

Measuring Spiritual Progress

Is it possible to measure spiritual progress? Can we know with any degree of certainty whether we are just “*spiritually existing*,” or whether we are partakers of the “*Abundant Life*?”

The word “**LIFE**” in Scripture embodies the Biblical concept of a person’s total fulfillment and usefulness in this life – and in eternity!

The purpose of this message is to ask the question, “*What standard can we use to measure whether or not we have this ‘LIFE’ in a Biblical sense?*” Can we accurately measure our progress since the day that we accepted Christ as our Savior in Christian maturity?

We are commanded repeatedly in Scripture to “*grow-up in Christ*” – to “*Put away childish things*.” After we have been born into the family of God, we are clearly expected to “*grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord*.” The question we face is have we fulfilled these God-given requirements for spiritual growth?

HOW CAN WE DETERMINE HOW FAR WE HAVE MATURED?

The questions that I trust to answer in this message are: How can we know how far we have traveled in our spiritual walk? Is there a way we can know – with any degree of accuracy – our present position in our journey of spiritual maturity? Is it possible that this path that God has plotted for our spiritual growth so uncharted, and trackless, that we cannot know?

I believe that a study on “*Spiritual Progress*” can make a crucial difference between merely existing spiritually – and – entering into “*Abundant Living*.”

As one studies the book of Psalms they come to realize that it is a book of

- exhortations to praise;
- records of miraculous deliverances
- and the deep dealings of God with His people!

. . . and that it this has application for our life today!

I want to first focus on Psalm 22 and notice that it is a picture of Christ purchasing our atonement. It presents a precise portrayal of Christ’s vicarious death. It begins with Christ’s cry from the cross, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?*” Verse 14 states, “*I am poured out like water, and all of my bones are out of joint*.” Verse 16 tells us “*they pierced My hands and My feet*.” Verse 18, “*They parted My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture*.”

Psalm 22 is a prophetic description of the dreadful suffering of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It reveals with incredible accuracy a description of the shame, agony, suffering and crucifixion of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This Psalm is a picture of Christ purchasing the atonement for us!

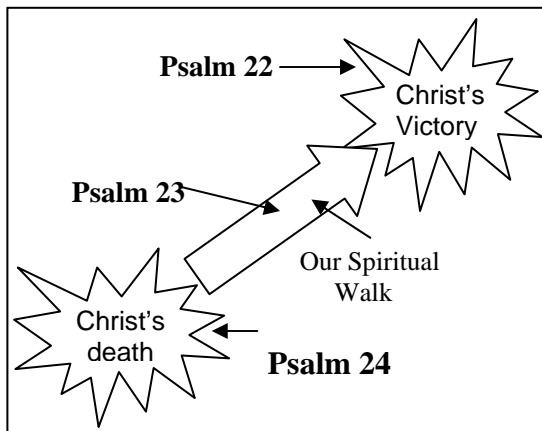
Skipping over the 23rd Psalm momentarily, which we will come back to, let’s look at Psalm 24.

Psalm 24 is a startling contrast to Psalm 22 - it sings of victory and triumph. Verses 7-10 reads, “*Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of*

glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah.”

One cannot help but notice a God-designed continuity between the description of a suffering Savior in Psalm 22 and the exhortation to, “lift up the gates and open the doors for the coming in of the King of Glory” in Psalm 24. Between these two momentous events: (1) A suffering Savior and (2) the coming of the King in Glory, there is an *intermediate stage*, that shows the Biblical standard of spiritual progress.

The “*key*” in answering the questions that I propose is found in Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is often used to bring comfort at funerals. It can find it printed on the backs of eulogy cards. Of course, this is not wrong, however, I want you to come to realize that Psalm 23 is a Psalm of life, not death. Sure these words can bring comfort to those who are going through a period of grief for it offers many wonderful promises of God, but I want us to see tonight that Psalm 23 was primarily given as a measuring means to guide our spiritual growth. God clearly gives the phases of spiritual development that we would do well to learn.



The very first phase mention is, “*The Lord is my Shepherd*,” referring to embracing the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior! “*Salvation*” is God’s foremost gift. It is freely provided by a merciful God and purchased for us by the suffering Savior portrayed in Psalm 22. However, this gracious provision goes unrealized until one embraces that atonement and accepts Jesus Christ as Shepherd.

We must be able to say, “*The Lord is MY Shepherd!*” We cannot progress into Spiritual maturity until we have embraced Jesus Christ as our Shepherd and within this initial gift of Jesus Christ, lies all the potential of the Spiritual LIFE God has designed for us!

