

Christian growth

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[0 : 0 0] Let us turn to the scripture we read in the first epistle of John, the second chapter, and we'll read again from verse 12.

John chapter 2 from verse 12. I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning.

I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the father. I have written unto you, fathers, because you have known him that is from the beginning.

I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. John, the beloved disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, as he often refers to himself, here writes a letter of reassurance to believers, of reassurance with regard to the basics of the Christian faith.

And we can never go over those basic things too frequently and reinforce in our understanding those basic truths about the incarnation of the Son of God, his suffering to death, and his resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of God.

[1 : 3 6] John writes as one who was a first-hand witness of all these events. A first-hand witness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he writes also with an awareness that all has not become perfect in the society or in the church of Jesus Christ.

The followers of Jesus have not become a perfect society. Sin still blemishes and flaws both individual and corporate life.

There might be those who were prepared to deny it. There were those, no doubt, who preferred to think that sin had been utterly eradicated. John has to say, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But John knows that, and gives us assurance, that there is a way of dealing with sin. It must not be lightly treated.

[2 : 4 5] It must not be thought of as not serious. But neither must it be allowed to induce despair. The virtue of the work of Christ, and of the ongoing work of Christ as he is our intercessor at the right hand of God.

The virtue of the work of Christ is that it procures our pardon, not once, but many times. It sustains the fellowship that subsists between us and the Father.

We have fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. It procures the pardon of sin for everyone who trusts in him.

And it leads to an increase in love, as it should lead to a multiplying of the occasions of gratitude. What John has to say, therefore, concerns the whole body of the people of God.

But what we want to focus on this evening is this categorizing of the various parts of the believing community that John has in mind here.

[4 : 07] He speaks of fathers and young men and children. And we want to follow him as he has a specific word of counsel for each.

We won't think of it precisely in the order in which John brings this before us here. I think in his very mention of fathers and little children and young men, of little children and youths and men of maturity, perhaps indeed John, as he thinks of the fathers, thinks of those who, like him, were contemporaries of the Lord Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry.

Still, they would have been people who had been longer on the Christian way. It's not necessary for us to think that John is speaking here absolutely in terms of biological age.

It may well be that he is thinking in terms of our experience of the grace that brings salvation. The fathers may not necessarily be those whose lifespan went back to the time of the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So in that light, at any rate, that we want to think over John's messages and to learn that he has something to tell us about the process of maturation in Christian experience.

[5 : 34] And then perhaps we'll just reflect for a moment or two on why it should be, see whether we can come to any conclusion as to why John should not take the young men in the precise order.

He doesn't follow through the order from children to young men to fathers. And why he should do that. It may be a little point of interest. First of all, we think of what John brings before us here with regard to the process of Christian maturation.

The process follows the natural pattern. Childhood, manhood, and maturity. And we want to look at the characteristics that John attributes and itemizes with regard to each.

With regard to children, the essential features that John notes here are, one, experience of forgiveness on account of the name.

Experience of forgiveness on account of the name of the Lord Jesus. And then, two, knowledge of the Father. It doesn't take a lot of reflection, I think, for us to realize that Christian experience, for the most part, if not invariably, Christian experience begins with seeking and obtaining pardon.

[7 : 00] We are introduced to God as sinners. We are introduced to God as people who have broken his most holy law and are worthy of condemnation.

We come before him as those who have no covering for their sin, whose sin has found them out. We have a sense of alienation from God that is not only founded upon our guilt, but also is a procuring of our guilt.

We have a sense of alienation, racial and self-induced alienation. We are not all of us eager seekers after God in the first instance.

Rather, we are of those that want to hide from him. Because we know, we have a feeling, we have an inward conviction that something dreadful may happen if we come into too close contact with this holy God.

We don't want to come too close to him. We are embarrassed by a serious mention of his name. Often it happens that we'd be willing enough to have the name of God or the being of God discussed as a philosophical speculation.

[8 : 16] To discuss with people whether indeed there exists such a being as God. We may be prepared to go on all night and all day in discussions of that sort. But when it comes to recognizing the God who is sovereign, the God who is the sovereign, whose will is law for us and whose law we have broken, the God who is in this respect the disturber of our peace.

We can't get on with him. We want to hide from him. And the reason is that he doesn't let us think comfortably about ourselves.

God disturbs our consciences. We're troubled and we can't forget our trouble. We can forget it maybe temporarily.

We can put the thought of our sin and guilt and danger out of our minds for moments or even for days and months and end. But we're not rid of the burden of guilt.

