

Lesson 3

Further Illustrations of Growth

The primary illustration of Christian maturity in the Bible is Jesus Christ. He is our elder brother. He took the form of a servant and obeyed the Father perfectly. He humbled himself with His death on the cross. We Christians are to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is the eventual goal of Christian maturity. Believers live their lives to do the will of Jesus Christ. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit reveals this. The “likeness of Jesus Christ” applies to the physical, mental, and social areas of our lives as well as to the spiritual aspect.

But the Bible illustrates our Christian growth in other ways too. In this lesson we will study several other illustrations. These will include the family, farming, and building. Our purpose is to see the concept of Christian maturity as clearly as possible.

Perhaps you have seen a great hill or mountain. From a distance it looks rather close. You think you can be there in a short time. As you approach it, the distance seems much greater. We sometimes call this *perspective* or *point of view*. We are trying to see our subject from several perspectives or several approaches. Allow the Holy Spirit to make real the right perspective for you.

lesson outline

- We Grow Up in a Family
 - Starting as a Baby
 - Changing Our Diet
 - Accepting Different Roles
- We Are Like a Valuable Farm
 - Belonging to God
 - Carrying Out Responsibility
- We Are a Building of God
 - Foundation and Building
 - How to Build God’s Building



lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to:

- Recognize the main source of the believer’s spiritual growth.
- Understand the importance of the believer’s cooperation with God in the process of spiritual growth.

learning activities

1. Check the glossary at the end of your study textbook for definitions to any key words that you do not understand.
2. If a concept in this lesson seems difficult, read the section twice or more. Use your pencil to underline or mark important parts of the lesson development.

3. Work carefully through the study questions, writing your own answers *before* checking the correct responses.
4. Ask the Holy Spirit to make these examples of growing up very real to you.
5. Take the self-test at the end of this lesson, and check your answers carefully.

key words

attitude	cultivate
brokenness	foundation
childish	point of view
conformed	repentance
conviction	responsibility

lesson development

WE GROW UP IN A FAMILY

Every human life has parents. There must be a father and mother who have given life to it and who have the responsibility of caring for it. The human infant is born with a great deal of need for love and care.

Starting as a Baby

Objective 1. *State how a new Christian can grow from a spiritual baby toward Christian maturity.*

Have you noticed any infants recently? Think of the various things that must be done for children to keep them alive and healthy. Parents gladly provide for their infants, knowing that the babies will eventually mature. New Christians have been “born again” (John 3:3). Scripture refers to them as *babies*. They must partake of spiritual food in order to grow from spiritual infancy into spiritual maturity.

- 1 Read John 3:3-6. What is the source of our spiritual birth?

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Notice in John 3:6 that John contrasts physical birth “from human parents” with spiritual birth.

When you thought about infants a moment ago, you may have remembered hearing their cries when hungry. God’s Word describes this reaction in the new Christian.

- 2 Take a moment to study 1 Peter 2:2. Please note that the phrase “grow up and be saved” is better understood as translated in the *New International Version*: “Grow up in your salvation.” According to this verse, what can we expect of a truly born again person?

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Changing Our Diet

Objective 2. *Explain how a Christian can gain understanding of more advanced spiritual truth.*

It is clear in the Scripture that the believer is neither to remain a spiritual baby nor to continue to use spiritual milk. Let us examine several Scriptures, which we shall develop more completely later.

- 3 Look first at 1 Corinthians 3:1-3. This passage indicates
- that mature Christians no longer need spiritual milk.
 - that mature Christians continue to need spiritual milk.
 - nothing definite concerning mature Christians and spiritual milk.
- 4 Now read aloud an important message in Hebrews 5:11-14. Here again the Christians are still using “milk” and not “solid food.” Verse 13 indicates that a milk-drinking Christian is
- experienced in the matter of right.
 - still a child.
 - experienced in the matter of wrong.
- 5 What does Hebrews 5:14 imply that mature Christians can do that milk-drinking Christians cannot do?

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Perhaps you are asking, “But what is the difference between spiritual milk and spiritual solid food?” Ask yourself where milk comes from. You will answer that it comes from a body which has eaten solid food and produces milk. Milk has gone through the digestive system of another: the mother, for example. Milk to a Christian is primary spiritual truth as opposed to more advanced spiritual truth. Understanding of more advanced truth comes through practical application of already known primary or basic truth (see 1 John 1:6-7).

6 Turn to 1 Corinthians 14:20. The apostle commends a childlike attitude toward evil. But he urges the believers not to be like in their

7 Again in 1 Corinthians 13:11 we are urged to grow up. In what three ways does a child reveal himself/herself according to this verse?.....

Paul continues in this verse by saying, “Now that I am a man, I have no more use for childish ways.” Do you remember when you put away play things or clothes you used as a child? It was not always easy. Growing up can be painful.