Verse 1 continues, “*I shall not want*.” It is a needful period in our growth of Spiritual maturity however, it is *not* permanent, but a temporary stage. If we are to have “*Spiritual progress*” we must realize our needs are resident in Christ Jesus. Christ will disperse our needs according to our growth.

“*I shall not want*” When we are converted, we are “*new babies*” in Christ. God, like a mother for her new infant, anticipates all its needs and does everything within her power to meet those needs. That little infant innocently basks in the wonder of all its new-found provision. Do you remember those that first period after you were converted? Do you recall when you were first saved how it seemed that God, like a mother for her newborn child, is always there providing for every need, every desire – even whims.

However, as the child grows, problems begin to beset him from within and without. That is the way it is for new believers. At first he seems to have “*no want*,” but as time goes by it

seems at times that his prayers go unanswered. Our natural reaction is to spend endless effort seeking to regain that *childlike* simplicity, thinking we have “*lost our first love* – that God is withholding something from us. We begin to feel that God’s promises seem to be shaken and ask, “*What has gone wrong?*”

It is important for us to realize that nothing has gone wrong! God’s care is still constant. His supplies are inexhaustible. The problem is simply that the time has come for “*new infant*” to grow up to begin to act on his dependence upon his Heavenly Father.

Verse 2 continues, “*He makes me to lie down in green pastures.*” The second problem following conversion is a phase I would call, “*energetic conscientious,*” that is, being overly zealous for the work of the Lord. The problem is to mistake of seeking means by which one can “*stay saved*” – feeling that one will show the Lord his earnestness, however, he is saying in a subtle way, “*I need to earn my salvation.*”

There is a phase of going through the *busyness of human activity*, an abundance of religious work, but it’s just a substitute for true maturity. It is actually an absence of trust and so it is necessary for the Lord to teach us to “*lie down*” like sheep being made to lie down in green pastures.

“*He makes me to lie down in green pastures,*” has reference to entering a true spiritual rest. Hebrews 4:1-11 refers to “*the rest*” the believer is to arrive at in his Christian walk. Verse 1, of Hebrews 4 states, “*Let us fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into rest, we should seem to come short of it.*” It is a sure stage of spiritual progress when the believer learns this lesson. The ability to “*feed in green pastures*” while resting in the Lord, is to realize He is saving us and we are not saving ourselves.

Verse 3 continues, “*He leads me beside the still waters.*” Water, in Scripture, typifies the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated as, “*leads*” here is especially interesting because it means, “*to gently beckon one forward.*”

Like sheep, we drink deeply of the quiet refreshing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 7:37, “*If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink, and out of his inner most being will flow rivers of living water.*” Drinking of the Holy Spirit is not a “*goal,*” rather a “*gateway!*” Only as we continually “*drink of the Holy Spirit,*” (spiritually speaking), that we will have the power to turn from an infant to a mature individual. This is a progression, not instant maturity.

Verse 3 begins with, “*He restores my soul.*” As innocent as this phrase may appear, its meaning holds the key to our apprehending God’s highest purpose for our lives.

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Let’s just see for just moment and review what we have covered so far?

1. We must embrace Jesus Christ as our Lord and Shepherd.
2. We will know a period of God’s perfect provision when we want for nothing.
3. We need to learn rest from self-labors in the finished work of Christ
4. We need to know what it means to drink deeply of the ministries of the Holy Spirit
5. **NOW** – here in verse 3, we are ready to come under the aspect of God’s dealing that is designed to “*restore the image of God*” in us.

Romans 8:28 is well known by almost every believer. It states, “*We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.*” Verse 29 continues to tell us what God’s purpose for us is. It states, “*To be conformed to the image of His Son.*” “*He restores my soul!*” The restoration of our soul is the predestined will of God for every believer, that is, “*Conformity to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.*” This restoration of man’s soul was God’s intention from the very beginning of creation – and is still His purpose for every believer.

Let Christ “*restore your soul!*”

Let me add one of my own thoughts here. Sadly churches often seek to force *external* conforming, giving the Holy Spirit unsolicited help. God says, in essence, “*Leave this work to the tender direction of the Holy Spirit.* The result will be a transformation wrought within the heart, not some superficial codes of conduct. God, through the Holy Spirit’s working, seeks to develop the character of Jesus Christ within the believer!