The burden still lies there locked away in some dark recess of the mind. And it takes sometimes just a little turn in the providence of God for that door to be unlocked and the whole flood of our guilt feeling to overwhelm us once again.

[9 : 37] And there can be no peace. And there will be no peace. Until we hear the message of God's forgiveness. Reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

Reconciliation through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness on account of the name. That's the basis of our peace. We come before God like the publican in our Lord's narrative.

Who could not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven but smote on his breast and said, God be merciful to me the sinner. That's where we start. That's where we are admitted to the fellowship of God.

When we have heard him say to us, See, I have blotted out as a thick cloud thine iniquities and will no more remember thy sin. That's where we have our beginning.

He speaks peace to us. We have redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. We have redemption through his blood. The forgiveness of sins.

[10 : 46] That's the basis of our peace. And there is no other foundation for peace. There is no other foundation but through him who is the propitiation for our sins.

And not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. We are justified freely by his grace. Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Whom God has set forth as a propitiatory. There's where it begins. There's where it begins. There's where Christian experience begins. I write unto you little children.

Because your sins are forgiven you. For his name's sake. And that's the first thing that John notices. That's the first stage in Christian experience.

The sense of forgiveness of our sin. Our Lord Jesus Christ saying to us, Son, daughter, thy sins are forgiven thee.

[11 : 52] The Son of Man has power upon earth to forgive sins. This is the door by which we enter into the kingdom of God.

The door of gracious forgiveness. The second feature that John speaks of in connection with this early experience.

The experience of those whom he addresses as little children. The second feature that he notices is, You have known the Father. You have known the Father.

Early in experience we come to know the Father. We are introduced to the Father by our Lord Jesus Christ, For whose namesake the Father puts away our iniquity.

In a way, what John says here is just a different way of noticing what we've already observed. In bringing us into a right relationship with God.

[12 : 56] It's a correction. What we have is a correction of our distorted view of God. A correction of the thought that we had in our minds that God was our enemy.

If you ask yourself, if you think over the story, the parable of the prodigal's son. You know the record of it, the familiar record of it in the Gospel of Luke.

Ask yourself, when did the prodigal know his father? Of course, he thought he knew him.

Hadn't he been brought up in the family? Didn't he know all about it? Hadn't he? Didn't he know all about how his father conducted his affairs? And wasn't that what irked him?

He wanted to get away. He thought he knew his father. He thought he knew his father as strict and unbending and rigorous and disciplinarian.

[13 : 54] From whose oversight he wanted to get away. He thought he knew him. And off he went. And off he went. Sick of home. And sick of the discipline of his father's house.

He came to the far country. wasted his substance with riotous living. Everything was gone.

And a new vision of his father came before his mind. As he himself was unwanted and despised. As he would fain have filled his belly with the husk that the swine did eat.

A new picture. One he hadn't observed before. It had been so close to him. It had been so close to him before he hadn't noticed it. My father is a generous man.

How many hard servants of my father have bred enough and to spare? My father is a generous and a godly man. I will arise and go to my father.

[15 : 00] But when did he know? When did he really know his father? He's encouraged along the road of return by this picture of his father.

He has it in his mind. Perhaps sometimes when he might be a little afraid of the reception he would get. As he thinks of the disgrace that he has brought upon his father's house. He's not certain.

But when did he know his father? Not until he heard his father say. Bring forth the patted calf and kill it.

Put the best robe on him. Put a ring on his hands and shoes and his feet. And let us make merry and be glad because this my son was dead.

And his alive was lost. And his pound was dead. And his alive again. Not until then. Did he know himself as the son of his father.

[15 : 59] And it when he knew himself was the son of his father that he knew his father. There's a vast difference you see. A vast difference between knowing things about.

And really knowing. Between getting hold of a whole lot of data. Filling our minds with facts and figures and statistics about people.

And actually knowing the person. Knowing is all about relationship. You know how it's expressed in scripture again and again.

The peculiar relationship that subsists between God and his people. Is in terms of God knowing his people. Just as the intimacy that.

The intimacy of knowledge that is. The intimacy of life. In the very unity. In the unity of life that is between husband and wife. Is so often spoken of in scripture.

[17 : 01] In terms of the husband knowing his wife. Well. Well. That's how it is. With God and his people. God said to Israel long ago.

You only have I known. Of all the families of the earth. God wasn't in that statement denying. Knowledge of. He wasn't denying.

That he was aware of the existence of other nations. That he didn't have an intimate and exhaustive. Understanding of what was going on all over the world. But he is saying there is a special relationship.

You only have I known. Of all the families of the earth. And it's at this point. It's at this point. When we come to know the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

That we enter upon this relationship. We come to the father. Through Jesus Christ the son. For no man comes to the father.

