

How Can I Grow as a Christian?

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Date: 25 October 2026

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] We're reading tonight from 2 Peter chapter 3. Yeah, there it is. 2 Peter chapter 3, verses 14 to 18. That's going to be on page 1019 of the church Bible.

That's the Bible in the seat in front of you. And as we're thinking about this, think about what we're going to be looking at tonight, about how can I grow as a Christian.

So it's 2 Peter chapter 3, verses 14 to 18. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish and at peace.

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures. You, therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

[1:15] To him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. And we're just going to have Colin now to come and preach to us. Thank you very much, Benjamin.

You know I've got a cold. My voice isn't great tonight, which isn't terrible. I've got a cough as well, so I'm doing the unforgivable. I am chewing a pan drop at the same time as speaking.

Please forgive me. I'm trying not to be disrespectful, but I'm also trying not to blow your ears out when I cough. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And the question, as Benjamin rightly said, and thank you very much to Benjamin for taking the first part of the service, is how can I grow as a Christian?

How can I grow as a Christian? Many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots. Many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots.

[2:20] I don't know if anyone can tell me what that means. I learned that in first year in school. I remembered it from first year biology many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots.

The first letter of each word represent the seven characteristics of a living organism. Movement, nutrition, respiration, excretion, growth, reproduction, and response.

Living organisms do all these things. They grow. Something that does not grow is by definition not a living organism.

So as Christians, we are commanded to grow. Our text tells us, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We shouldn't need to be commanded.

It's natural, if we're alive as Christians, to grow in our spiritual relationship with God. If we are not growing, if we are not growing, by definition, we are not spiritually alive.

[3:26] Our growth may be negative in that we are going back in our faith, we're backsliding, but the pursuit of spiritual health requires and means positive growth.

We're growing closer to God and our faith in Christ is becoming stronger. Every healthy Christian wants to grow in their relationship with God.

They want to become stronger Christians, but the question is, how can we grow as Christians? How can I pursue vibrancy and spiritual health in my life, in my closeness, in my relationship with Jesus Christ?

Now, the Bible tells us that there are three ways we can grow as Christians. We call them the means of grace in that they are the normal methods God uses to strengthen us in our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He gives us more grace, if I may use that term guardedly, through these three means. They are the word, prayer, and the sacraments of the church.

[4:37] The word, prayer, and the sacraments of the church. The more we invest and engage in these three areas, the stronger and healthier we shall grow as Christians.

Before we discuss and explore each one of them, I want to look into their proper setting. Should we do them as best done privately or corporately?

In other words, what part do other Christians play in my spiritual growth? I used to think, based upon 19th and 20th century pietism, that it was my personal diligence in prayer and Bible study which defined my spiritual life.

I was brought up believing this quote. I think it was Murray McChain who said it. What a man is on his knees in private, that is what he is, and no more.

And there is no doubt truth in that. As Christians, we want to pursue a growing and healthy personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. But the older I get, and I hope the wiser I get, that's disputable, but the wiser I get, the more I realise that genuine spiritual growth is a team effort.

[5:55] It's a community project. I'm not saying our private devotions aren't important, they really are, but what I'm saying is that public worship is far more important than we think it is.

And I justify this for many reasons, not the least of which is that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are only to be administered in a public setting, in a church setting.

The Lord's Day worship services of the church are the best settings in which to grow as Christians. We're together with our brothers and sisters in Christ, all of whom are different.

We pray to God, we engage with the Word of God, and we invest in the sacraments of the church. And that's one of, if not the most important reasons, we devote ourselves to the church.

And that's why we set a premium on Lord's Day morning and evening worship. The church is, as it were, the best fertilizer of our growth as Christians, it boosts our growth.

[7:08] It's why we obey the command of the writer of Hebrews when he says, do not neglect the gathering of yourselves together. But of course, as well as worship on the Lord's Day, we want to invest in fellowship with other Christians, learning from each other how to read and apply the Word of God, and gaining insight into how God answers our prayers.

