

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

A Double Miracle

By Sally Lam-Phoon

Theme: God's Transforming Power

Call to Worship: #719, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *Our Lord the Creator*

Opening Song: #7, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *The Lord in Zion Reigneth*

Closing Song: #111, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *It Took Miracle*

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:18, NASB

This sermon was originally given on Monday, July 4, 2005, during the Women's Ministries/Shepherdess meetings at GC Session 2005 in St. Louis, Missouri.

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For those of us who have held our own babies in our arms, we can better understand the miracles of change and growth that can take place in a human being. Silently, imperceptibly, both these miracles take place on a moment to moment, day by day basis by the power of God.

Similarly, in the spiritual realm, the double miracle of transformation by grace and personal Christian growth is initiated and brought about by a personal God who is intensely interested in each one of His children.

The world is just as interested in personal growth but defined within a totally different paradigm. Never in the world's history has there been so many self-help books, on-line classes, paper chases. A check on the computer yielded 10 pages of information leading to 99,732 sites on self-help books alone. People are anxious to grow but mainly for the purpose of getting ahead and staying ahead of the competition. Thus, growing can be a very stressful pursuit because as soon as you climb up one rung of the ladder, you find that there is always someone ahead of you and another rung to be scaled.

On the contrary, Christian personal growth brings about a stabilizing peace and an inner joy that cannot be attained without a transformation that first takes place effected by this mysterious element called "grace." Grace, that divine attribute that comes gift-wrapped from God first saves us (Eph 2:8) and then helps us to grow.

Peter wrote: ". . . grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18, NASB). Ellen White says that grace "was sent in search of us"¹ and God abundantly provides this grace that "we may accomplish everything that [He] requires."² Phil 1:6 (Living Bible) states: I am sure that God who began the good work within you will keep right on helping

you grow in his grace until his task within you is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns.

Hence, this growth process will never be completed until Jesus comes. No wonder Ellen White says that Christian growth or sanctification is the work of a lifetime.³ As long as Satan reigns, we will have self to subdue, sins to overcome, with no possibility of anyone saying, 'I have finally arrived at maturity.'

However, instead of being stressed out with personal growth, Grace says, "The point is not to try harder; instead you must strive less. You must acknowledge your helplessness and totally depend upon the Grace Giver. Sure, you are made for good works and holy action but that has to flow out of a state of being that comes from spending time with and knowing the Source of Grace."

The Bible uses the beautiful analogy of the development of a plant as a representation of Christian growth. Let us learn some lessons from this analogy.

Personal growth takes time.

Since the invention of instant noodles, the world has seen scores upon scores of inventions that have pandered to our search for instant gratification of our needs and desires. Whether we are hungry or thirsty or bored—there is an instant solution. However, with growth, there are no shortcuts, no magical solutions; maturity simply takes time.

Once I had the luxury of owning a fruiting mango tree. It was a joy to watch the first fruits appear on this five-foot high tree and resist the temptation of picking them until they were fully ripe. After patiently anticipating for months, we finally decided that the fruit was mature enough and joyfully picked our first precious ripe mango off that tree. Then we left it on the table to "mature" it further for a couple of days before cutting it open. When our teeth sank into that mango, it was worth all the wait. It was simply bursting with juice with an unbeatable heavenly sweetness.

What a contrast to mangoes I buy from the markets in Singapore, a country which imports more than 90% of its fruit from abroad. These mangoes are picked for export thousands of miles away and are usually green and unripe when picked so they won't bruise in the shipping process. Then just before they are sold, the fruit are sprayed with CO² gas to ripen them quickly. Though the fruit is edible, it is a far cry from the mango that has fully matured on my tree. For true maturity to develop, it just takes time.

Why does growth take so long? We are often impatient. Rick Warren says it so well in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*⁴: "While we worry *how fast* we grow, God is concerned about *how strong* we grow. God views our life *from* and *for* eternity, so He is never in a hurry."

God exercises abundant patience with us because there are so many things we have to unlearn and relearn; we are such slow learners. We are often sucked into the milieu that is around us, absorbing the world's values and standards, blindly following their priorities and forgetting our own destiny.

Growth calls for change

That is why growth calls for us to re-arrange our thinking and exchange our faulty paradigms for God's way and will. Our day-to-day living distracts us from the purpose which God has planned for us.

For Beth, life was absolutely filled to overflowing. A modern "do-it-all" career woman, she wanted to prove that she could also be a caring Mom and a supportive wife besides being a filial daughter to her in-laws and parents. From the moment she opened her eyes in the morning, she had a long list of errands to run and duties to fulfill in addition to doing a perfect job at work as well as in church, that she hardly had time to stop and think, let alone read her Bible. To her, life felt much like running to catch a train, completely out of breath but never ever getting on.