[18 : 03] But by him. No one knows the father. But the son. And he to whom the son will reveal him. And it's when through faith we are bound to.

When through faith we are united with our blessed redeemer. That we come into the family of God. In Christ we become children of God.

And because we are children. God sends to us the spirit of adoption. To cry unto him, Abba, Father. Knowing the father. God is essentially an experience of fellowship.

We are not only children. We are not singular. But we are brought into the whole company. The whole fellowship. You see how in this epistle John lays emphasis upon the fellowship.

That subsists between the people of God. A fellowship that has its nexus. In their fellowship with the father and his son Jesus Christ. We are children in the whole family of God.

[19 : 10] And that is what in part explains John's solicitude. For those still young in faith.

He wants to welcome them and encourage them as members in the family of God. I write unto you, little children. Because you have known the father.

That's the first. These two elements enter into our primary experience of Christian saving grace. Our sins are forgiven for the sake of the name.

And we know the father. Now let's see what John has to say to the young men. The first word to young men reflects not only on the fact of their hub.

Reflects only on the fact of their having overcome the evil one. It's in the second message to them that John fills this out.

[20 : 18] And gives some explanation of their victory. It's because they are strong. And the word of God abides in them. So we look first of all at the explanatory feature.

Because you are strong. And the word of God abides in you. And then we look at the achievement. You have overcome the wicked one.

I write unto you young men because you are strong. Young men are usually thought of as in the prime of life. Strong at the peak of their natural powers.

Ready for the battle of life. Having a zest and enthusiasm for living. Such a zest and enthusiasm for living. As sometimes makes older people tired just to see it.

And the process of spiritual maturation. Follows the same course. We begin as children. As babes in Christ. In need of care.

[21 : 24] And protection. And counsel. And exhortation. From our seniors. In need to be fed. With the milk. The sincere milk of the word.

Not yet the strong meat. Of the word of God. But then we grow in strength. And vigor of faith. We grow in understanding.

And expertise. In the use of the word of God. We begin to realize. That life is not always. In the kindergarten. That we live in a hostile environment.

And we've got to face up to and overcome the enemy. So we must be strong. But strong. In what way?

You remember Paul wrote to Timothy. Thou therefore my son be strong. In the grace that is in Christ Jesus. It's not just a matter of physical strength.

[22 : 25] It's a matter of being strong. In the grace. Of our Lord Jesus Christ. Strong in faith. Strong in reliance upon the Savior.

For if life hitherto. Through the early stages. Has taught us anything at all. It is that our own strength. And our own resolution. Is not enough. But also.

It has taught us. That the Lord Jesus Christ. Is dependable. And that through him. We can do all things. Strong in faith. Strong in hope.

Abounding in love. That's what it means. To be strong in the grace. That is in Christ Jesus. You're strong. And the word of God.

Abides in you. We begin. As we noted. With the sincere milk. Of the word. And we develop. To the point. Where we can benefit.

[23 : 25] From the strong meat. That belongs to those. Who are of mature age. That belongs to those. Who are ready. For the real fray. Of life. The word of God.

The study of the word of God. Reflection upon the word of God. The word of God. This is to be. Our daily spiritual fear. The word that reveals. The father. And the son.

And the holy spirit. The word that informs us. As to the mind of God. It's in the studying. Of the word of God. That we come. As it were. To a spontaneous knowledge.

In any given situation. Of stress. That we have a spontaneous reaction. To what is evil. That we may be able. To overcome. The word is that.

That shields. That shields us. From much of the evil. That is in the world. We know that it is in the imagination. In the imagination of the heart. That so much of the evil.

[24 : 22] That is done begins. There are the outer defenses. If we can keep. The imagination. If we can keep. The inner thinking. Of our minds. Pure.

And just. And good. If we concentrate. Our minds. Upon the word of God. Then our imaginations. Will not be defiled. Will not be fouled.

When the imagination. Is steeped in biblical law. The outer defenses. Are secure. The word. Shields us. From the evil one.

One. But the word also. As our savior himself. Demonstrated. Is the sword. Of the spirit. It is not only for defense.

But it is also for offense. And sometimes. Offense is the best form. We have of defense. When we see the evil one. When we know. Where his attack is.

[25 : 18] We know. How to use the sword. Of the spirit. Not only to parry. But to thrust. And to stab. And to slay. We need to know.

The word of God. We need to know. The word of scripture. Thoroughly. If we are to stand. Against the wiles. Of the wicked one. He who knows. Only the letter.

