

Dear Ladies of the Charlotte Church,

What does it mean to grow spiritually? This question was asked of several women who answered with their own unique perspective and experiences. In this collection of quiet times, each woman has shared how she connects with God in her own spiritual walk with him. There are seven entries, one for each day of one week. We hope these thoughts and prayers will give you encouragement and inspiration "to grow" in your own relationship with the Lord.

Love to all -

Bonnie Fisher

TO GROW...A Lesson from the Garden

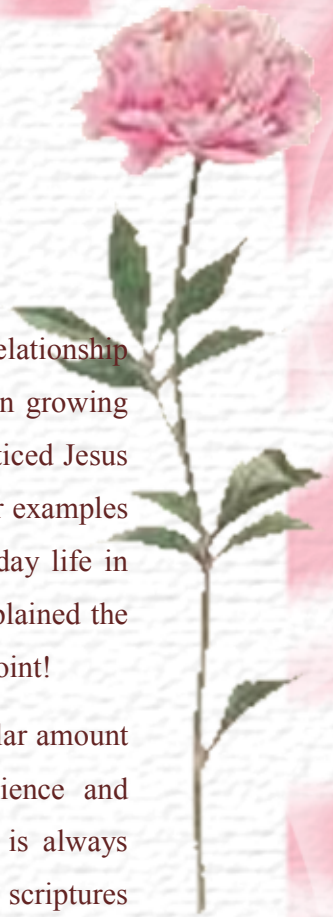
As a church, we're concentrating this quarter of the year on "growing" in our relationship with God and others. Growing is something I love to talk about, since I've been growing gardens, big and small, for over 45 years. When I started to study the bible, I noticed Jesus talked a lot about plants, seeds, soils, pruning, harvesting, seasons, and many other examples of nature to illustrate his lessons. He painted clear, beautiful pictures of every-day life in parables and stories so that those listening could understand him, although he explained the parable of the soils to his disciples (Matthew 13:18-23) to make sure they got the point!

Whether you're growing gardens or character or relationships, they all take a similar amount of thought, planning and research, time, work, patience, good advice, resilience and perseverance. And no matter how long or well you've done something, there is always something new to learn. Although Nicodemus was "Israel's teacher" and knew the scriptures thoroughly, he took the time to seek out Jesus, and found he had a lot more to learn (John 3:1-21).

Conditions, as well as timing, are important to growing (Matthew 13 - the parable of the soils). A few garden seasons ago, I planted from seeds that I had gathered from the previous garden. While checking on my nice new rows of plants, I noticed there were a few very different from the ones surrounding them. I realized I had mixed up a few of the Morning Glory seeds in with the Malibar Spinach. They were in the same dirt, got the same amount of water and sun, and were alive but not thriving. Spinach needs room to spread out. Morning Glories need the support of a fence to climb up, and although they have beautiful blue blooms, they can strangle out other plants if left unattended. When I moved the Morning Glories to the fence just a foot away both plants thrived.

We all have different needs when it comes to our spiritual growth and our relationships with others, and even good things can hinder that growth. Even though we know something thoroughly or have been doing it a long time, we always have room to learn and grow. And when we have other "gardeners" looking out for us and helping us to find room to grow or get the support we need, and then us doing the same for others, we can all not just grow, but thrive!

Toni LaGatta





TO GROW...A Lesson from the Garden, Part 2

I have a jade plant that started as a cutting piece from a plant that was in the window of a class I took in 2003 in Orlando, Florida. I planted it in a pot on my pool deck and it grew into a very large, vibrant and attractive plant. Over the years, many friends, and both my daughters-in-law asked for a cutting of their own. Because we lived so close to the University of Central FL, many campus students came for breakfasts and dinners, baptisms (we had the only pool in the campus group) and to help me in my garden. Lots of them went home with a little piece of jade plant to start their own, because it is so easy to start and take care of. I've given away lots of potted jade cuttings as gifts to new neighbors.

When I moved to Charlotte I brought my large beautiful jade plant with me. It did pretty well until the weather turned cold and the days were not as sunny as in Florida. The weather and seasons were different and it was getting older, and its glory was starting to fade, but there were new plants started from it around my home, as well as plants in Orlando, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, West Palm, Atlanta, Virginia, and now with a few new friends in Charlotte.