Accepting Different Roles

Objective 3. *List three things included in the process of our growing up spiritually.*

God’s concern for the believer to achieve full spiritual stature is found in many places in the Bible. God is concerned that the believer knows the full purpose He has for His children. The apostles shared God’s yearning father-heart. Paul and John particularly sought to move the believer through childhood into young adulthood and on to parenthood in the spiritual sense.

Do you remember the changes of duties in your family as you became older? Are you now a mother or father yourself? If so, your view of life certainly differs from that of a child or youth. The apostle John writes from the position of a spiritual father in 1 John 2:12-13.

- 8 Read 1 John 2:12-13 carefully. Select the three stages John refers to from the following list. Circle the letter before each one of the correct three.
- Babies
 - Children
 - Old men
 - Young men
 - Boys
 - Fathers



You can see in 1 John 2:12-13 that the situations are different at each of the three levels of maturity. The children *receive* forgiveness for their sins; the young men *do* a notable deed in their victory over evil; and the fathers *know* God better than the others. The children are portrayed as the *most dependent*, the young men as the *most active*, and the fathers as the *most mature*. Fathers have fullest understanding of God and His purposes.

You have noticed that three levels of growth in God's family are represented in this passage. And three things included in the process of our growing up spiritually are *reaching higher levels of knowledge*, *accepting more responsibility*, and *performing more significant duties*. As we have seen, *growing* means "leaving," leaving childish things to gain greater stature.

WE ARE LIKE A VALUABLE FARM

You know that some farmland is much more valuable than other land. Good land with rich soil and well-watered plains is precious. The farmer's very life is built around the land. He clears and plows, plants and cultivates, waters and waits. The harvest is his reward. He has worked hard during long hours. The farmer deserves the joy of a good harvest. How sad it is when his efforts are in vain and the land or climate robs him of his due reward.



Belonging to God

Objective 4. Explain how *Ephesians 3:17-18* indicates that we belong to God.

The Bible often refers to God's people as being the Lord's vineyard or field (Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 12:10). God has chosen us, and we are His field. He has carefully planted His seed in the soil of our lives. He expects and deserves to have a harvest. He awaits our maturity as anxiously as the farmer observes his crops.

9 Read 1 Corinthians 3:9. According to the first sentence in this verse, believers are God's field. Now read verses 5-8 of the same chapter. Notice these words: "sowed the seed," "watered the plant," "grow." According to these verses, who makes the plant grow?

- a) Apollos
- b) God
- c) Man
- d) Partners

NOTE: Don't forget that although God alone has the power to develop spiritual growth in us, He requires our cooperation with Him in developing it.

Ephesians 3:17-18 is a prayer by the apostle Paul that the believers may have their *roots* in love, so that they "together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love." To have our *roots in God's love* denotes that we belong to God; it continues the analogy between believers and a valuable farm. God's love, like rich soil, will help growth. In this passage Paul is praying for what God awaits in us: *Christian maturity*.

Carrying Out Responsibility

Objective 5. *Describe the responsibility to God's field that we must carry out in order to reap God's harvest of blessing.*

Believers are sometimes pictured as the keepers of the field of God. They have a responsibility to fulfill as workers in God's field. You remember reading in 1 Corinthians 3 that Paul sowed seed, Apollos watered, and so forth.

10 In Jeremiah 4:3, what is God telling His people to do that refers in a literal sense to farming?

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The answer to the preceding question means that we can make the spiritual soil of our life ready to receive God's seed. Perhaps you ask, "How can I plow the soil of my life?" *Plowing breaks up soil to eliminate its hard crust.* Then both seed and moisture can enter into the soil and cause growth. Brokenness in the believer's life is a result of responding in humility to God's conviction. Such response keeps the soil of the heart open. The Holy Spirit will faithfully tell or show (convict) our spirit when something is wrong.

Can you remember a recent time in your life when the Holy Spirit convicted you? Perhaps it was because of something you said. Or maybe you were angry or bitter toward a fellow believer. How did you respond to this? Did you excuse yourself? Did you resist the conviction? An attitude of brokenness in true humility responds with repentance to God's conviction.

Repentance means "to turn away from." An illustration of brokenness and repentance in response to God's conviction is found in the following prayer:

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for showing me this sin. I am genuinely sorry for this wrong. I repent and turn from this. Thank You that I am forgiven through the price of Christ Jesus' sacrifice. Praise You, Father.

Through brokenness and repentance the soil of my life is kept open and permits spiritual growth.

11 Read another verse concerning this matter: Hosea 10:12. This is a wonderful command from God to His people. According to this verse, what are the people to plant and reap?

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Our responsibility to God's field is to plow and plant in devotion to the Lord. When we carry out these responsibilities, we are blessed with God's abundant harvest.

WE ARE A BUILDING OF GOD

Perhaps near where you live, there is a very grand building. Does it stand above all others in size? Is it made of more beautiful materials? No doubt it was built with the skill and care of dedicated workers. Its perfection shows it was built to an exact design. People like to look at it. Some other buildings are built more quickly, with less skill, and contain less costly materials. They are less durable. Anyone can tell the difference.

