

5 Steps to Practical Spiritual Growth

So much is written about spiritual growth, and anyone in a relationship with God wants to grow spiritually. Yet often it can seem so complicated! We can feel pulled between intellectual approaches on the one hand and the pursuit of mystical experiences on the other. One expert tells us to look back into the mists of time, while another tells us to look within or to look at their list of how-to steps. In the midst of all the noise, somehow Jesus often gets lost. In this Pre-Forum Conference, we will consider some simple biblical insights that will help us grow spiritually in a straightforward, practical, and Jesus-focused way.

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Session 1: Understand the Power of Fallen World Gravity

Our world was profoundly changed by humanity's great fall in Genesis 3. The after-effects of that day still shape every day for us all. How does the spiritual gravity of this fallen world pull on us in respect to religious inclinations, cultural/societal leanings, and most importantly for this seminar, spiritual growth?

I. Beware of the “deadly be’s” (Bryan Chappell)

- A. Be like
- B. Be good
- C. Be disciplined

II. The Fall of Genesis 3 changed everything

²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Chapter 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” ² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and

that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

III. Without divine revelation, humans cannot know “the Garden”, and so default in one of two directions:

- A. The Wilderness Worldview: God is a projection of my ego, and my life is about my success (+ve)
- B. The Prison Worldview: God is a projection of my frustrations, and my life is about my escape (-ve)

IV. The “Wilderness Worldview”

- A. Religiously - Information, instruction, obedience
- B. Societally - Law & Order, individual, success
- C. Personally - being the best me I can be!

V. The “Prison Worldview”

- A. Religiously - Escape, mystical experience, striving against distraction
- B. Societally - Revolution, collectivist, destruction (for the utopia after)
- C. Personally - Mystical, striving, dualistic

VI. Fallen World Gravity pulls the gaze of our hearts inward!

Session 2: Looking At – The Basic Orientation of a Christian Heart

In the midst of all the complexity of Christian ministry, there is a basic orientation of a Christian heart. What, or who, are we to look at? The right answer, of course, is Jesus. We will look at key passages from the New Testament that present the full impact of this truth.

I. Fallen World Gravity pulls the gaze of our hearts inward

II. What happens when divine revelation breaks in?

A. John 1:14-18

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

B. John 3:14-15

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

C. Galatians 3:1-3

¹ O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

D. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear

and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

E. 2 Corinthians 3:18

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

III. The basic orientation of our hearts – me or him?

Session 3: Looking To – The Motivation for Spiritual Growth

Life in this world is often a struggle. Where can we find motivation to keep going when everything encourages us to fall back? In this session, we will consider the motivation for spiritual growth, focusing primarily on the book of Hebrews.

I. The shape of the sermon to the Hebrews

A. Introduction (Chapter 1)

Jesus is better than any angel!

B. Main Idea (Chapter 2:5-9 – based on Psalm 8)

God will glorify humanity, Jesus proves it!

C. First Movement (Chapters 2-5 – based on Psalm 95:7-11)

Press on into the rest!

D. Second Movement (Chapters 7-10 – based on Psalm 110:4)

Press on into the presence of God!

E. Third Movement (Chapters 11-12 – based on Habakkuk 2:3-4)

Press on toward your reward!

F. Conclusion (Chapter 13)

Live in light of the unshakable kingdom!

II. The motivation for Christian living (Hebrews 3:1; 12:1-3)

A. ¹ Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, (Hebrews 3:1)

B. ¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Session 4: Looking Away From – The Distractions from Spiritual Growth

The gaze of our affections is continually tugged away from Jesus by other attractions. What are these magnetic pulls on our affections, and what can we do about them?

I. What can distract us? (Hebrews 12:1)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, **let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely**, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus . . .

Question – what is the character of the “sin which so easily entangles” you?

Question – what is the “weight” that you need to lay aside?

II. The “religious and good” distractions (Philippians 3:1-16)

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

III. The “relational drift” distractions (James 4:4-10)

Note the context – their problem is described in 4:1-3 . . . passions that wage war within them. So what is the solution? Get a grip? No, how about “get a glimpse:”

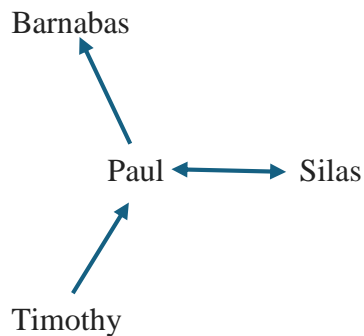
⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Session 5: Looking With – We Do Not Travel Alone

Too often, we think of spiritual growth as an individual exercise. But we do not travel alone. We will finish the seminar by considering some companions for our journey.

I. We are not made to travel alone – the danger of lone ranger spirituality!

- A. The church
- B. Friends
- C. Mentoring relationships



- D. Impersonal mentoring relationships

II. If Christianity has a Christ-ward gaze at its core, what are the implications for each relationship above?

III. What kind of communion?

“We need “to return to ‘the forgotten Trinity’ – to an understanding of the Holy Spirit, who delivers us from a narcissistic preoccupation with the self to find our true being in loving communion with God and one another – to hear God’s call to us, in our day, to participate through the Spirit in Christ’s communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world – to create in our day a new humanity of persons who find true fulfilment in other-centered communion and service in the kingdom of God.”

(Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, James B. Torrance, IVP 1996)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—

² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the

eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1 John 1:1-4

Resources

Please check out The Biblical Preaching Podcast and BiblicalPreaching.net

The New Birth, by Peter Mead (Union Publishing, 2024)

The Little Him Book: Looking at the Jesus Who Makes Our Hearts Sing, by Peter Mead (10Publishing 2021)

Lost in Wonder: A Biblical Introduction to God's Great Marriage, by Peter Mead (Christian Focus 2016)

Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers, by Dane Ortlund (Crossway 2020)

Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners, by Dane Ortlund (Union/Crossway, 2021)

The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit, by Michael Reeves (Paternoster 2012)

Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord, by Michael Reeves (Union/Crossway, 2021)

Enjoying Jesus: Experience the Presence and Kindness of the Son of God in Everyday Life, by Tim Chester (The Good Book Company, 2024)