

QUIET TIME

Theme: Spiritual growth

- Try to make a specific time every day to meet Jesus Christ through reading and meditating his Word.
- Pray, talk with Jesus Christ and make a few short notes about this Bible passage in your notebook.
- Record what you discover, what speaks to your mind and heart, what you find difficult or what you understood.

- Day 1 Jeremiah 17:5-8
God is the Source of all growth
- Day 2 John 15:1-8
The most important sources for bearing much fruit
- Day 3 Psalm 92:12-14
Growing from youth till old age
- Day 4 1 Corinthians 2:14 – 3:15
Growing from immaturity to fruitfulness
- Day 5^{BS} Hebrews 5:11 – 6:8
Growing from infant to teacher, without arrest
- Day 6 Psalm 1:1-6
God's Word as source for spiritual growth
- Day 7 Matthew 13:3-23
Growing by hearing, understanding, accepting, retaining and persistent fruit bearing
- Day 8 Colossians 3:5-17.
Growing by weeding and planting
- Day 9 1 Timothy 4:12-16
Growing in doctrine and life
- Day 10 1 John 2:12-14
Growing strengthens
- Think about Colossians 1:9-10.
This is a possible prayer for another person.
 - Pray this prayer for one another and for someone else.
 - Pray every day for someone or something specific and wait in expectation for what God is going to do (Psalm 5:3).

STUDY

Theme: Spiritual growth: why and how

Read study 22 carefully before the next meeting. If you have questions, write them down and mail them to one of your group leaders. We will seek an answer together.

BIBLE STUDY

Theme: Growth does not acknowledge a standstill

If you like, you may already prepare the Bible Study for the coming meeting by reading through the Bible passage. Make use of the 5-step Bible Study method. The Bible passage is: **Hebrews 5:11 – 6:8**

MEMORISATION

1. Motivation

Jesus memorised Bible verses (Luke 4:4-13). Are you doing that?

2. Memorisation

Memorise this verse in the Bible version of your choice.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Psalm 1:3

He is like a tree planted
by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.

Psalm 1:3 (NIV)

3. Review and back-review

Review the last 5 memorised verses once every day and back-review all other memorised verses once every three weeks.

4. Review of the Bible books

All 27 books of the New Testament

The 4 Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

The 1 Historical Book: Acts

The 13 Letters of Paul: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

The 8 General Letters: Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1&2&3 John, Jude

The 1 Apocalypse: Revelation

22. Spiritual growth: why and how

In Luke 2:52 is written: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men”. Also Christians should grow in all the important areas of life and especially spiritually.

A. Responsibility for spiritual growth

1. The parable of the sower

Read Mark 4:1-20. What is the message of this parable?

‘The seed’ represents the Word of God. ‘The different conditions of the soils’ represent the different possible attitudes and conditions of the heart of every man: hardened, shallow, divided and well prepared.

Mark 4:1-20 is not a parable about a sower, but rather a parable about the attitude and condition of the human heart on which the sower sows his seed. It is not a parable about how God’s Word is sown, but rather a parable about how God’s Word is received!

Condition 1: *The seed that fell on the path (vs. 4).*

This is a picture of a heart that is hardened, insensitive and does not respond. When your heart is like this, you do not respond to God’s Word. You think that God’s Word has nothing to say to you or that it is not important. You make no effort to understand it (Matthew 13:19) and you do not accept it (Mark 4:20). That is why your heart becomes more and more indifferent until it is completely hardened.

Satan knows the power and influence of God’s Word and is always ready to take God’s Word away from your heart (Luke 8:12)! Therefore it is very important that you make an effort to understand God’s Word (Matthew 13:23) and that you accept God’s Word (Mark 4:20) every time you hear, read or study it! When you detect that you have an attitude of indifference, procrastination or enmity, you must immediately deal with it!

Condition 2: *The seed that fell on rocky places (vs. 5).*

This is a picture of a heart that is impulsive, shallow and changeable. When your heart is like this, you respond too much in an emotional and thoughtless way to God’s Word. You accept God’s Word without considering the consequences. At first you are enthusiastic, but when it begins to cost something and difficulties arise, the sprout (what God’s Word began to accomplish in you) withers and dies. Your faith in God’s Word has no root, i.e. you do not persist to hold on to it (retain it).