Isaiah 40:8 says, *"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."*

As we get older, our "glory" will start to "fade". We can leave a little piece of ourselves in each of our relationships, our kids, grandkids, and friends, with our favorite scriptures, a little of our faith and perseverance, stories of our triumphs and failures. We can, as Titus 2 instructs, teach the younger ones around us by our words and example, and inspire them to do greater things, to grow their own "plants" so they can give pieces of themselves away as they grow older.

Toni LaGatta



TO GROW...in Relationship with God

Topic: To Grow in your relationship with God

Reading: Jeremiah 29:11 -14a; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Matthew 22:37-38

Insights: Spiritual growth begins with a desire to know and grow closer to God. He wants us to seek a deep and life- long relationship with Him. He wants a fully committed heart from us not half-heartedness. In return, He promises to give us hope, to prosper us and to listen to our prayers.

Spiritual growth continues when God searches for and finds fully committed hearts.. This is a delight to Him. When He finds one He strengthens it. This can be likened to adding nutrients to fertile ground. What does He think about your heart?

What fuels Spiritual growth? The first and greatest commandment, Matthew 22:37, says to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. It is an all- consuming love that requires your all. No divided heart for Him. He is not interested in second place. He wants your all and deserves your best.

Reflections: When I counted the Cost just before baptism I remember being asked what I thought my biggest challenge would be in making Jesus Lord. I replied: time. I am married, the mother of four children and I work full-time. I could not imagine how I could submit to God's will. It was not easy. It was in fact, painful at times. I felt I had to be everywhere, do everything and no one understood. I had to figure out how to feed everyone, get homework done and get to wherever we needed to be on time. Mostly being on time was sacrificed. Additionally, I sacrificed Quiet Times. They were very hurried or non -existent. I would feel so guilty and inadequate. I must admit there were times when I wanted to give up. It seemed to me that God was asking a lot of me.....I was right...He was. I belonged to Him and everything I possessed came from Him. I had to put HIM first. I decided to believe the scriptures and follow them.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I praise your holy name. Thank you, for your amazing love. Help me to grow in my love and knowledge of you. I repent of the sin that stops me from serving you wholeheartedly. Please help me to put you first in everything I do. I want to please you. I want to grow. In the name of Jesus I pray these things. Amen.

Judy Boswell





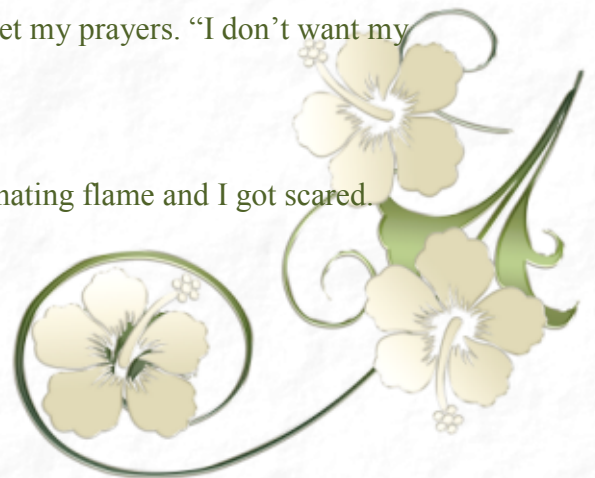
TO GROW...Through Adversity


In the early fall of 2017, I was on the cusp of a spiritual breakthrough. I could feel myself growing closer to God and I was excited! I was starting to understand the love that surpasses knowledge, being filled to the measure of the fullness of God in a way I had not let myself be in many years. (Ephesians 3:10). I was taking the time to literally get on my knees and WORSHIP Him. Not my routine prayer as I woke up and thanked Him for the day, thanked Him for my family and our health, asked him to help me in self control, and a few more things before I woke fully and shuffled to the bathroom. I was now finding a quiet spot in my bedroom. Getting on my knees prostrate. Seeing myself before the Almighty Gods throne and asking Him to increase my faith. To help me grow.

And then it started to happen! A joy. A determination. I was EXCITED to have time with God! I looked forward to my time with my creator! I couldn't wait for it! The awe of kneeling before the throne of God was breathtaking! It was comforting. And with Jesus sitting at His right side, I felt safe. I could see God's promises literally blossoming in my heart, mind and soul. I was drawing close to him and He to me (James 4:8a). I was seeking him with all of my heart and he was letting me find him! My heart burst with the truth of Psalm 95:2-3! I craved spiritual milk. I was growing in my walk with Jesus as God continued to answer my prayer to increase my faith.

