

The Believer's Growth in Grace

John Newton's Three Letters on the Progressive Work of Grace

John Newton wrote three letters on the stages of growing in grace.¹ He used Mark 4:28 as the general guide to his letters. "First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." He develops three stages from this verse, the blade, the ear, and the full corn. The blade is the beginning of conversion, a young convert; the ear represents a convinced believer, though he is not seasoned; and lastly, the "full corn" or "full grain" represents the seasoned believer.

Mark 4:26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

One commentator described the meaning of this parable in these terms: "The process of spiritual growth is spontaneous within the kingdom of God, but it remains a total mystery to natural humanity."² The passage clearly illustrates the mysterious spiritual growth that exists in this world. Whether what Newton had to say could be clearly proven from this passage may be debatable but what he wrote concerning the progressive work of grace cannot be debated.

A; or, Grace in the Blade

Newton wanted to present only those things that were common to all believers. He recognized that God's ways are diverse but He still "leads all his people effectually and savingly to the knowledge of the same essential truths" (197).

1. A divine work is needed

Since we are all dead in trespasses and sins, the person who comes to Christ comes to Him by the work of divine power ("No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" Jn. 6:44). The "beginning is instantaneous." He describes it in this way:

It is effected by a certain kind of light communicated to the soul, to which it was before all utter stranger. The eyes of the understanding are opened and enlightened. The light at first afforded is weak and indistinct, like the morning dawn; but when it is once begun, it will certainly increase and spread to the perfect day. We commonly speak as if conviction of sin was the first work of God upon the soul, that he is in mercy about to draw unto himself. But I think this is inaccurate. Conviction is only a part, or rather an immediate effect, of that first work; and there are many convictions which do not at all spring from it, and therefore are only occasional and temporary, though for a season they may be very sharp, and put a person upon doing many things. (198)

2. An adequate conception of God

¹ John Newton, *The Works of The Rev. John Newton*, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1824), 1:197-217. These can be found on the internet, <http://gracegems.org/Newton/108.htm>. He says, "I sit down to give you my general views of a *progressive work of grace*, in the several stages of a believer's experience; which I shall mark by the different characters, A, B, C..." (197).

² R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 1; 2d, IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 154.

Newton highlights the need for the heart to be enlightened more than the conviction of sin because adequate “conceptions of God” are required to have a right conviction of sin. He knew that sin is often feared for different reasons (e.g. danger) but to see its true demerit, we need a knowledge of who God is. “The natural conscience and passions may be indeed so far wrought upon by outward means, as to stir up some desires and endeavors; but if these are not founded in a spiritual apprehension of the perfection's of God, according to the revelation he has made of himself in his word, they will sooner or later come to nothing; and the person affected will either return by degrees to his former ways, 2Peter 2:20, or he will sink into a self-righteous form of godliness, destitute of the power. Luke 18:11.” (199)

3. The natural conscience can explain the change for some

The natural conscience could easily be sparked and invigorated but it will not produce the intended spiritual effect. On account of this, “the many woeful miscarriages and apostasies among professors are more to be lamented than wondered at.” It may look like there was life but their apostasies prove that it was not a divine work.

4. Scripture guides the new believer

As God leads through His truth “all the leading truths of the word of God soon begin to be perceived and assented to” yet he struggles as he avoids sin, has his heart affected by the glory of Christ, and find encouragement as he prays. He loves the Lord’s people and accounts them to be the “excellent of the earth, and delights in their conversation.”

He is longing, waiting, and praying, for a share in those blessings which he believes they enjoy, and can be satisfied with nothing less. He is convinced of the power of Jesus to save him; but, through remaining ignorance and legality, the remembrance of sins previously committed, and the sense of present corruption, he often questions his willingness; and, not knowing the aboundings of grace, and the security of the promises, he fears lest the compassionate Savior should spurn him from his feet. (200)

5. Finds comfort from God

As he struggles in his new life, his heart is enlarged in prayer, he is fed by the Word preached, promises come to him with great comfort, etc. Yet, through his immaturity, he draws wrong conclusions from these spiritual blessings. In this state, the young convert is not discerning.

He mistakes the nature and design of these comforts, which are not given him to rest in, but to encourage him to press forward. He thinks he is then right because he has them, and fondly hopes to have them always. Then his mountain stands strong. But before long he feels a change: his comforts are withdrawn; he finds no heart to pray; no attention in hearing; indwelling sin revives with fresh strength, and perhaps Satan returns with redoubled rage. Then he is at his wits' end; thinks his hopes were presumptuous, and his comforts delusions. He wants to feel something that may give him a warrant to trust in the free promises of Christ. His views of the Redeemer's gracefulness are very narrow: he sees not the harmony and glory of the Divine attributes in the salvation of a sinner: he sighs for mercy, but fears that justice is against him. *However, by these changing dispensations, the Lord is training him up, and bringing him forward.* (201)

6. Up and down

He is beginning to see that his spiritual troubles are more devastating and is becoming more convinced that outward trials would not bother him if he could just have that “abiding sense of his acceptance in the Beloved...” (201) He regrets that he does not possess the spiritual appetite he first felt when converted. He is moving forward but there is much mixture of self in all that he does.