Verse 3 continues, “***He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name sake.***” This is one of the most demanding statements that God makes upon man! This Hebrews word translated as “***leads***” here is different than the word translated “*leads*” in verse 2. Here it has the meaning of “*guiding, compelling even forcing*” The issue at stake here is, “*For His names sake.*” God assumes responsibility for developing His righteousness in our life – if we co-operate with Him.

Verse 4 begins, “***Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.***” We have come a long way from the place of “*not wanting anything*” to “*the valley of the shadow of death.*”

Listen! So often today God is misrepresented and pictured as eager to dispel our least discomfort and to provide for our least desire. That’s not what the Bible teaches. If we are to progress in spiritual maturity, God will not spare us disappointment and discord, even despair of life itself. If we are to know the “*Abundant Life*” then we must know “*the valley of the shadow of death.*”

Your “*valley of the shadow of death*” may be physical, financial, emotional, or perhaps, the lose of home or loved ones, but, with David we can say, “***I will fear no evil for God is with me!***” It is here in our “*valley of the shadow of death*” that we can gain a “*spiritual-perception*” of God’s ways that cannot be obtained under any other circumstance.

Verse 4 continues, “***Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.***” The “*rod*” is a symbol of authority. It is an extension of the shepherd’s arm. It is his strength, his power, and his authority in serious situations. The “*staff*,” on the other hand, was a symbol of caring and comfort. It was used to show kindness and long suffering to the lambs.

Here, in a picture of the “*valley of the shadow of the death*” – a crisis in the believer’s walk – and the Shepherd offers His “*rod and staff*” – His gentle authority and His comforting love! Happy is the one who learns to depend upon Christ’s “*rod*” and “*staff*” when he encounters a crisis.

Verse 5 begins, “***You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.***” We learn the security of the Shepherd’s “*rod*” and “*staff*” in the midst of conflict and we are ready to sit

down in holy confidence to partake of God's table "*in the very presence of our foes.*" God is not an "*escape mechanism!*" We tend to think that God will come to our aid and help us "*escape from our enemies.*" That is not what Scriptures teaches us. We will "*sit down at God's table in their presence.*"

Verse 5 continues, "**You anoint my head with oil.**" God's anointing is a prized possession! We learn to seek the anointing of God because nothing can be accomplished for God without the anointing.

How do we obtain this anointing?

God is anxious to anoint the one who has trod the steps outlined in this Psalm. When we learn the lessons of **trust** and **obedience**, anointing follows as a natural result of spiritual progress. When we reach the place of steady communion with God, then we are on receiving ground for His anointing

Verse 5 continues, "**My cup runs over.**" What a striking statement both for its beauty and the place we find it in this Psalm. "*My cup runneth over,*" speaks not only sufficient supply for oneself, but for others as well!

Let me detour here to say, I believe that it is ignorance, rather than rebellion, that causes one to reject a deeper, abundant life, refusing to progress in spiritual maturity. If anyone realized what a "*cup-running-over-life*" was like, they would never be satisfied with just existing in their Christian experience.

Verse 6 begins, "**Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.**" Like "*Bodyguards,*" wherever we go God's "*goodness*" and "*mercy*" follows us. God's loving-kindness and unfailing love is following us all the days of our life! Just think of it, every time we pause, and turn around, "*goodness*" and "*mercy*" are following us. They are our traveling companions!

We need to pray, "*Lord, You are so good, and Your mercy endures forever!*" God's "*goodness*" and "*mercy*" will trail us closely, guarding, leading, providing, an abundant life!

Verse 6 continues, "**and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**"

Living with others is an experiment in love. I don't want to appear mean, however, I would like to say that few of us have sufficient love to permit others an extended, or indefinite, stay in our homes. We are told here that we will dwell in God's house "*to the length of our days.*" God loves us enough to permit us to "*dwell in His house forever!*" The secret is that God will have so conformed us to the image of Christ that we will be able to dwell in His house forever – and live with each other *in harmony!*

Interestingly the word, "*forever*" here in Psalm 23:6 is not the same word that speaks of eternity, or of our heavenly home. This word is translated from the Hebrew word that has the meaning, "*for the length of days.*" This verse speaks of "*dwelling in the Lord's house*" here in this life! As we learn to spiritually mature in Christ, we dwell in God's presence here and now, spiritually, awaiting our abiding "*physical*" presence with Him in the life to come.

This last phrase is a fitting conclusion for a Psalm on Spiritual Growth. The “*King of Glory*” is waiting to come in! When the Temple of the Old Testament was build, the “*glory of the Lord came in.*” God is building a spiritual Temple for His glory and He wants you to be a part of His holy Temple *now!*