It is important that you hold on to God’s Word (Luke 8:15) and persist to believe it and act according to it in difficult times! When you have the inclination to approach God’s Word too emotionally, you must learn to follow God’s Word with your mind and will.

Condition 3: *The seed that fell among thorns’ (vs. 7).*

This is a picture of a heart that is divided. When your heart

is like this, you choose for things that lead to death rather than choosing for things that lead to life (Deuteronomy 30:19). You allow yourself to be influenced more by other things than God’s Word. You regard other things as more important or more pressing, you are distracted by the worries of life, the attractions of wealth or the desires for pleasures of life. Your heart is thus divided between the things of this world and the Word of God. The things of this world choke the Word of God. That is why the Word of God bears no fruit in your life.

It is important that your heart remains clean, pure, good and honest (Luke 8:15). Stop worrying (Philippians 4:6-7). Do not be distracted by material possessions or wrong priorities.

Condition 4: *‘The seed that fell on good soil’ (vs. 8).*

This is a picture of a heart that is well prepared, responds to God’s Word, retains God’s Word and persistently bears fruit. When your heart is like this, you respond to God’s Word just as Jesus Christ wants you to. In contrast to the first soil you hear God’s Word, make an effort to understand it (Matthew 13:23) and accept it (Mark 4:20). In contrast to the second soil you retain God’s Word even in difficult situations (Luke 8:15). In contrast to the third soil you keep your heart well prepared, clean and free from anything that could choke God’s Word (Luke 8:15). In this way you persistently produce a crop, sometimes thirty times, sixty times or even hundred times what was sown (Matthew 13:23; Mark 4:20)!

The message of this parable

The message of this parable is that the condition and attitude of your heart at any time determines how you respond to God’s Word. And the way you respond to God’s Word determines how much fruit you bear (how much influence you will have).

On any day that you have not responded to God’s Word as Jesus Christ desires, you may immediately change your attitude and respond to it in the way Jesus Christ desires! He gives you very many new chances to respond to his Word in the right way. But don’t put God to the test (cf. Genesis 6:3).

2. The parable of the self-growing seed

Read Mark 4:26-29. What is the message of this parable?

The mystery: ‘The seed grows all by itself (vs. 27).

Growth in nature is always a mystery! Whether it is the growth of plants and trees, animals or people, no one can completely explain why and how growth takes place! The farmer who sows seed in his field knows that he cannot cause the seed to grow. He can exert no influence on the process of sprouting, growing, forming of the ear or bearing of fruit. The farmer does have a task: he covers the seed with shade, pulls up the weeds, and gives water and fertilizer. All these things benefit growth, but cannot cause growth. All the farmer can do is trust that growth will take place and patiently wait for the harvest. He must rely on God and trust that God will give growth.

Spiritual growth is likewise a mystery. God himself establishes his kingdom (kingship) in our hearts and lives and cause it to grow and bear fruit! Thanks to God's gracious will the spiritual seed (the message concerning God's kingdom) will have an increasing influence in our hearts and lives and on our society (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

The power of the seed: *'The seed produces grain all by itself' (vs. 28).*

All by itself, without any visible cause or help from man the seed germinates under the soil, sprouts above the soil, and then forms a stalk, a head and finally the full kernel in the head. It seems as if God had entrusted the knowledge and ability of growth to the tiny seed, so that by way of speaking it knows exactly what to do and when to do it! God has given the tiny seed enormous potential and power!

God's Word likewise has enormous power and potential to establish God's plan and God's kingship in the hearts and lives of people! That is why people must do their utter best to hear, understand, accept and apply God's Word in every area of their life and to pass it on to other people. In this way God's Word can grow in us and exert its power and influence through us (1 Peter 1:23; 2:3). God's Word knows exactly what, when and how to do what God designed it to do. God's Word travels from one person to another and from one country to another (Acts 17:6; 19:10).

The harvest: *'As soon as the grain is ripe' (vs. 29).*

Immediately when the harvest has come, the farmer harvests the grain. He will not wait!