At times Beth felt like she was stuck on this dizzying merry-go-round that is spinning and spinning so fast that even if she wanted to get off, she could not. There were too many bills to pay, too many obligations to fulfill, and the uncertain future to worry about. Yet she was filled with an unexplained restlessness, sometimes resentment and unhappiness with all she had to do. While she was a Christian and attended church regularly, she felt an emptiness, a stagnation within.

Due to an economic downturn, Beth lost her job. She felt devastated but it was Christ's way of getting her attention. He beckoned her into another paradigm where she could unlearn all that mind-racking speed, relearn how to slow down, to make intelligent choices, to rethink her priorities and focus on where she was actually headed. She turned to her Bible for answers and prayer for solutions and experienced the joy and peace that she first knew when she encountered God.

Growth takes place when we are plugged in to God and engrafted to His Word, and constantly aligning ourselves to His will through prayer.

Like Beth, when grace comes seeking for us, if we respond to it, it will begin to transform us. It may force us out of our comfort zones to confront what needs to be adjusted for growth. When we are willing to plug in to God and on a daily basis, engraft His Word, the Word that was given to change us, to mature us and to make us complete, equipped to do what He has in mind for us, then we begin to grow. The Scriptures will teach us, rebuke us, correct and instruct us, causing us to exchange an earthly framework for a heavenly one (II Timothy 3:16, 17).

Therefore, growth does not come by hard work but by first being still with the open Word of God and keeping an open mind to His voice as we communicate with Him everyday. Growth depends on an appropriation of grace from God the Father; an assimilation of His blessings through the Holy Spirit everyday and abiding in the Word of God.

In the process, we get better acquainted with God, the Source of our growth, so He can personally instruct us regarding the what, the when, the where, the how and the why of life.

Growth is an act of God

I Cor 3:5-6 NIV: I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant but it was God who made the plant grow. Growth cannot be forced; it is a natural phenomenon that takes place when the

conditions are right. It is a divine process in cooperation with the transforming power of grace through the Holy Spirit.

Sam Chadwick puts it this way: “Christ lives in men through the Spirit. He is no longer a model but a living Presence. Christian faith does not copy Him; it lives Him. Christ is not imitated, but reproduced. Life is sanctified because He possesses it, lives it, transforms it. The Spirit of God does not work upon us; He lives in us.”⁵

Growth may be painful at times.

No pain, no gain. Although Christians should not be masochistic and go searching for trials, in the course of living, we are told that if we are growing it will be natural to encounter some painful experiences.

James 1:2-4 tells us: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. NIV

On many an occasion, those who are closest to us are sometimes the most trying. Most of us seek friends who like us and whom we like but we don't have the choice of picking who our family or church community may be. It is often in these two arenas that we are forced to deal with people who may not like us and whom we may not like. In doing so, we may experience the greatest growth, resulting in the smoothening of our rough edges.

The Message Bible expresses Romans 5:2-5 in this way: “We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

“There's even more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!”

Personal growth results in the fruit of the Spirit

A life that is transformed by grace and growing in the Spirit will result in bearing the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, talks about bearing fruit shown in good works while growing in the knowledge of God (Col 1:9, 10).

As grace worked on the heart of Beth, she found peace in extending love and joy to her family members and church friends. No longer was she restless and striving, trying to prove that she could do it all but she was able to relax, let God take over the steering wheel of her life, showing her what He wanted to accomplish through her. She made the changes as she discovered them in her own daily spiritual journey with a personal God. Many times, life was not a piece of cake

but she found that grace could see her through her trials.

CONCLUSION

This morning I believe that you and I are not here by coincidence. God has brought us together to know Him and His will for us. He is inviting us to a feast of His grace, to exchange our faulty paradigms for His amazing and outrageous grace which is sufficient to change us. Then as we engraft the Word, we will truly begin to know our loving heavenly Father. When He lives in us, He will bring about the double miracle of transformation and growth far beyond what we have ever imagined. Yes, personal growth is just waiting for us. Won't you say to the Lord, "I'm ready, Lord; let the miracle begin!"

¹ Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942) p. 161.

² Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1941) p. 301.

³ Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911) p. 560.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Quezon City, Philippines: The Campus Crusade for Christ, 2002), p. 218.

⁵ Samuel Chadwick, *The Way to Pentecost*, (Avonmore, PA: The West Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 87.

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May 30, 2005

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