7. Grace in the Blade characterized

The grace of God influences both the understanding and the affections. Warm affections, without knowledge, can rise no higher than superstition; and that knowledge which does not influence the heart and affections will only make a hypocrite. The true believer is rewarded in both respects; yet we may observe, that though 'A' is not without knowledge, this state is more usually remarkable for the warmth and liveliness of the affections. On the other hand, as the work advances, though the affections are not left out, yet it seems to be carried on principally in the understanding. The old Christian has more solid, judicious, connected views of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the glories of his person and redeeming love: hence his hope is more established, his dependence more simple, and his peace and strength, more abiding and uniform, than in the case of a young convert; but the latter has, for the most part, the advantage in point of sensible fervency. (202-3)

This believer often thinks he isn't truly converted. “His faith is weak, but his heart is warm.” (203) As redeemed, the spirit of bondage slowly dissipates. Such is the new young believer.

B; or, Grace in the Ear

Newton describes this stage of the believer as one who is assured “from a simple view of the grace and glory of the Saviour.” (204) What characterized “A” was *desire* and what characterizes “B” is *conflict*. “A” just left Egypt and saw the deliverance of the Lord at the Red Sea; “B” begins right after. His struggles are more than he had expected. “The Lord is now about to suit his dispensations to humble and to prove him, and to show him what is in his heart, that he may do him good at the latter end, and that all the glory may redound to his own free grace.” (205)

1. God could have completely freed us from sin

Though God hates sin and teaches His people to hate it as well, he has chosen not to deliver them completely “from the defilement of indwelling sin.” Newton wisely notes that God allows sin to remain “for the fuller manifestation of the glory of his grace and wisdom, and for the making his salvation more precious to their souls.” (205-6)

2. Our duty is to fight sin but we know not ourselves

“B” knows he must fight sin and desires to do so. Yet, he is of course not completely sanctified. He knows that his heart is “deceitful and desperately wicked” “but he does not, he cannot, know at first, the full meaning of that expression.” (206)

3. Our wicked heart comes to light

Newton says that “B” begins to see his sinfulness. Yet, “the exceeding sinfulness of sin is manifested, not so much by its breaking through the restraint of threatening and commands, as by its being capable of acting against light and against love.” (207) One need not fall into “gross outward sin, in order to know what is in [his] heart” (207). Some he allows to fall into sin while the rest feel its motions run rampant in their hearts.

The Lord makes some of his children examples and warnings to others, as he pleases. Those who are spared, and whose worst deviations are only known to the Lord and themselves, have great reason to be thankful. I am sure I have: the merciful Lord has not allowed me to make any considerable blot in my profession during the time I have been numbered among his people. But I have nothing to boast of herein. It has not been owing to my wisdom, watchfulness, or spirituality, though in the main he has not allowed me to live in the neglect of his appointed means. But I hope to go softly all my days under the remembrance of many things, for which I have as great cause to be abased before him, as if I had been left to sin grievously in the sight of men. Yet, with respect to my acceptance in the Beloved, I know not if I have had a doubt of a quarter of an hour's continuance for many years past. But, oh! the multiplied instances of stupidity, ingratitude, impatience, and rebellion, to which my conscience has been witness! And as every heart knows its own bitterness, I have generally heard the like complaints from others of the Lord's people with whom I have conversed, even from those who have appeared to be eminently gracious and spiritual. (208)

4. Temptations come in degrees

The Lord allows occasions, turns, events, etc. in our lives to try our spirits. Then we feel how vile we are in ourselves! “*We are prone to spiritual pride, to self-dependence, to vain confidence, to creature attachments, and a train of evils.* The Lord often discovers to us one sinful disposition by exposing us to another. He sometimes shows us what he can do for us and in us; and at other times how little we can do, and how unable we are to stand without him.” (209)

Through this, he gains knowledge of himself and the preciousness of his Savior. “The dark and disconsolate hours which he has brought upon himself in times past, make him doubly prize the light of God's countenance, and teach him to dread whatever might grieve the Spirit of God, and cause him to withdraw again. The repeated and multiplied pardons which he has received, increase his admiration of, and the sense of his obligations to, the rich sovereign abounding mercy of the covenant.” (209)

5. Meekness towards our brethren

Because he has seen the Lord's dealings with his own vile faithless soul, he is meek towards those who have been overtaken in a sin. This, for Newton, is the best sign of one who is progressing towards maturity. He is confounded by his sins and the Lord's mercy: “That you may remember, and be confounded, and never open your mouth any more (to boast, complain, or censure), because of your shame, when I am pacified towards you for all that you have done, says the Lord God.” (Eze. 16:63)

C; or, The full Corn in the Ear

As “A” was characterized by *desire* and “B” by *conflict*, so “C” is characterized more by *contemplation*. This may not immediately strike us as being accurate or helpful yet his explanation justifies his observation.