Of scripture. Can very soon. Be disconfused. And disarmed. When scripture. Is quoted. Apparently. Against scripture. That man becomes.

Confused. And helpless. When scripture. Perhaps. When a promise. Of scripture. Is quoted to us. As it was. In the case of our Lord. As though it were a mandate.

We become confused. Our Lord knew the difference. Between promise. And mandate. He knew that the promise. Was to be laid hold upon. By faith. But the mandate. Of God.

[26 : 15] Is something. That is obligatory. And demands. Constant obedience. Thou shalt not tempt. The Lord thy God. That is permanent.

That is obligatory. So the man of God. Is strong. The man of God. Who is strong. And in whom the word of God.

Abides. Will compare spiritual things. With spiritual. He will milk out. The virtue. Of the word. Day by day. And so increase in strength.

I write unto you. Young men. Because you are strong. And the word of God. Abides in you. And because you are strong.

And the word of God. Abides in you. You have overcome. The evil one. This is the explanation. Of our need of strength.

[27 : 12] Because the enemy is strong. Why must we be so strong? It's not for show. We're not entering. As it were.

Some spiritual. Mystery universe. A contest. In which we're to show off. Our muscles. And put ourselves. In all sorts of odd postures. To do so. Strength is needed.

Because the enemy is strong. Strength of faith. In God. Is needed to resist. The distortions of truth. With which the evil one assails us. Was it not.

At this point. That Eve failed. Strength of faith. In the goodness of God. Is needed. So that we can set aside.

The allurements. Of the evil one. And strength of faith. In the protection. Of God is needed. In order that we can disregard. The threats. Of the evil one.

[28 : 10] You have overcome. You know already. John says. You know already. What it is to be victorious. And this is our victory.

Even our faith. The maintenance of the faith. Is what defeats the enemy. Oh we may be beaten. In minor skirmishes. And we may be hurt.

And humiliated. In those afraid. Of the evil one. But as long as faith. Faith endures. As long as faith. Lays hold.

Upon the Christ. Of God. We cannot be overcome. The eclipse of faith. Alone. Is what would cut us off. From God.

The eclipse of faith. Alone. Is what would put us. In the outer darkness. But you are strong. And the word of God. Abides in you. And you have overcome.

[29 : 08] The evil one. I write unto you. Young men. Because you are strong. Because you have overcome. The evil one. And I write unto you.

Fathers. Now. It is noticeable. That John. Has just one word. For the fathers. He says it twice.

I wonder. If he thought the fathers. Were getting a wee bit deaf. Anyway. He says the same thing. Twice. To them. I write unto you.

Fathers. Because you have known. Him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you. Fathers. Because you have known. Him that is from the beginning.

This is their distinguishing feature. It's in the use. It's no doubt the use of this expression. That maybe makes some people think.

[30 : 09] That by the fathers. John identifies the people. As we said. Who were the contemporaries. Of the earthly. Of the earthly ministry of Jesus. For John.

The word was. In the beginning. The word that was with God. And is God. And this is what John recalls. Again and again.

At the commencement of this letter. That which was from the beginning. Which we have seen. And our hands have handled. Of the word of life. John vividly recalls.

The incarnation. As one who saw. And lived under the same roof. As the word that was become flesh. And this is the one whom John introduces to others.

He has spent his life. Telling people. About him. Entrance into life. Continuance in life. Development to maturity.

[31 : 09] In growth. And growth in knowledge. Of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's all. A unifying. It's a solidifying.

Of the unity. Of our relationship. With the father. There's a sense. In which. This takes us back.

To the very beginning. We come full circle. For there is never. Any moving away. From the Christ. Who introduced us. To God. But now.

Each time. We come back. To this point. We come with a new sense. Of his truthfulness. And faithfulness. He is the beginning. And the ending.

The alpha. And the omega. The first. And the last. The fathers. Have a story. To tell. That reassures. All. Who are in the struggle.

[32 : 04] Of life. And witness. The author. The initiator. The exemplar. Of faith. Is also. Its perfecter. We shall abide.

In him. Who is true. This is the true God. And eternal life. And eternal life. Now we had thought. Just for a moment.

To reflect upon. We've been thinking. Of this process. Of maturation. Little children. Young men. And fathers. And we had in mind.

To address. Ourselves. To the question. Why did John. In writing. To these. Different groups. Not stick. To the natural order. There. Why.

In both. Statements. Did he take. What is naturally. The middle group. And speak to them. Last. It's obviously. Done. Deliberately.

[33 : 00] On John's part. It's as though. He says. To the young men. You just. Hold on. You stand over there. I've got a word for you. And I'll come to you. Presently. But first of all.