But then all of a sudden situations started occurring that required a different kind of faith. A faith that surpassed knowledge in situations that I could not control, a supernatural faith of being sure and certain of what I hoped for but couldn't see. The waves of the storm were starting to get violent, the oars slipped out of my hands and I was terrified. "Wait a minute God!! This isn't what I mean!!! THIS isn't how I want you to increase my faith! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?!!" I started to fear. I wanted no part of the kind of faith I needed now. I didn't want to go any further. I started to regret my prayers. "I don't want my faith to increase. Not if this is how it has to be."

The Holy Spirit inside of my soul was growing into an illuminating flame and I got scared.





I started listening to the father of lies (John 8:44). I believed Satan when he'd whisper in my ear "You aren't meant for GREAT faith. What you have is enough. Let others trust more. You can't."

I was withering under the heat. Through many tears and pleas, God rectified the situation. But when I had time to reflect, I could see how I didn't trust God fully. I desperately held on to trusting in my own strength, forgetting that my strength is made perfect in my weakness when I let God be in control (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). I let the worries of the world choke me (Mark 4:19). That's not who I want to be.

God calmed the waves. When the ocean became still again I opened my eyes and saw peace. When I opened my heart again I saw God. Hands out stretched to hold me and say "I love you. I had you all along." (Isaiah 41:10). Satan was still in the background laughing at me and proclaiming victory over how this story went. But our loving God is letting me know that in the end, it was still a stepping stone towards my growth and faith. I'm still here. He didn't let me fall. He had me all along, and I have the opportunity to start where I left off. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. (Lamentations 3:22-24).

God will give us what we ask for. When I was asking and the rubber hit the road, I took a detour. It may take me a little longer to get where I'm heading, but I still learned along the way. Signs are still posted along the way of detours to help you to get where you're going. God will never forsake or leave us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). His plan, no matter the outcome, is not to harm us. We need to give the reigns to God. The God who loves us. The God who had to watch horrible things happen to his son so that his majestic plan for this world could come to fruition. The God who nurtures us, feeds us, and watches us grow. The God who allows us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! ♥ (2 Peter 3:18).

Kathryn Stamas





TO GROW... in Understanding God's Generosity

It dawned on me recently that I see God up in heaven holding onto a huge stash of blessings and looking down on us while we are praying for these blessings. I see Him doling them out carefully and sparingly as He sees fit. This is not His heart from the Bible! Consider these passages:

Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all...how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

Matthew 7:11, "...how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?"

Ephesians 1:6 "...His glorious grace, which He has freely given us"; verses 7-8, "...the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us."

Do I miss God's heart of generosity and love because of disappointment? Does my disappointment nullify God's incredible gifts of goodness, love, grace, the Holy Spirit, and the sacrifice of His Son?

Romans 5:5, "And hope does not disappoint, because (God answers all my prayers the way I want Him to in my timing....NO!) God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Wow...read that again and really take it in!

Ps. 84:11, "...no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless."

Maybe God's view of good gifts is different than mine. His gifts are unmeasurable, inconceivable, and incomparable.

Ephesians 1:18, "...His incomparable great power for us who believe."

Ephesians 2:7, "....incomparable riches of His grace..."

Ephesians 3:16, "...out of His glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through His Spirit..." vs 20, "...who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine..."

Am I like some of the Jews of Jesus's day who miss these immeasurable and incomparable blessing because I am looking for a different kind of king and a different kind of kingdom? God's lavish riches may not look like my version of riches, which are really no more than filthy rags.

Abba, please open the eyes of my heart ..."in order that (I) may know the hope to which you have called (me), the riches of (your) glorious inheritance in (your) holy people and (your) incomparably great power for us who believe." Ephesians 1:18-19.

Paula Chu



TO GROW...When You Can't Stay the Same

From "When God Says Go", by Elizabeth Laing Thompson, published by Barbour Publishing, Inc. Used by permission. Excerpt from Chapter 6 When You Can't Stay the Same, Esther's Story (Based on Esther Chapter 4).

Sometimes problems arise and we manage to find a way around them. We just change direction and – woo-hoo! – we've sidestepped the crisis. When that happens, yay for us. But sometimes God has us in circumstances we can't escape. No way around, no way out. Sometimes He puts us in, or allows us to remain in, situations that expose our every doubt, fear, and weakness. They range from the inconvenient to the catastrophic: A class you can't drop. A conflict you can't avoid. A financial disaster. A family drama. A sick child. An unexpected death.

