

LifeStages: Growing to Spiritual Maturity – Part 3 of 5 By Barry L. Davis

THE FOLLOWER

Not long after I first moved to the Twin Cities area of Minnesota I was asked to drop some friends off at the Minneapolis airport. I dropped them off, got back on the freeway, and headed back home. After about five minutes or so, I started noticing that my surroundings didn't look familiar at all. I decided to keep going, thinking maybe I was just confused since I was new to the area. I drove for 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, and I still wasn't seeing any signs of the city. The whole time I was driving I knew I should stop and ask for directions, but there was just something within me, some kind of a male pride syndrome, that just wouldn't let me. Finally, I decided to stop at the convenience store and ask the girl behind the counter for directions: "*How do I get to Minneapolis?*" The cashier pointed toward the road I'd been driving on and said, "*You need to go north.*" It turns out that while I knew I should have been going north, I'd been driving south the entire time.

When we move from the *Seeker Stage* to the *Follower Stage*, we find ourselves turning around and going the opposite direction from what we've been used to. We are making a spiritual U-Turn that leads us away from ourselves and into the position of placing our feet into the footprints of God. While making the decision to move from *Seeker* to *Follower* can be kind of scary, starting out in the Christian life can be almost overwhelming.

In this article I want to help those of you who have moved from the *Seeker Stage* to the *Follower Stage* as you begin your journey in the Christian life. Now, if you believe you've already passed this Stage, you'll still want to tune in, because while we move along in maturity, the principles I'm going to talk about in this article will apply throughout your Christian life.

SOME TENSIONS YOU CAN EXPECT

While you receive the peace that passes understanding when you become a Christ Follower, you still have to deal with the tension surrounding where you've been in your spiritual life up to this point with where you're headed now. There are three very specific tensions that you will be dealing with immediately.

A Collision of Values

The way that I view money, status, and other symbols of success will begin to change. Once a young man that had a lot of money approached Jesus. He asked Jesus what he needed to do to receive eternal life. Jesus listed some of the commandments that he needed to keep, and the young man said, "I've kept all those since I was a kid." Jesus replied, "*You lack only one thing,*" he told him. "*Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*" At

this, the man's face fell, and he went sadly away because he had many possessions (Mark 10:21-22).

This is a classic case of a collision of values. Jesus recognized that this man's wealth was standing in the way of him being a true Christ Follower. Jesus very clearly told him to remove this obstacle from his life, and then he would be in a position to follow. We are never told what decision the young man made, but we are told he "went away sad, because he had great wealth." This young man's principles are colliding – *should I follow the value of wealth, or the value of Christ?*

Money might not be a problem for you; it might be something else that you consider valuable. Whatever it is, it is colliding with the value of following Christ to your full potential. This is a tension that you must deal with right away.

A Loss of the Familiar

One day as Jesus was walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother, Andrew, fishing with a net, for they were commercial fishermen. Jesus called out to them, "Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!" (Mark 1:16-17).

Jesus calls His followers to a drastic change in the way they perceive the world and their place in it. He takes our ordinary lives and shows us the set of priorities that really count. Simon and Andrew were commercial fishermen. Jesus explained to them that when they made a decision to follow Him, they were making a decision to reprioritize their lives according to Jesus' agenda. When I become a Christ Follower, though I may have the same job, and live in the same house, and have many of the same surroundings I had prior to my conversion experience, I now see all of these things in the new light of being called as a minister of Jesus Christ.

Handling the Emotional High

Becoming a Christian is the greatest experience you will ever have. You will begin to see life through new eyes, you know that the promises of God are yours, and you start to walk and talk and act and react differently than before. You are on an emotional high that greets you each morning when you wake up and tucks you into bed at night. But eventually, your emotions will begin to play tricks on you, and the excitement isn't what it once was. By some Satanic twist, the freshness of your newfound faith begins to feel kind of ordinary to you after awhile. Jesus addressed this problem in Mark 4:16-17:

"The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But like young plants in such soil, their roots don't go very deep. At first they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word."

If you base your faith on the emotional high you will eventually walk away from that faith. You must base your faith on the Christ who has saved you and made you whole. Whether life is going smoothly or there are many bumps in the road, the same Jesus who was so evident to you in the good times hasn't gone anywhere. We must trust in the objective truth of the Word of God rather than on our emotional state. Sometimes our emotions lie to us, but God's Word never does

PROMISES YOU CAN RELY ON

To be able to deal with the different issues, problems, and hassles that are going to come your way, you need to have a foundation for standing strong in your faith. The one thing that will help you more than anything else is relying on the promises that God made to you when you moved from a *Seeker* to a *Follower*.

For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in him. That is why we say "Amen" when we give glory to God through Christ. It is God who gives us, along with you, the ability to stand firm for Christ. He has commissioned us, and he has identified us as his own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the first installment of everything he will give us (2 Cor. 1:20-22).

Every promise that God has made to you based on your relationship to His Son, will come true in your life. You can absolutely count on it! While the following promises are in no way exhaustive, they should help you to get a basic idea of what you can count on from God to help prepare you for the future:

Salvation is Your Present Possession

The most important promise a new believer should cling to is that of eternal life as a gift to all who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Consider the following two passages:

(God) has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. So whoever has God's Son has life; whoever does not have his Son does not have life. I write this to you who believe in the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life (1 John 5:11-13).

"I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

There will be days when you just won't feel like you're a Christian and your confidence in the Lord will fade. Before that ever occurs, you need to learn to base your faith on statements in the Scriptures rather than on your feelings. When you understand that God has already granted you the gift of eternal life, that you have it right now, you will be able to deal with any issue with a newfound boldness and assurance.