So the lesson is clear. Engage in the life of the church. While not neglecting our private devotions, intertwining our lives with those of other Christians is the ideal setting for growing and knowing our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

So there are three ways to grow as Christians. The Word, prayer, and sacraments. If we want to be healthy and growing Christians, we need to engage with them all.

first of all then, the Word, the Word of God. The Word of God is contained in the pages of the Bible, or to be clearer still, the Bible is the Word of God.

When we say the Word of God, we mean the very speech of God. Everything we need to know about, as human beings, both about God and about ourselves.

[8:40] God the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture to take exactly what He wanted them to say using their own distinct personalities and styles.

To put it crudely, God speaks to us in His Word, the Bible. In 2 Timothy 3.16, a verse we know well together, the Apostle Paul tells us that Scripture is breathed out by God.

that's breathed out by God. The Bible is God's breath where His breath is life. In the Garden of Eden, when God created Adam from the dust of the earth, we read that He breathed into the nostrils of the first man, and I quote, He became a living being.

So the breath of God gave life to the first man. in the same way as God breathed into us by His Word, He gives us spiritual life.

According to Romans 10, verse 17, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. So the origin of spiritual life in a person, the beginning of faith, comes through hearing the Word of God by God breathing through His Word life into our hearts.

[10:00] It's as the Word of God is proclaimed, God gives us life. The Holy Spirit speaks through His Word. Like a defibrillator, the words of God in the Bible jumpstart our spiritual hearts.

they give life to our dead souls. This is how God gives us new birth and works faith in Jesus. The Word of God is not, however, only the means by which God gives us life in the first place, but the means by which God strengthens our spiritual life and helps us to grow as Christians.

So, for example, in Acts chapter 20, in verse 32, in His farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, the Apostle Paul commits them to God unto the Word of His grace which is able to build you up.

And again, in 1 Peter 2, in verse 2, the Apostle Peter writes, long for pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation.

So, the Bible is our means of grace, the means by which God communicates the grace of salvation to us. And that is why the Bible is central to our discipleship as Christians.

[11:21] That's why the Bible must be central to everything we do as a church. From our preaching to our singing, from our prayers to our structures, even the architecture of this church has the pulpit, the place where the Word of God is read and preached, in the center.

that's also why our primary confession as Reformed Evangelical Christians is the Westminster Confession of Faith. And why the first chapter of that confession on Holy Scripture is perhaps the greatest human composition devoted to the centrality, the sufficiency, and to the message of the Bible.

So if you want to grow in your faith, you must put the Bible front and center of your life. Many Christians, myself included, recommend the practice of daily reading using notes like Every Day with Jesus or Daily Bread or, in my own instance, the UCB Daily Reading Notes.

Other Christians read larger portions of the Bible every day with reading guides like McShane's Daily Reading Program. But just as we wouldn't go a day without eating physical food, so we shouldn't go a day without the spiritual food the Bible can give us.

And if you want help in your daily readings, then please speak to me or to one of the other elders, especially Peter, after the service and we can guide you to the best resources out there.

[13:05] But having said that, do not underestimate the strengthening grace of the public preaching of the Word of God. There's something about public preaching which is even more powerful than private reading.

We need to pay the maximum attention to and put the maximum effort into the preaching of the Word. So if it means taking notes, do that.

It will most certainly mean praying for God's help beforehand. But not only so, it's good to read the Bible with other Christians, to listen to others' perspectives on and applications of Scripture's teaching, the kind of setting we have in our city groups or in Crowley Connect.

Well, whatever the context, the Bible is the Word of God and through God's Word He speaks, God renews our graces, He strengthens us to meet all the challenges we face in life.

In His Word, God points to His Son, Jesus, in whom there is love, joy, peace, comfort, grace, and righteousness for us as Christians.

[14:21] So the Bible is the first means God uses for our growth. And the question for us becomes, are our Bibles gathering dust on a shelf in our house?

