

## HOW DO PEOPLE GROW?

by Andy Stanley

From time to time, people ask about what some would refer to as our discipleship model. To help answer those questions, I wanted to offer this article to explain how to “grow” your relationship with Christ. We throw the “grow” word around a good bit on all of our campuses. Specifically, we talk about a “growing” relationship with Christ. But what exactly does that mean? What exactly is growing?

The answer is found in a New Testament book of the Bible that you may have never read. Years ago someone creatively named it 2 Thessalonians. Basically, it is a letter—actually, the second of two letters—written by the apostle Paul to Christians in the city of Thessalonica. He opens the letter with these words:

***We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.***

***2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 (NIV)***

Paul congratulated these new believers on their growing *faith*. The New American Standard translation of the Bible says their faith was “greatly enlarged.” Sounds a bit like a medical condition to me. I like the translation “growing more and more.” Paul goes on to say that he often boasted to other churches about the faith he saw in the church at Thessalonica. **So what’s the big deal about faith?**

### Big Ol’ Faith

God wants to grow your faith. Here’s why. Faith, or trust, is the centerpiece of every great relationship. You can’t have a healthy relationship with anyone without faith, or trust. As trust deepens, relationships deepen and mature. God sent Jesus into the world to

reestablish a relationship with mankind. For that relationship to happen, there must be trust, or to use the Bible word, faith. Anything that enhances trust between two entities enhances the relationship, albeit spouses, nations, siblings, or friends. Grow the trust and you deepen the relationship.

It is no coincidence that our relationship with God is initiated by an act of faith. Remember this verse?

***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”***

***John 3:16 (NIV)***

Isn't that interesting? We receive eternal life by “believing in” or trusting in Christ. The very first thing God requires of us is our trust. Why? Because that's the stuff relationships are made of. And what your heavenly Father wants most from you is that—a relationship—relationship characterized by trust, faith, and confidence.

## The Big Apple

While we are on this subject, there is another thing that bears mentioning. Do you remember what happened that caused man to fall out of favor with God to begin with?

There was a time when humankind had just the kind of relationship with God we are talking about; one characterized by mutual trust. But something happened. You know the story. Long, long ago in a garden far, far away... the serpent came to Eve and said, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”<sup>1</sup>

Think about that question. “Did God really say...?” What's his point? What was the serpent after? What was he driving at? The conversation that followed makes it all too clear.

*The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"*

*"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

*Genesis 3:2-5 (NIV)*

The serpent's agenda was pretty clear. He wanted Eve to doubt God. His purpose was to chip away at her faith to the point that she would act on her disbelief. And that is exactly what she did. Even before she tasted the forbidden fruit, the battle was lost. She doubted. She lost confidence. The relationship was damaged. Broken.

**In many ways belief and unbelief are two sides of the same door.** We exited a relationship with God through unbelief and we come back in through belief. And once we are in, our heavenly Father does a full court press to grow and mature our faith so that we never want to leave again.

## What If?

God's desire for us to trust him fully is really an extension of his unconditional love. The best thing for us is to trust him. To illustrate, I need you to lend me your imagination for just a moment. Imagine what your life would be like if you had *perfect* faith in God.

What if you had complete confidence that he loved you unconditionally? What if you fully embraced the notion that nothing comes into your life without his knowledge?

What if you were confident that everything that comes your way was part of a divine plan and that some day you will look back and see how it all fits together? And ... and this is big ... and what if that was the filter through which you viewed and responded to the circumstances of life every minute of every day? In other words, what if you were absolutely confident that God was with you and for you? What would you worry about?

What would you fear? What would you argue with him about? Which of his laws and principles would you write off as impractical and irrelevant?

Can you see how a perfect faith would eventually shape your entire life? Think about it. You would live a life of complete surrender to your heavenly Father, not because you had to, but because you wanted to. You wouldn't obey because you feared retaliation. You would obey because you *trusted* him.

I feel like I skim across the surface of that kind of surrender during worship on Sunday mornings. On many occasions, while I'm staring at the words on the screen, letting the lyrics wash over me, I'm struck by this thought, "**Why do I ever sin?**" In light of what God has done for me, in light of the fact that he is the perfect, trustworthy Father, why would I doubt, fear, or disobey? In those moments I am drawn to surrender, not from fear, but from faith. And how I wish I could latch onto that perspective and maintain it through the week. After all, that's the goal. That's how you live when faith is perfected. That's what God is after in each of us.

## The Flip Side

Now to be honest, we are not the only ones who benefit from big faith. God has a stake in this as well. Specifically, God is most honored ... receives the most glory ... through our living, active, death-defying, out-of-the-box faith. Nothing reflects better on the Father than a child whose lifestyle says, "I trust you." **Trusting God is tantamount to giving him a standing ovation.**

Matthew records an incident that underscores how much the Father values our faith. Jesus was asked by a Roman soldier to heal his servant who was at home suffering. Jesus agreed and indicated that he would follow the soldier to his home. The soldier responded, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word and my

servant will be healed.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ response took everyone by surprise.

***Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.”***

***Matthew 8:10 (NASB)***

Nowhere else in Scripture do we find Jesus “marveling.” The Greek term actually means to be astonished or extraordinarily impressed by. What astonished Jesus? The man’s obedience? Nope. His faith. Specifically, the soldier’s faith that Jesus was working on behalf of the Father.

Our faith reflects well upon the Father. The more perfect our faith, the better we reflect his greatness. So it should come as no surprise that the maturity of our faith is high on God’s agenda for our lives. God is at work building, growing, maturing, igniting, yes, even perfecting, our faith.

In fact, the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews goes so far as to refer to Jesus as the “perfecter” of our faith. But how? How does God perfect our faith? Well, I’m glad I asked.

## The Five Faith Catalysts

We believe there are five primary catalysts God uses to grow our faith. We refer to them as, you guessed it, the five faith catalysts. These five things are not listed anywhere in the Bible. We came up with the list by observing how God works in the lives of believers and even unbelievers. We are not arguing that these are the only five leverage points God uses. But we are saying that every time we hear someone recount his or her faith journey, at least one of these five dynamics is a part of the story. They are:

- ❖ Practical teaching
- ❖ Providential relationships
- ❖ Private disciplines
- ❖ Pivotal circumstances
- ❖ Personal ministry

Practical teaching reveals where we are and where we need to go. Providential relationships allow us to hear from God through others. Private disciplines tune our hearts to God's heart. Pivotal circumstances force us to look at God. Personal ministry enables us to experience God's power. Each of these, in its own unique way, builds our faith in God. And at some point in your spiritual journey, each of these catalysts will intersect with your experiences.

## It Isn't What You Know

I want to make sure you understand a very important distinction. Spiritual growth or development is not primarily about becoming smarter or even more obedient. Spiritual growth is all about a relationship with your heavenly Father through his son, Jesus. Consequently, spiritual growth is about faith growth. The bigger your faith, the deeper the relationship. **Bible knowledge alone will make you proud. Obedience alone will make you judgmental. Trust makes you dependent.**

As your pastor and teacher, I certainly hope you learn a lot. For the sake of your family and friends, I hope you obey a lot. But most importantly, I hope you will learn to trust a lot. In that, your Father is honored and your life will be richer.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:1

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 8:8