

This month I will continue our discussion of the stages we grow through when we are born again. The good news for us is that we have all experienced these phases naturally as we grew from infancy into childhood—even now to the point where we can now read and understand this newsletter. Because of this, we can clearly see the parallel the New Testament writers were using when they described what is happening to us spiritually.

As I mentioned last month, it is often difficult for us to separate our spiritual development from our natural development. What I mean by this is that in the natural we grow to a certain stage, and along that growth path we accumulate knowledge, skills, and experience. Some of us are quite accomplished in what we have achieved in the natural world—a doctor, master electrician, or perhaps a business leader. Others may feel they have lived mediocre or even disappointing lives from a natural perspective, possibly to the point where they do not feel they have much to offer anyone. ***Regardless of where we fall along the scale of natural success, we all begin at the same place when it comes to our spiritual development.***

When we are saved, we must begin to think about life from a different perspective—a spiritual perspective. Paul himself had to do this after his conversion on the road to Damascus. At that time he was living out what he believed was his calling, acting with the authority of the high priest and the leadership in Jerusalem as he persecuted the church. But Jesus had other plans for him. When Jesus blinded him that day on the road, He brought all of Paul's personal plans into question.

Look at what Paul says in ***Philippians 3:3-9***:

- 3** For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,
- 4** though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:
- 5** circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;
- 6** concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.
- 7** But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.
- 8** Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ
- 9** and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

Here we see Paul presenting his natural resume to the readers. What does he say in **verse 7**? "What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ." He then goes on to say in **verse 8** that he has "counted them as rubbish."

These are very powerful statements that deserve careful examination. Paul is literally presenting his natural resume in **verses 3-6** and then concluding that it is rubbish. The Greek word translated rubbish carries the idea that ***everything he once trusted in must now be viewed with suspicion.*** In other words as

one reference puts it, “every conceivable credential—religious, ethnic, moral, or intellectual—falls under the same verdict: refuse. The gospel dismantles any system that places confidence in the flesh.”

This must become our mindset in transformation, and we can see how much significance this thought carries as we prioritize our spiritual development.

Now let us look at the next Greek word: **Strong’s 3813 – παιδίον (paidion)**, often translated as child or young child. This word appears 52 times in the New Testament and generally refers to children from toddler age to around twelve years old. It presents the picture of a young person who has some knowledge but is still immature and childlike in understanding.

A child in this stage is beginning to discover the world around them, and as their Adamic nature begins to surface there must also be appropriate correction. At this stage children often want to do things their own way, so rebellion must be addressed carefully so that it can be corrected without damaging the child’s strengths or spirit. Experts suggest that children between the ages of four and seven process more information than at any other time in their lives. If parents have done a good job in the early toddler years teaching self-control, sharing, asking politely, avoiding tantrums, and generally acting right, the years from two to twelve can be quite enjoyable.

Should we give a child between the ages of two and twelve responsibilities? Yes, we should. Tasks such as cleaning their room, picking up their clothes, hanging them up, helping with the dishes, and taking out the trash are responsibilities they can manage. Do they always want to do these things? Usually not—at least not repeatedly—but responsibility must be learned.

At the same time, we do not give them responsibilities they are not ready for. We do not allow them to balance the checkbook or give them the keys to the car. Instead, we begin teaching them the responsibilities of life, such as respect for authority and honoring their parents. While we do not give them authority over others, we do begin teaching them how to cooperate, play well with others, and respect other people’s feelings.

As we draw parallels to our spiritual development, Christians in this stage are often very hungry—or should be—for knowledge and information, but they are not yet fully ready to discern right from wrong. **They need spiritual tutors and governors to guide their development.** People in this stage often think primarily about how others affect their lives rather than how their own actions affect others.

**The length of time it takes to move through this stage depends greatly on how willing a person is to apply themselves to the lessons they are learning.** Just as some children are naturally receptive to character growth, some people are more receptive to spiritual growth than others. Qualities such as humility, care for others, willingness to serve, the ability to compromise, and learning to live peacefully with others can have a significant impact on both natural and spiritual development.

As we have already discussed, a person may remain in these stages for many years, or they may move through them relatively quickly. Much depends on their humility, the spiritual nourishment they receive through the Word, and the time they devote to the Lord. This stage—**paidion**—is extremely important, not because the person knows everything yet, but because during these early years of development we begin learning how to take control of our souls. If we do, the possibilities of what God can accomplish in our lives as we continue to grow are tremendous.

We must also understand that we are quite vulnerable during this stage. As we develop, we may begin to think we are more mature than we truly are, and the enemy will use this to separate us from those who are watching over our souls. Consider how we watch over children in these younger years. We may take them to the park and allow them to play with friends, but we usually keep an eye on them. To a child

this may feel restrictive, but to a parent who understands the dangers that may exist, it is necessary. The same dynamic occurs within our spiritual development. The enemy seeks to steal the Word before it can take root, so those who are being developed must recognize this danger and listen to those who are responsible for their spiritual care.

At this stage we should be sitting at the feet of those who can develop us spiritually. We should be anchored within the church, receiving the Word consistently and becoming involved in serving and accepting appropriate responsibilities. We should also be developing our prayer life and learning to fellowship with our Helper, the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we clean windows, empty the trash, or use our skills and gifts to support ministry leaders, all the while recognizing that we are still being trained and are not yet spiritually strong enough to be thrust into positions of influence.

Our ability to recognize where we are in our development cannot be overstated. Proper spiritual formation must remain our priority.

Next month we will continue this discussion and examine the next phase of development—the formidable teenage years described by *Strong's 5043 – τέκνον (teknon)*.

Love,

*JANN T. BUTLER*