12 Quote the part of 1 Corinthians 3:9 that relates most closely to this section of the lesson.

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Foundation and Building

Objective 6. Use 1 Corinthians 3:12 to explain to someone else the operation of a person's free will in the choice of materials for God's spiritual building.

In 1 Corinthians 3:9-12, Paul places special emphasis on three things:

- 1. God's building
- 2. Foundation for God's building
- 3. Materials in God's building

Notice the specific difference between the composition of the foundation for this building and the composition of the building upon that foundation.

13 Who is the foundation which is laid for this building (v. 11)?

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14 What are the six building materials listed in this passage (v. 12)?

- a
- b
- c
- d
- e
- f

We saw above that we are both God's field and the keeper of His field. Now we understand that we are both His building and His builders. It is significant that we can exercise our own free will in the choice of materials we use in the building of God's building. In one sense the great building we are working on is the church (the body of Jesus Christ in the world—not a physical building). In another sense our own body is like a temple.

15 Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. What is our body compared to in these verses?

- a) A growing field of grain
- b) A tall fruit-bearing tree
- c) A pearl of great price
- d) The temple of the Holy Spirit

How to Build God's Building

Now, read 1 Corinthians 3:13-17, and answer the following questions.

16 What is it about a person's work on God's building that will be judged?

- a) The amount
- b) The quality
- c) The beauty

17 The illustration of God's judgment upon our work says that in the Day of Christ every person's work will be exposed and revealed by We are further told that "if what was built on the foundation survives the fire, the builder will receive a"

Every day, I must choose how and what to build. The foundation cannot be changed. It is Jesus Christ our Lord. The Father has a wonderful plan for what my personal *Christian building* should be like. He tells me in His Word of the right attitudes, habits, words, and character. He designed what a Christian should be like. When I build to His specifications (the specific orders on *His* plan), the *building* of my life will be beautiful and durable. It will be like the grand building we talked about. If I neglect God's plan and choose materials that do not please Him (wood, grass, or straw), my building will not survive fire and I will never become a mature Christian.

Perhaps you would like to pray this prayer with me:

Father, Your plan is best. The materials You choose are best. I want the building of my life to be made to Your standard. I want to be conformed to Your Son Jesus Christ in my body, mind, and spirit. Amen.

self-test

SHORT ANSWER. Briefly answer the following question in the space provided.

1 At what point in their experience should believers no longer need the milk of the Word of God?

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MATCHING. Read the instructions carefully and write your answer in the space preceding each question.

2 Match the Scripture (right) to each of the basic ideas brought out in this lesson (left). I have filled in the first blank for you.

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| ..2. a | A fuller level of maturity is to have a fuller knowledge of God and His purpose. | 1) | “Anyone who has to drink milk is still a child, without experience in the matter of right and wrong.” (Hebrews 5:13) |
| b | Believers choose the material that they use to build their life on the foundation of Christ. | 2) | “I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who has existed from the beginning.” (1 John 2:12-13) |
| c | The soil of our life can be kept open by responding in humility to the conviction of God. | 3) | “Plow up your unplowed fields; do not sow your seeds among thorns.” (Jeremiah 4:3) |
| d | An understanding of more advanced spiritual truth must be added to our knowledge of primary truth for us to understand more difficult problems. | 4) | “Each one must be careful how he builds. . . . Some will use gold or silver or precious stones in building.” (1 Corinthians 3:12) |

MULTIPLE CHOICE. Circle the letters before the best answers to each question.

3 In this lesson the believer is compared to several things by way of illustration. Select the five correct illustrations.

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|----------------|----------------------------------|
| a) A tree | f) Soil |
| b) A baby | g) An old man |
| c) God’s field | h) God’s building |
| d) A ship | i) A road |
| e) An island | j) The temple of the Holy Spirit |

4 Select the three building materials that represent those qualities which will *last* at the judgment seat of Christ.

- a) Gold
- b) Grass
- c) Straw
- d) Wood
- e) Silver
- f) Precious Stones

answers to the study questions

- 1** The Spirit of God
- 10** To plow up their unplowed fields
- 2** Thirst for pure spiritual milk
- 11** They are to plant righteousness and reap blessings.
- 3** a) that mature Christians no longer need spiritual milk.
- 12** “You are . . . God’s building.”
- 4** b) still a child.
- 13** Jesus Christ
- 5** Distinguish between good and evil.
- 14**
 - a** Gold
 - b** Silver
 - c** Precious stones
 - d** Wood
 - e** Grass
 - f** Straw
- 6** children; thinking.
- 15** d) The temple of the Holy Spirit
- 7** In speech, feelings, and thinking
- 16** b) The quality
- 8**
 - b) Children
 - d) Young men
 - f) Fathers
- 17** fire. reward.
- 9** b) God