A word to the children. And a word to the fathers. And then I will. A word with you. Why. Should it be like this. Well. It may well be.

That John. Saw that. This. Group. Is the most. Vulnerable. Now. That may seem. Rather strange. To say. When he says. You are strong. What do we mean.

Then. By saying. They are most. Vulnerable. What I mean. Is that. They. This is the group. That is most. Frequently.

Under the most. Intense. Pressure. And assault. And attack. Of the evil one. And maybe it's in terms of that. That John is so glad.

[33 : 56] To write. That you have overcome. The evil one. In the case of children. In the case of little children. There are special. Family protections. Just as in the case.

Of those. Who have been through. Times of crisis. I'm sure. Most of us have known. Times in. In our lives. We've had times of. Not only a physical. But a spiritual. Crisis.

And maybe. We've been surprised. For weeks. Afterwards. Of the halcyon days. That we experience. It's as though. God in his mercy. By his own.

Direct intervention. Kept the devil. At a distance. In order that we would get time. To recover. To recuperate. To build up our strength again. After the experience.

Through which we've passed. In the case of little children. There are those. Special. Family protections. And in the case. Of the fathers.

[34 : 53] The mature ones. That John speaks to here. You might say. Well these people. Have been through the mill. They're not indeed. In a situation.

Where they can afford. To be careless. Or be off guard. But they've learned. The lesson. That they must. Stick with him. Whom they have known.

From the beginning. But the young men. The young men. Are out there. As we say nowadays. Where the action is. And that's where the assaults.

Of the devil. Are most strong. Be sure that. Any experience. Or responsibility. That marks us off. From others.

In the Christian community. Any experience. Or any responsibility. That marks us off. Is something. That draws the attention. Of the evil one.

[35 : 50] And makes us a prey. To his assaults. It's not without significance. I think that. It's immediately. After John. Has said.

I have written unto you. Young men. Because you're strong. And the word of God. Abideth in you. And you have overcome. The wicked one. That he goes on. To say. Love not the world. Neither the things.

That are in the world. If any man. Love the world. The love of the father. Is not in him. The temptation. To worldliness.

May be at its peak. May be at its strongest. When we are at our prime. When we are.

At the point in life. When our family commitments. Perhaps are at their most. Weighty and their greatest. And we are tempted then. To make concessions. To the spirit of worldliness.

[36 : 47] Concessions that may. Improve our worldly prospects. That may improve our situation. With regard to our job. Or with regard to our incomes.

And so on. Temptations that suggest to us. That we take this or that road. It will help our families. Love not the world.

Neither the things. That are in the world. Be strong in the grace. That is in Christ Jesus. Leaders. Are special objects of assault.

And we may be aware. In these days. That there is a conspiracy. Against. Those who are in places. Of leadership. In the church of Jesus Christ. A conspiracy.

Of evil powers. To overthrow them. To plunge. Not only them. But in. But whole communities. Of Christian people. Into confusion. And so we need to be strong.

[37 : 48] In the grace. That is in our Lord Jesus Christ. And the one. Comforting consideration. Or at least one of the. Comforting considerations.

In all of this. Is that our Lord Jesus Christ. Is willing. To make us strong. He is willing. To sustain us.

To energize us. We draw upon the. Apostle tells us. We draw upon the energies. Of the risen Christ. We have fellowship with him. We know the power.

Of his resurrection. And if we know the power. Of the resurrection of Christ. If it is in union. If we are in union. With the living Christ. He is the one.

Who will make us strong. He is the one. Who tells us. Not to be afraid. If we were to sit down. And think of the power. Of the enemy. If we were to think.

[38 : 44] Sit down. And just reflect. Exclusively. On the subtlety. And the persistence. Of the enemy. We might be plunged. Into despair.

But he is enthroned. He is exalted. To the right hand of God. And he is the one. Who makes his people. Strong in faith.

You are strong. The word of God. Abides in you. And you have overcome. The wicked one.

Let us pray. We wait on thee. O Lord. Our God. The God of our strength.

Our shield. And our defense. All our hope. Is in thee. May we be kept. From ever thinking. That we can go it alone. May we realize.

[39 : 41] What a deceit. And what a nonsense it is. To imagine. That we can. Face up to the enemy. Of our souls alone. But may we know. The victory.

That belongs. To those. Who are in Christ Jesus. May we be strong. In his grace. That we may overcome. And know the fulfillment.

In due time. Of his promise. To him that overcometh. Will I give. To sit with me. On my throne. Even as I also. Overcame. And am set down.

With my father. On his throne. In Christ accept us. Amen.