, and by

the things we fail to do. How can any of us expect to progress in maturity if we never realize and experience who God is? He desires to be a Father to His children. God doesn't love us because of the Cross. It is not the work of the Cross that makes us lovable in the eyes of God. The Father sent the Son because He already loved us. The Cross wasn't to make us lovable...it proclaims that we already were! *You can send comments and questions to awb.wcn@verizon.net*