Or are our Bibles our daily companion? The Word of God. Second means of grace, prayer, prayer. John Stott was one of the greatest evangelical preachers, writers, and leaders of the 20th century English church.

Well, Western church, really. And he writes these words, he says, I doubt if anybody has ever become at all Christ-like who has not been diligent in prayer.

I doubt if anybody has ever become at all Christ-like who has not been diligent in prayer. In very general terms, if the Bible is God speaking to us, prayer is our speaking to God.

[15:29] If the Bible is God breathing life into us, prayer is like us taking breath. When someone's been given the kiss of life to bring them back from the dead, the first sign that they are alive is that they breathe on their own.

Well, in Hebrews chapter 4, verse 16, the writer specifically attaches prayer to God to the giving of grace and strength.

We read in that verse, Hebrews 4, 16, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Earlier in the Bible, in Luke chapter 9, verse 13, Jesus encourages his disciples to ask, seek, and knock. And in so doing, he says, you'll receive the Holy Spirit who will give you grace, strength, and perseverance.

So I'm going to quote from Table Talk magazine, which is the daily readings of Ligonier, which is a great resource. Let me quote this, prayer is a means of grace through which the Spirit works in the Christian's life.

[16:50] Prayer is a means of grace through which the Spirit works in the Christian's life. It is through our dependence upon God in prayer, the Holy Spirit of God works as power, strength, and

grace in our lives.

I want you to think about it like this. Our relationship to God is like a pipe through which flows God's grace and strength. The word God is his grace flowing from him to us.

But there's a blockage in the way on our side preventing his grace from reaching us. Prayer dissolves that blockage by the Holy Spirit's influence, allowing the grace of God to flow freely into us.

Prayer is a means of grace for the Christian. However, as I've said, it's not just about Jesus and me. our private devotions are crucial.

They are very important to our spiritual lives as Christians. But I want to suggest that whereas in evangelicalism our private devotions, including our quiet times, are uppermost, and they really are very, very important.

[18:15] In our particular stream of evangelicalism, it is in corporate or community prayers, God strengthens our graces to the max. God has promised to be with us in a very special way when we meet together to pray in a way he hasn't promised to be with us when we pray by ourselves.

So in Matthew 18, for example, I know there's a context to this verse, but in Matthew 18, 20, Jesus says, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them. And again in 1 Corinthians 3,16, the Apostle Paul, speaking to the whole church in Corinth, asks, do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you, not individual church?

God promises to hear the prayers of his people when they gather together to pray, either in public worship or in other intentional meetings for prayer.

If the book of Acts teaches us anything, it teaches us this, God heard and answered the prayers of the church as they gathered together to pray.

We don't need any evidence of this. How many times have we gathered together to pray for issues like Caroline Payton's health, James' safe delivery?

[19:43] How many times have we met together to pray? We don't need any evidence of the truth of this. So the pastors intercessory prayed the Lord's Day. Prayer meetings of the church, they are specifically designed to dissolve that blockage to the Holy Spirit's influence among us and in us, allowing the grace of God to flow freely into us.

If you feel tonight that you're not really growing in your faith, could part of the answer to that be that you need to commit yourself more intentionally to the public prayers and prayer meetings of this church?

The corporate worship of the church, and I want you to listen very carefully to what I'm going to say here because I think it's very important. The corporate worship of the church becomes even more crucial to any among us who are struggling with depression or doubt or temptation.

In such situations, the Puritan Richard Baxter advises us that private prayer is actually not helpful. In his wonderful treatise called On Melancholy, which I think was a 17th century word for depression, you can get it online, read it for yourself.

He says, if you spend time praying by yourself when you're depressed, all that will happen is it will provide you with an opportunity to get stuck in your own head and you'll feel even worse afterwards.

[21:27] So he says, for the depressed Christian, it is better to pray with other Christians and listen to them praying. Because they will give you the strength you need to get back on track in your Christian life and regain your spiritual health again.

