

SCRIPTURE: THE KEY TO GROWTH

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One of the sad realities in the contemporary church is that more and more often the careful, thoughtful, precise interpretation of God's Word is being depreciated in favor of subjective and mystical "spiritual experiences." As a result, many professed believers are not growing at all. It's as if a group of people ate nothing but junk food. Those who get caught up in empty and superficial experiences are pursuing a path that leads to error and that cannot produce real spiritual change and growth. In effect, they're missing the genuine path to maturity, which comes by means of God's Word. They are content to remain at a basic level of immaturity, accompanied by all sorts of problems and deceptions, rather than progressing in the levels of maturity.

The classic text on the Word's power, value, and importance in the believer's maturing process is 2 Timothy 3:15–17, which says, "From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." This passage, more succinctly than any other in the New Testament, outlines the spiritually transforming power of the Word.

Scripture's Role in Salvation

Timothy was privileged to first hear the Word at an early age (2 Tim. 3:15), because "from childhood" his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice had taught him "the sacred writings"—the Old Testament (see 2 Tim. 1:5). They built their faith and devotion on those writings and helped Timothy do the same. As they all became exposed to New Testament truth, the Old Testament's anticipation of salvation turned into a firm realization. They had repented under the grace and mercy of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; when they heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they knew God's promise of the Messiah—Redeemer had been fulfilled, and they trusted Him as Lord and Savior.

Paul exhorted Timothy, who was more easily intimidated and discouraged than the apostle, to hold on and stand firm in what he had learned. Both in his family and under Paul's leadership, Timothy became sound in his knowledge of Scripture. Paul did not need to admonish him about faulty doctrine or sin but urged him to persevere in the truth and the sound doctrine he already knew.

Paul, like our Lord before him (John 5:39), clarifies the fact that the words of Scripture themselves—or an intellectual knowledge thereof—do not grant salvation, but rather "the wisdom" they impart "leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Thus, the first work the Word does is bring believers to salvation (cf. Ps. 19:7; Mark 4:14–20; John 5:24, 39; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23). The truth of Scripture, when mixed with faith in Christ

and energized by the Holy Spirit, leads to spiritual life. The apostle Paul asked the Romans, “How shall they [unbelievers] hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14) and later explained that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (v. 17).

Scripture’s Role in Teaching

Second Timothy 3:16 delineates how the Word works in maturing believers, beginning with its teaching role. Paul says it is “profitable for teaching.” “Profitable” (the Greek word can be translated “beneficial” or “productive”) focuses on the sufficiency of Scripture. This means Scripture is comprehensive, absolutely able to meet believers’ every spiritual need (cf. Josh. 1:8; Ps. 119).

“Teaching” simply means that the Word conveys doctrine, not dogmatism, by which believers come to understand God’s mind, which encompasses His truth, His principles, His law, His requirements, and His commands. All are foundational for every facet of Christian living.

The important point regarding Scripture’s essential role in teaching is that apart from it there are certain truths we could never know about God. Everyone can know something about God through His general revelation, by which He reveals His wisdom and the power, variety, and magnificence in His creation and that He is a personal God. But God’s saving love cannot be known apart from special revelation. Paul explains it this way:

Just as it is written, “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.” For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.... But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.—1 Cor. 2:9–10, 14–16

The truths that pertain to genuine spiritual life and Christian maturity are simply unavailable to and cannot be understood by unbelievers. Such matters can’t be grasped empirically or philosophically; they’re not available internally or externally by human wisdom. The only way anyone will ever know the things of God is by the Holy Spirit’s instruction through the revealed Word (John 14:16–17; 16:13; 1 John 2:20, 24, 27). That is what Jesus said sanctifies all believers: “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

Scripture’s Role in Reproof

Once God’s Word begins to teach believers the truth, it will eventually and inevitably reprove certain ideas and behaviors. The word “reproof” in 2 Timothy 3:16 means “to rebuke, refute, or convict” misbehavior or false doctrine. Scripture confronts two areas: it exposes sin and refutes error.

God’s Word has the negative ministry of destroying and eliminating whatever is sinful and false, just as much as it has the positive ministry of edifying and enhancing whatever is righteous and true. This reproofing ministry is how Paul continually used the Word: “I testify to

you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men.... Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears” (Acts 20:26, 31).

Mature believers who preach or teach the Word will use it to rebuke what is wrong as well as to emphasize what is right. Jesus referred to such a process when He told the disciples, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2).

Spiritual growth can blossom as we allow the Word to confront our sin and error and lead us to walk in the Spirit. That is why Scripture’s reproof is so profitable. And it is why we should be grateful for its discipline, just like the writer of Proverbs: “For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life” (6:23).

Scripture’s Role in Correction

When I was in school, I appreciated those teachers who marked wrong answers on my papers and then wrote in the correct ones. But those who only marked wrong answers without indicating what was correct frustrated me. Scripture is not like those schoolteachers who would merely mark wrong answers. It actually corrects us. The Greek word for “correction” in 2 Timothy 3:16 literally means “to straighten up.” God’s Word doesn’t just rebuke, convict, and refute. It goes further and pulls us back into line, mending, rebuilding, and fixing what is broken.