We cannot run from these situations. Some are griefs that feel past bearing, past surviving – and yet we must bear them. We must survive them. The only way out is through. And in situations like this, God is saying, "Grow". He gives us no choice but to move forward. No choice but to change.

Maybe we have to become stronger. More resilient. Willing to take on a challenge we'd rather avoid. Or maybe we have to become "weaker". More vulnerable. Willing to accept – even invite – help. Maybe, like Esther, we have to become braver. More independent. Willing to stand alone. Whatever our demons, we have to take them on and wrestle them down till we sit on top, bloodied but victorious.

We *Get* to Change

One of my favorite things about being a Christian is that *we get to change*. Most people you know are probably still the same basic people they've always been since late adolescence - just taller and less pimply. But their character, their strengths and weaknesses - those have stayed mostly the same. Christians are no better than anyone else, but thanks to the grace of God, the blood of Christ, and the power of the Spirit, you and I get to grow and change. What a wondrous, liberating gift! You know all those flaws you hate about yourself? Those





weaknesses that frustrate you, embarrass you, and limit you? With God's help we can change them! We can grow. *We can grow*, and what a privilege that is! Paul paints us vivid pictures of spiritual growth in his letters:

Yet, my brothers, I do not consider myself to have "arrived" spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me. My brothers, I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal - my reward the honor of being called by God in Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-14 PHILLIPS

....Day by day, hurdle by hurdle, step by step, Esther kept moving forward until she saved her people. You and I must do the same. We must keep moving forward. We need not jump ahead ten steps, or even ten days – let's just move forward one step at a time.

Let's allow God to make us braver than we think we can be. Let's quiet the voice that insists, "I can't." Like the Little Engine That Could, with every step let's whisper, "I think I can..." because even when we can't, our God can.

Elizabeth Laing Thompson





A Prayer to Grow in Knowing Who God & Jesus Really Are

John 1:1-3, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.



If the Word is God and Jesus, then in order to grow in knowing who they are, I should grow in knowing the Word. I have begun creating personal prayers using scripture and share with you my prayer for growing in my knowledge of God & Christ. The lines of the prayer are taken from the Bible with the verses noted before or after each passage used-


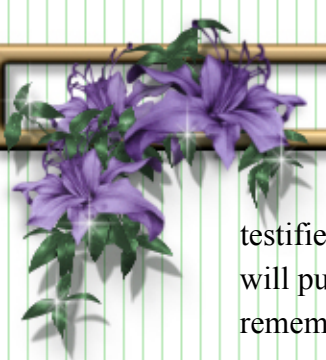
Dear Lord, in order to obey Psalm 46:10, two things must happen. I must know you in order to calm down and be still, and I must be still in order to hear you and know you.

Dear God, you are my Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, your son, is your exact representation (Hebrews 1:3). You are my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield in whom I take refuge, who subdues people under me (Psalm 144:2). 2 Timothy 4:18 says you rescue me from every evil attack including attacks of sadness, despair, hopelessness and emptiness (*you can fill in your own attacks here*). In Matthew 6, the birds have nests, Solomon fine clothes, both have food, and you remind me that I will be housed, clothed and fed more abundantly than all the birds or flowers in the field!

Thank you Father that you are a merciful God (Deuteronomy 4:31) who will not abandon or destroy me or forget the covenant with my ancestors, which you confirmed to them by oath. Your promise of salvation, your new covenant in Acts 2:39, is a promise for me and my children and for all whom the Lord our God will call, which according to 1 Timothy 2:4 is all people whom you want saved and where you put eternity in the hearts of every person (Ecc. 3:11).

From one sacrifice (Hebrews 10:14) you have made perfect forever those who are being made holy - ME! You have made me perfect as you make me holy. Thank you Jesus. Hebrews 10:15-18 says when I doubt, the Holy Spirit (living inside me)





testifies saying “this is the covenant, I will make with (my name) says the Lord. I will put my laws in her heart and I will write them on her mind. Her lawless acts I will remember no more.”

Because God, you made him who had no sin to be sin for me (2 Corinthians 5:21) so that in him I might become the righteousness of God. You do not treat me as my sins deserve (Psalm 103:10), and you send them as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). Why? Because you have always longed to be gracious to me (Isaiah 30:18).

You are my refuge and strength, my ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1) and I am so grateful that you do not stand far off, but you God are within me. Therefore I will not fall; you will help me at break of day (Psalm 46:5) and I'll be able to be still and know that you are God (Psalm 46:10).

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Jennifer Fuller