So just before we leave this point about prayer being a means of grace, let me suggest that we approach our prayers. This is very simple. It was taught to me when I was first converted, by adopting the following four steps.

Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, acts for short. We begin in prayer with where we should, the adoration of God for who he is as the blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one true and living God.

We praise him for his sovereign love and for his glorious power. We worship him for what he has done for us in creation and redemption. We praise him for the cradle.

We praise him for the cross. We praise him for the empty tomb. We praise him for the throne of Christ in heaven. We adore God. Secondly, we confess our sins to God.

[22:51] We admit that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We do not merely confess sin in general. But if we're praying in private, we confess our particular sins to God, our particular sins of thought and word and deed.

We confess our sin and we claim God's promise in 1 John 1:9 that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from our sins and Thirdly, we give thanks for all God has done for us and given to us.

Nowadays, people recommend keeping what they call a gratitude diary. That's a good idea, even for the Christian, especially for the Christian, because there's always things we can be thankful for, be it the breath in our lungs, the homes in which we live, never mind the more particular things concerning our spiritual lives, the fellowship of other Christians, the way God strengthens us to meet life's challenges, etc.

And fourthly, we want to supplicate, or in other words, to ask for things. So in the Lord's Prayer, for example, we pray for our daily bread.

Supplication is an opportunity to open up our hearts to God and pour out our desires to Him. We ask Him for divine help when we are weak. We pray for His grace to help us in time of need.

[24:30] We supplicate for His work in us and among us. It becomes very difficult if you use these four words, acts, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication.

Walter and I were in Twin Lakes one year, and we would set the task of there were four of us gathered. Everyone was put together in fours. And we were told you've got to spend ten minutes in a prayer of adoration.

Remember this, Walter, a prayer of adoration to God. You're not allowed to confess your sins, not allowed to say thank you to Him, and you're not allowed to ask for anything. You've just got to spend ten minutes adoring God.

You should try this at home. It is so hard. Anyway, prayer is a means of grace. It is the way by which God's grace floods into our lives through that pipe and helps us to grow as Christians.

Let me remind you once again of Stott's quotes before we move on. I doubt if anyone has ever become at all Christ-like who has not been diligent in prayer. Well, thirdly and lastly, sacraments, sacraments.

[25:43] In a Reformed evangelical church like ours, there are two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. And we engage with them only in the context of public worship, although in private we reflect them also.

The great North African bishop, Augustine, he famously said of these sacraments, they are visible signs of an invisible grace.

They are visible signs of an invisible grace. As we engage in these visible signs of baptism and the Holy Communion, God gives us invisible grace.

Through water, through bread, through wine, God helps us to grow as Christians and strengthens us in our faith. Christian baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace.

I'm quite glad he's not here tonight, but the right person to speak to the issue of baptism as a means of grace, of course, is Dr. Crookes, whose work on this subject, I kid you not, is world-leading.

[26:58] In Titus 3, verse 5, the Apostle Paul speaks of how we have been saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

In baptism, the Holy Spirit makes us new. He gives us new grace. He gives us new strength. There is an inextricable link between the sacrament of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And there is an inextricable link between the Holy Spirit and growth in our Christian lives. The link between baptism, the Holy Spirit, and growth is mysterious.

It's spiritual. It's invisible. But baptism is far more than a mere sign of something. Where I believe credo-baptists, or recordings of the Holy Spirit or adult Baptists, you might call them, go wrong, is at large to believe that baptism is a promise we make to God.

But according to what I read in the Bible, as a sacrament, baptism is more a promise God makes to us. That's why baptism is a strengthening grace that helps us to grow.

[28:14] Let me briefly just list three contexts in which baptism can strengthen you in your faith. First, when you are baptized. When you are baptized.

Most of us here were baptized as infants. But in a mysteriously spiritual way, on that day, God promised to be our God and we to be his children.

Who knows what grace God gave us on that day. Read John Owen if you want to find out more about this. Second context, when we engage in the baptism of others.

