

## Are You Facing Life with an 8th Grade Faith?

### 2 Peter 3:14-18

Equipping for Christ's Mission through Nurture

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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National's vision statement calls for Worship: centering the church in a shared encounter with a merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

National Presbyterian's vision statement calls for Nurture in the Word of God, equipping Christians of all ages to serve as Christ's light in the world.

Robert McAfee Brown, in his book *The Bible Speaks to You*, makes a rather startling suggestion: *Be It Hereby Enacted*: that every three years all people shall forget whatever they have learned about Jesus, and begin the study all over again.

Forget everything you've learned about Jesus? Why would he make such a recommendation? For one thing, because our vision of Jesus is inevitably distorted by the society we live in. For example, I grew up with portraits of a white, blond-haired, and blue-eyed Jesus, in short, an all-American boy. But Jesus was undoubtedly olive-skinned and dark-haired, with dark brown eyes, every inch a middle-eastern Jew. In the Congregational Church in Hana, Hawaii, there is a life-sized stained glass portrait of Jesus. He is dark-skinned with long flowing black hair, and he is dressed in Polynesian apparel. That, I suspect, is a closer approximation to Jesus than the paintings of Warner Sallman and Frances Hook.

More importantly, Brown suggested that we begin the study all over again because many Christians stopped studying somewhere around the eighth grade. As a result, they are using a simple childhood faith to solve tough adult dilemmas. Robert Fulghum could say, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. But you and I will not conquer adult crises with a kindergarten creed.

That may be why the last surviving words we have from Peter's pen are these: Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In other words, don't rely on an eighth grade faith. Grow on and grow up, first in the grace . . . of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Grace is like the soil in which we plant things. The soil is there already. The soil is a gift of creation in which beautiful things grow, roses and rhododendrons. And, like soil, grace is there already. It is a gift of God in which faith grows, and courage and kindness and all sorts of good things.

But unlike the soil, you cannot improve on grace. You can enrich soil with nitrogen and phosphate, but you can't improve on God's grace. It contains all the nutrients you need to produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Then how do we grow in grace? Simply by letting ourselves be enfolded in God's favor every day, by allowing God's gracious promises to flow over and around and within us, dare I say by relaxing in God's love, by believing that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (See Romans 8:38-39). I sometimes begin my prayers with the salutation Almighty God, but that conjures up an image of such superhuman power that I'm not sure God will pay attention to little me. Sometimes I pray Heavenly Father, but when I reflect on my behavior as an earthly son, I feel I don't deserve God's attention. But when I pray Gracious God or God of grace I come in contact with a God who accepts and receives me in spite of my errant behavior. God's foremost attribute is not almightiness or even holiness but graciousness, unmerited favor toward all whom he has created and for whom Christ gave his life. And throughout my life I want to sink ever deeper in the inexhaustible reservoir of God's grace.

Then, Peter adds, grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The word knowledge has two meanings in the New Testament, and I'm convinced both are present here. The first is the knowledge that digs for data, that ferrets out the facts. So to know Jesus Christ calls for concentrated study in the documents that describe Jesus. And those documents, the primary sources, are found in the New Testament.

Yes, I know the New Testament is disparaged in many circles these days, and not only in university departments of philosophy and science but in departments of religion as well. Some scholars claim that the gospel writers could not possibly have remembered the precise words and deeds of Jesus after thirty or forty years, so they made them up. Well, perhaps those scholars can't remember what they had for breakfast last week, but Kenneth Bailey, who spent most of his life in the Middle East, will tell you that illiterate Palestinian peasants can cite with precise accuracy their family stories and genealogies going back thirty and forty generations. We in the West don't have to remember anything because it's all written in books and encyclopedias and on the internet. But those who lived in pre-Gutenberg days had to commit things to memory and they did so with undeniable accuracy. And so did the writers of Holy Scripture.

I want to be as knowledgeable--no, I want to be more knowledgeable--in the Christian faith than I am in politics, sports, economics, psychology, science, history, and culture. And if you want to join me in that resolve, there is a handy book called *The Bible through which you can grow in the knowledge of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*.

But there is another, more important, definition of knowledge: relational knowledge. Not just knowing about Jesus Christ, but

knowing Jesus Christ personally.

Let me put it this way: grow your friendship with Jesus. And the best way to grow a friendship is to spend time together, to share hurts and hopes, to eat together and go places together.

When we moved to Washington two and a half months ago I expected to keep up with good friends back home and to entertain friends who are passing through, but for the most part, to put friendship on hold for these months while you search for a new pastor. But you are not letting us get away with that. You are reaching out to us, and I am learning all over again that friendship is a gift. More often than not, friendship begins when others hold out their hands, invite us to dinner, share their stories, and invite us to share ours.

Jesus Christ is holding out his hand to you. You don't have to initiate anything, just r.s.v.p. by telling Jesus your hopes and hurts (that's called prayer), by eating and drinking with him (that's called communion), by listening to what he has to say (that's called Bible study), by entrusting your life to his guidance (that's called faith), and by assisting him in his work (that's called ministry).

Some call these the disciplines of the Christian life, Bible study, prayer, worship, and mission. But if the word discipline repels you, if it smacks of rigor and regimentation, then think of them as the marks of friendship, listening, talking, sharing, helping. They are the gestures we employ without thinking when we are with our friends.

And the wonderful thing about friends is that when we get together, even after years of separation, we don't have to forget everything we knew and start all over again. We pick up right where we left off and then add new strands to the rich tapestry of our friendship. Jesus said, I do not call you servants . . . I have called you friends. And I ask, what new colorful strands will you add this week to the tapestry of your friendship with Jesus? Peter thought this of such overriding consequence that he made it his valedictory to the church through all ages: Grow . . . grow in the grace . . . grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.