Not unlike the relationship parents have with their children, spiritual mothers and fathers reprove their children regarding sins and areas that need improvement. If they are good parents, they will then set their children on the correct path by teaching them appropriate behaviors and attitudes.

Scriptural correction therefore is the positive provision for believers who accept the Word’s negative reproof. The process sometimes “for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

Scripture’s Role in Training in Righteousness

If we’re allowing God’s Word to have an authentic role in our spiritual growth, it will not just leave us with the bare elements of truth. Instead, the Word will apply to our lives what it has taught us so that it might continually build us up in righteousness. In 2 Timothy 3:16 this process is denoted by the Greek word *paideia*, which is rendered “training” and originally meant training a child (*paidion*) but came to have a broader meaning of any sort of training, as it does in this verse.

But how does training in righteousness express itself practically? The process begins when we hear Scripture preached during the worship service or taught in a Sunday school class or Bible study. That’s when we store doctrinal and biblical truth in our hearts and minds.

The next practical phase of our training in righteousness comes in our daily lives as we interact with people and ideas of the world and occasionally need to confront error. You might find yourself in a group discussion when someone interjects an obvious doctrinal error. At that point you can draw on Scripture to refute the error and allow the truth to shape the thinking of the other people in the group. In that way you will be obeying the apostle Paul's command to present yourselves "approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling

On a more personal level you can be trained in righteousness when you encounter a temptation. When you think you may be on the verge of losing a battle with temptation, you can draw on your knowledge of Scripture to help you respond in a righteous and godly way. Similarly, you may face a major trial in which your understanding of the Word will take over, guide you through the crisis, and thereby further train you in righteousness. Following the example of the Lord Jesus (see Matt. 4:3–10), we need to carefully and accurately use Scripture to deal with each and every temptation or trial from the world (cf. Ps. 119:9–11; Col. 3:16).

No matter how deep our understanding of Scripture is, God still trains us in ways we don't always comprehend. However, that should not keep us from affirming with the psalmist, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1).

DESIRING SCRIPTURE

If we are going to experience genuine growth, it must occur according to the pattern of 1 Peter 2:1–2: "Therefore, putting aside all malice [evil] and all guile [deceit] and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation."

Verse 1 simply means we must deal with all the sin in our lives by constantly confessing and forsaking it. Then we can get to the heart of the matter in verse 2 and have an unencumbered desire for the richness and purity of Scripture. As David wrote in Psalm 19:10, the Word is "more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." David also wrote in Psalm 1:2 that the righteous person's "delight is in the law [Word] of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night." And he stated over and over in Psalm 119 that he delighted in the Word. Such a strong, joyful longing for Scripture is also our foundational key for growing more and more Christlike.

The analogy in 1 Peter 2:2 is very plain. The apostle Peter is simply saying that believers should long for the Word the way a baby longs for milk. In the Greek, the term translated "long for" means an intense, recurring craving, and that's how babies will express their desire for milk. They don't care if it's from a bottle or directly from Mom, what color their room is, or even what time of day it is—they want milk, and if they don't get it soon enough, they scream and cry. Believers should have that same kind of single-minded craving for the Word of God.

Peter doesn't say read the Bible, or study it, or meditate on it—he says *desire* it. It's what Paul calls "the love of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:10). In effect, this produces an attitude in the believer's heart that says, "I want the Word more than I want anything else."

We need that kind of strong desire if we are going to know Scripture well enough so it can train us in righteousness. Consider the passion for truth that the writer of Proverbs outlines:

My son, if you will receive my sayings, and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

—2:1–6

If we seek divine truth as earnestly as some people go after material riches, we will find it, because God has made it available (cf. Job 28).

Supposedly a young man once came to the ancient Greek philosopher and teacher Socrates and asked him, “O master Socrates, will you be my teacher?”

Socrates replied, “Follow me,” and turned and walked into the sea. He kept walking and walking, and the young man kept following and following. He wanted very much to have the master Socrates as his mentor.

They eventually reached the depth at which the water was just touching their lips. Socrates then turned around and put both hands on the young man’s head and pushed him under. The man, wanting to be a compliant student, stayed underwater for a while.

But soon the young man began to spit and sputter and flail around as he gasped for air. All the while Socrates, who apparently was quite strong, held him under the water. Soon the man began blowing large bubbles and thrashing more madly. Finally, Socrates took his hands off his would-be student, who popped to the surface of the water.

Gasping for air and spewing water out of his mouth, the young man frantically asked the philosopher, “Why did you do that? Why?”

Socrates answered him, “When you want to learn as much as you wanted to breathe, I will be your teacher.”

When believers want to find and know the truth the way some people look for natural treasures, when believers crave the Word as passionately as an infant craves milk, they will grow and mature and become like Jesus Christ.

Joshua 1:8 provides a fitting summary to our study of spiritual growth: “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have [spiritual] success.” The key is to absorb God’s Word and live it out.

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¹MacArthur, John: *The Pillars of Christian Character : The Basic Essentials of a Living Faith*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1998, S. 74