1. Experience has confirmed that the Lord is good

He is stable because long experiences over his lifetime have proven how true God is to all His promises. He is not better or stronger than “B” per se (as to inherent grace). He, like “B” depends upon the Lord and is convinced that he is incapable of performing spiritual acts without God.

Yet in a sense he is much stronger, because he has a more feeling and constant sense of his own weakness. The Lord has been long teaching him this lesson by a train of various dispensations; and through grace he can say, that he has not suffered so many things in vain. *His heart has deceived him so often, that he is now in a good measure weaned from trusting to it; and therefore he does not meet with so many disappointments.* And having found again and again the vanity of all other helps, he is now taught to go to the Lord at once for "grace to help in every time of need." Thus he is strong, not in himself, but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. (211)

In a sense, he has seen the limit of this world; its vanity, its deceptions and disappointments. This is not something that one merely “teaches” another person but something formed into who we are as mature seasoned tried believers. It is the work of God.

2. C’s happiness and superiority to B lies in ...

Rather than summarize these words, I quote extensively so as not to miss the force of what he is saying:

...by the Lord's blessing on the use of means—such as prayer, reading and hearing of the word, and by a sanctified improvement of what he has seen of the Lord, and of his own heart, in the course of his experience—*he has attained clearer, deeper, and more comprehensive views of the mystery of redeeming love*; of the glorious excellency of the Lord Jesus, in his person, offices, grace, and faithfulness; of the harmony and glory of all the Divine perfection's manifested in and by him to the church; of the stability, beauty, fullness, and certainty of the Holy Scriptures; and of the heights, depths, lengths, and breadths of the love of God in Christ. Thus, though his sensible feelings may not be so warm as when he was in the state of 'A', his judgment is more solid, his mind more fixed, his thoughts more habitually exercised upon the things within the veil. His great business is to behold the glory of God in Christ; and by beholding, he is changed into the same image, and brings forth in an eminent and uniform manner the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. His contemplation's are not barren speculations, but have a real influence, and enable him to exemplify the Christian character to more advantage, and with more consistence, than can in the present state of things be expected either from 'A' or 'B'.

Such a believer has deep practical and sensible views of who his Savior is. His views have “real influence” in his life. He believes deeply in what he knows and this conviction determines all that he does.

3. Humility

Newton lists three dominant graces in “C.” “It is a part of C's daily employment to look back upon the way by which the Lord has led him; and while he reviews the *Ebenizers* he has set up all along the road, he sees, in almost an equal number, the monuments of his own perverse returns, and how he has in a thousand instances rendered to the Lord, evil for good.” (212) He can truly say with Paul that he is “less than the least of all saints.” “The apprehension of infinite Majesty combined with infinite Love, makes him shrink into the dust.” This deep humility begets two other graces.

a. Submission to the will of God

“The views he has of his own vileness, unworthiness, and ignorance, and of the Divine sovereignty, wisdom, and love—teach him to be content in every state, and to bear his appointed lot of suffering with resignation...” (213)

b. Tenderness to his fellow brothers and sisters

“He cannot but judge of their conduct according to the rule of the word. But his own heart, and the knowledge he has acquired of the snares of the world, and the subtlety of Satan, teach him to make all due allowances, and qualify him for admonishing and restoring, in the spirit of meekness, those who have been over taken in a fault.” (213)

4. Spirituality

All of us have a spiritual taste for divine things but we are all renewed only in part. “C” is more weaned from his attachment to this world, less prone to depend on creatures, etc. “He still feels a fetter, but he longs to be free. His allowed desires are brought to a point; and he sees nothing worth a serious thought, but communion with God and progress in holiness.” (214) Without the Lord’s presence, all is prison and vanity for him.

From hence arises a peaceful reliance upon the Lord: he has nothing which he cannot commit into his hands, which he is not habitually aiming to resign to his disposal. Therefore he is not afraid of evil tidings; but when the hearts of others shake like the leaves of a tree, he is fixed, trusting in the Lord, who he believes can and will make good every loss, sweeten every bitter, and appoint all things to work together for his advantage. He sees that the time is short, lives upon the foretastes of glory, and therefore accounts not his life, or any inferior concernment, dear, so that he may finish his course with joy. (214)

5. Union of heart to the glory and will of God

As we mature, our judgment, aim, and end will conform to His glory and will. When young (“A”), he was concerned with sensible comforts; now, he desires to be with Christ. “That God in Christ is glorious over all, and blessed forever, is the very joy of his soul; and his heart can frame no higher wish, than that the sovereign, wise, holy will of God may be accomplished

in him, and all his creatures. Upon this grand principle his prayers, schemes, and actions, are formed.” (216)

It does not matter if “C” is rich or poor, learned or illiterate, etc. The effects of the power of God’s grace perhaps not measurable to the human eye are evident to the soul.