Your Prayers Will Be Answered

Travel back with me in time 2,000 years to the night before Jesus' death. As He met with His disciples He spoke to them in new ways about prayer—prayer in which they would be intimately involved with Him even though He would physically leave them and return to heaven. This is what He said:

“At that time you won't need to ask me for anything. The truth is, you can go directly to the Father and ask him, and he will grant your request because you use my name. You haven't done this before. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy” (John 16:23-24).

When you approach the Heavenly Father in Jesus' Name, that is, by Jesus authority, by virtue of the relationship you have with Him, God will answer your prayer. When you speak to God, He is listening. That's a promise!

Victory Over Every Temptation

One of the biggest problems a Christ Follower is faced with on a daily basis is the battle that comes when we are tempted to go against God's will by participating in activities or thoughts that are contrary to God's plan for our lives. The good news is that God is going to help us from giving in to those temptations. Consider this promise:

But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it (1 Cor. 10:13).

It is important to emphasize at this point that being tempted is not a sin. It only becomes a sin when we give into it and allow it to take over. In fact, if I am not being tempted I begin to worry. It's almost as if Satan believes he already has such a hold on me that he doesn't need to bother anymore! One of the reasons giving into temptation is a sin is because every time I give in I am rebelling against the clear promise of God that we just read about.

God will show us a way out of the situation if we are willing to let Him show us. That is a promise that should help you tremendously as you learn to follow Christ

Forgiveness of All Your Sins

One of the hardest promises for the new Christian to grasp is the fact that God has forgiven you for all your sins, and that there is no sin you cannot bring to God for cleansing. Reflect on the following verses:

Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone (Psa. 32:5).

If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong (1 John 1:9).

When we bring our sin to God, without pretense, without hesitation, He removes that sin completely. Not only do we experience forgiveness, but the removal of guilt. God purifies us based on the relationship we have with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. It is truly a wonderful feeling to know without a doubt that all of your sins are forgiven.

God's Guidance for the Rest of Your Life

Major decisions and difficult circumstances await all of us in life. A first step in overcoming any anxiety you may have is to list any current decisions to be made or problems you need to have solved. List anything at all that causes you major concern and make the list as complete as possible. Then claim the promise of these verses:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths (Prov. 3:5-6).

Take every issue of your life, acknowledge that God is supreme in your life, and lay every problem, every circumstance you're dealing with at His feet, and He will guide you. Always remember that God is on your side. He wants you to succeed and not fail in the Christian life. He is not your enemy; He is your friend and your guide.

SOME TOOLS TO HELP YOU GROW

There are three spiritual tools that you need in your Christian toolbox that will assist you in moving from the *Follower* to the *Owner* stage. Take full advantage of these tools and you will be amazed at the rapid rate of growth you will experience. Do not neglect any of the three tools or you will short-circuit the growth process.

Information

Right now, more than anything else, you probably have a hunger to know more and more about the Christian faith. There are many great resources available that will teach you about the Bible and the Christian walk, but the number one source of information is the Bible itself.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right (2 Tim. 3:16).

Begin today to read through the Bible. Don't let this scare you. It is not all that difficult. If you're new to Bible reading begin with one of the Gospels, preferably the Gospel of Mark. If you read just two chapters a day you will be done with this Gospel in just over a week. While reading pay very close attention to everything Jesus says, does, teaches, and lives out in His own life. Why? Because as a *Follower*, I am going to follow Jesus in every respect. This is not optional. I will never move beyond this point unless I make a concentrated effort, with God's help, to become like Jesus.

Next, read through the book of Acts where you will find the history of the early church. Again, read just two chapters per day and you will have read the entire book in just over two weeks. In the book of Acts you will discover what God expects us to do, not only as individuals, but the mission He has sent us on as the church. You will begin to discover the power that is available to each one of us as we rely on the Holy Spirit to empower us for ministry.

Dialog

Get to know as many other Christ Followers as you possibly can and learn from them. If your church offers small groups, Sunday School classes, or other times of fellowship and training take full advantage of them. You will take great comfort in knowing others have struggled as you have and have overcome.

You also need to make a concentrated effort to begin to dialog with God. To communicate with God it is necessary to be both active in reading His Word and in prayer. If you have never prayed before in your life, don't worry about it. God just wants to hear your voice; He doesn't care how elegant your language is. Take time every day to speak to Him, to praise His Name, and to acknowledge Him as Lord of your life.

Persistence

There are going to be times when you want to hang it all up, times when your former life begins looking attractive to you again, and times when you feel completely defeated. Whatever you do, don't give up! God will see you through, but you must persist in following Him with all your heart. It will all be more than worth it! Toward the end of his life, after going through more trials than any ten of us together will ever face, Paul wrote the following words:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful (2 Tim. 4:7).

As Christ Followers, we're called upon to do the same. The great news is that God is with us every step of the way. There is nothing that we can't handle with God leading us on into greater spiritual adventure.

At the beginning of this article I shared with you how I went the wrong way when I left the airport and ended up far away from my destination. But with some simple

directions, I made a U-Turn and found my way home. You know, I've never headed south out of the airport since that day? Some of you reading this are in the beginning stages of the Christian life, you're at the Life Stage we've described as *Follower*, and you've made a big U-Turn with your life. I am so excited for you and what you have to look forward to. I'm also concerned that you allow God to take you through this Stage to the next. And He will do it, just trust in Him, and He will see you through.