

II. TIME

It seems that most believers have difficulty in realizing and facing up to the inexorable fact that God does not hurry in His development of our Christian life. He is working from and for eternity! So many feel they are not making progress unless they are swiftly and constantly forging ahead. Now it is true that the new convert often begins and continues for some time at a fast rate. But this will not continue if there is to be healthy growth and ultimate maturity. God himself will modify the pace. This is important to see, since in most instances when seeming declension begins to set in, it is not, as so many think, a matter of backsliding.

John Darby makes it plain that "it is God's way to set people aside after their first start, that self-confidence may die down. Thus Moses was forty years. On his first start he had to run away. Paul was three years also, after his first testimony. Not that God did not approve the first earnest testimony. We must get to know ourselves and that we have no strength. Thus we must learn, and then leaning on the Lord we can with more maturity, and more experientially, deal with souls."

Since the Christian life matures and becomes fruitful by the principle of growth (2 Peter 3:18), rather than by struggle and "experiences," much time is involved. Unless we see and acquiesce to this, there is bound to be constant frustration, to say nothing of resistance to our Father's development processes for us. Dr. A.H.Strong illustrates for us: "A student asked the President of his school whether he could not take a shorter course than the one prescribed. 'Oh yes,' replied the President, 'but then it depends upon what you want to be. When God wants to make an oak, He takes an hundred years, but when He wants to make a squash, He takes six months.'" Strong also wisely points out to us that "growth is not a uniform thing in the tree or in the Christian, In some single months there is more growth than in all the year besides. During the rest of the year, however, there is solidification, without which the green timber would be useless. The period of rapid growth, when woody fiber is actually deposited between the bark and the trunk, occupies but four to six weeks in May, June and July."

Let's settle it once and for all -- there are no shortcuts to reality! A meteor is on a shortcut as it proceeds to burn out, but not a star, with its steady light so often depended upon by navigators. Unless the time factor is acknowledged from the heart, there is always danger of turning to the false enticement of a shortcut via the means of "experiences," and "blessings," where one becomes pathetically enmeshed in the vortex of ever-changing "feelings," adrift from the moorings of scriptural facts.

In regard to this subject George Goodman writes: "Some have been betrayed into professing perfection or full deliverance, because at the time they speak they are happy and confident in the Lord. They forget that it is not a present experience that ensures fruit unto maturity, but a patient continuance in well doing. To taste of the grace of God is one thing; to be established in it and manifest it in character, habit, and regular life, is another. Experiences and blessings, though real gracious visitations from the Lord, are not sufficient to rest upon, nor should they lead us to glory in ourselves, as if we had a store of grace for time to come, or were yet at the end of the conflict. No. Fruit ripens slowly; days of sunshine and days of storm each add their share. Blessing will succeed blessing, and storm follow storm before the fruit is full grown or comes to maturity."

In that the Husbandman's method for true spiritual growth involves pain as well as joy, suffering as well as happiness, failure as well as success, inactivity as well as service, death as well as life, the temptation to shortcut is especially strong unless we see the value and submit to the necessity of the time element; in simple trust resting in His hands, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). And, dear friends, it will take that long! But since God is working for eternity, why should we be concerned about the time involved?

Graham Scroggie affirmed: "Spiritual renewal is a gradual process. All growth is progressive, and the finer the organism, the longer the process. It is from measure to measure: thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold. It is from stage to stage: 'first the blade, then the ear, and after that, the full corn in the ear.' And it is from day to day. How varied these are! There are great days, days of decisive battles, days of crisis in spiritual history, days of triumph in Christian service, days of the right hand of God upon us. But there are also idle days, days apparently useless, when even prayer and holy service seem a burden. Are we, in any sense, renewed in these days? Yes, for any experience which makes us more aware of our need of God must contribute to spiritual progress, unless we deny the Lord who bought us."

We might consider some familiar names of believers whom God obviously brought to maturity and used for His glory -- such as Pierson, Chapman, Tauler, Moody, Goforth, Mueller, Taylor, Watt,

Trumbull, Meyer, Murray, Havergal, Guyon, Mabie, Gordon, Hyde, Mantle, McCheyne, McConkey, Deck, Paxson, Stoney, Saphir, Carmichael, and Hopkins. The average for these was fifteen years after they entered their life work before they began to know the Lord Jesus as their Life, and ceased trying to work for Him and began allowing Him to be their All in all and do His work through them. This is not to discourage us in any way, but to help us to settle down with our sights on eternity, by faith "apprehending that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12b,14).

Certainly this is not to discount a Spirit-fostered experience, blessing, or even a crisis; but it is to be remembered that these simply contribute to the overall, and all-important process. It takes time to get to know ourselves; it takes time and eternity to get to know our Infinite Lord Jesus Christ. Today is the day to put our hand to the plow, and irrevocably set our heart on His goal for us -- that we "may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Philippians 3:10).

"So often in the battle," says Austin-Sparks, "we go to the Lord, and pray, and plead, and appeal for victory, for ascendancy, for mastery over the forces of evil and death, and our thought is that in some way the Lord is going to come in with a mighty exercise of power and put us into a place of victory and spiritual ascendancy as in an act. We must have this mentality corrected. What the Lord does is to enlarge us to possess. He puts us through some exercise, through some experience, takes us by some way which means our spiritual expansion, and exercise of spirituality so we occupy the larger place spontaneously. 'I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee. By little and little I will drive them out before thee, until thou be increased.'" (Exodus 23:29-30).

"One day in the House of Commons, British Prime Minister Disraeli made a brilliant speech on the spur of the moment. That night a friend said to him, 'I must tell you how much I enjoyed your extemporaneous talk. It's been on my mind all day.' 'Madam,' confessed Disraeli, 'that extemporaneous talk has been on my mind for twenty years!'"