The 22nd of this month, or next month, rather, little James McDonald's going to be baptized here, whether it's the baptism of James or the baptism of an adult, we participate by joining in the vows

we make together.

However, for us, as we engage in that baptism, God is, so even when we make those vows with James being baptized, God is mysteriously and spiritually strengthening us with baptismal grace once more.

[29 : 27] And the third context, whereby baptism becomes a means of grace to us, is when we remember our own baptisms. And as we reflect on what baptism means, the promises God makes to us on that day, God strengthens us by his spirit.

Now, I don't know how it works. We don't have to understand everything because by definition some things are mysterious and beyond our understanding. But we believe that baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace.

The Holy Spirit comes to strengthen and help us to grow. The Lord's Supper is also a sign, a visible sign, of an invisible grace.

In 1 Corinthians 10 verse 6, we're asked, is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation or communion in the blood of Christ?

And is not the bread that we break a participation, communion in the body of Christ? As by faith in Jesus we eat bread and drink wine, we share in the body and blood of Jesus.

[30 : 43] Or to put in other words, we share in Christ himself. We commune in him and we share in him. I want you to imagine, because it's mysterious reality, that as we engage in the communion meal of bread and wine, we are being fed by his Holy Spirit with the heavenly Christ.

We are being strengthened by his grace. We're being lifted up into heaven and we're sharing in a heavenly banquet where the menu of that banquet is the heavenly Jesus himself.

It's not a physical but a spiritual eating. And the digestion's not physical, it's spiritual. It's not our stomachs being fed with the flesh of Christ, it's our souls being strengthened by the heavenly grace of Christ.

Christ. And again, I don't know how this works. We don't need to understand everything because by definition some things are mysterious. But we believe that the Lord's Supper is a visible sign of an invisible grace, the Holy Spirit of God who strengthens us and helps us to grow as Christians.

Christians. One final thing here. Many Christians, and they are Christians, refrain from eating and drinking the bread and wine because they feel as if their faith is too weak, too halting.

[32 : 22] But that is exactly what the communion is for. Those with weak faith. And that's its precise design to strengthen us in our faith.

To say that our spiritual weakness disqualifies us from taking the Lord's Supper is like saying that a sore head disqualifies us from taking paracetamol.

To say that weakness, spiritual weakness or doubt, disqualifies us from taking the Lord's Supper is like saying that a sore head disqualifies us from taking paracetamol.

It makes no sense. I quoted him this morning. One of our first ministers was John Rabbie Duncan.

And when Alassie at his congregation told him that she felt too sinful and too weak and had too many doubts to eat the bread and drink the wine of the communion, he famously said in his Aberdonian tongue, and I can't do it because my voice is shattered, he said, tack it, Alassie.

He said, tack it, Alassie, it's for sinners. Tack it, Alassie, it's for sinners. Do you want to grow in your faith? Do you want to know Jesus better?

[33 : 41] Because the closer we get to Jesus, the more joy, peace, and love, the more satisfaction, holiness, and contentment we shall enjoy. The more we get to know Jesus, the more we want to get to know Jesus.

And there are three ways we can get to know Jesus better. The word of God, prayer, and the sacraments of the church. So the only question remaining for us all this evening is this.

How desperate are you to know Jesus? Let us pray. Lord our God, we thank you that these truths are not hidden in your word.

They are clear. They are direct. that as we engage in your word, and as we invest in the private and public study of your word, as we engage and invest in corporate and private prayer, and if we engage in baptism in the Lord's Supper, you infuse grace into us.

And we ask, oh Lord, that you would give us a heart to know Jesus better. Never once have we got to know him, but we didn't want to know him more. And we particularly pray for any here tonight who don't know him at all.

[35 : 10] And we ask that even as they sense that others in this room have an appetite for getting to know Jesus, they too would begin to get that appetite themselves, to hunger and thirst after the Jesus in whom are hidden all the riches of wisdom and knowledge.

We ask that your Holy Spirit would have free reign in our hearts tonight. And we ask these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.