Just as the seed grows according to its own God-given rules until the harvest, likewise God's kingdom (kingship) will grow according to God's will in personal lives as well as in countries.

God's kingdom (kingship) has grown since Christ's first coming and will become larger and larger (as the parable of the mustard seed teaches) and will permeate more and more areas of life (as the parable of the leaven teaches). At the right time it brings people into God's kingdom at the present time (John 3:8). And at the right moment when the harvest is complete (ripe) the final phase of God's kingdom will become visible on the new earth (Matthew 13:41-43; 25:34). The time to be harvested is different for every individual, because it comes at the time he dies or at the time of Christ's second coming!

The message of this parable

The message of this parable is that God and not man is the Creator of spiritual growth. It is God himself who established his kingdom (kingship) in the hearts and lives (John 3:8) of his chosen people on earth (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14)!

This parable is also a warning not to approach God's work with too much human idealism, enthusiasm, effort or impatience. People sometimes ask: "Where is this coming he promised?" (2 Peter 3:4). "Why does Jesus Christ not return

sooner?" "Why is there so much suffering and misery on earth?" "Why does this person not come to faith?" "Why does God not solve this problem?" As a consequence people get discouraged, begin to doubt God or lose their zeal for God. But God knows what he is doing, when he should do something and why he should do it. He determines the exact day and hour. Wherever God's Word is sown, there will be a harvest in God's time! God has entrusted such power and potential to his Word that it cannot return empty to him" (Isaiah 55:10-11)! Even if there are many things we do not understand, God's plan and programme cannot fail and will not fail (Isaiah 14:24,27)!

3. The relationship between the two parables

The parable of the self-growing seed emphasises God's sovereignty with respect to spiritual growth. It is not you, but God alone who is the Creator of spiritual growth in your life. In a complete sovereign way he establishes his kingdom (kingship) in your life and determines its progress in your life and the lives of others.

This does not exclude the fact that you need to co-operate with God (1 Corinthians 3:6-9). The parable of the sower emphasises your responsibility with respect to spiritual growth. The measure of spiritual growth and fruitfulness in your life is dependent on your response to God's Word. And your response to God's Word is dependent on the condition and attitude of your heart.

B. The difference between dead and living things

Example of the differences between a car and a tree.



A car:

- a dead thing
- designed / made by men
- quickly turned out on an assembly line
- each part is screwed on from the outside
- cannot grow; only deteriorates
- each car is one of thousands of the same model
- cannot reproduce itself
- causes pollution and waste
- only costs money to possess and maintain
- when discarded it pollutes the environment

A tree:

- a living organism
- designed and made by God
- grows slowly; takes much time to grow
- each cell develops from the inside
- never stops growing; becomes better
- each tree and each leaf is unique; one of its kind
- can reproduce itself
- bears fruit in season
- turns out a profit (fruit and wood)
- when it dies it provides food for new life

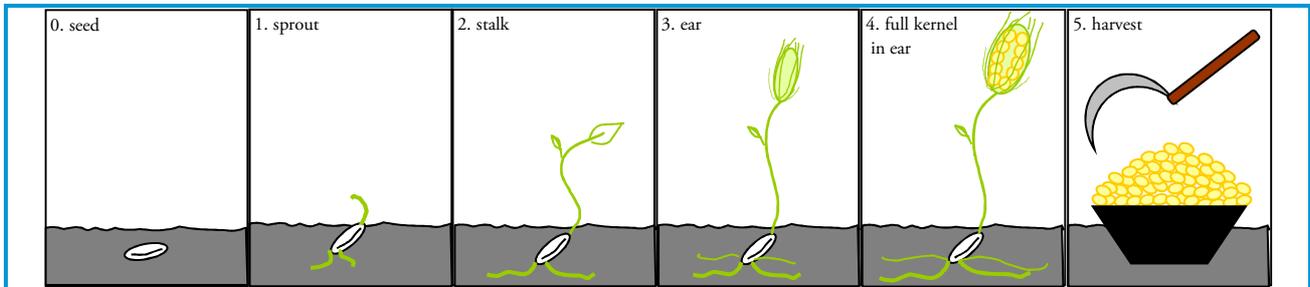
C. The different stages of growth

1. The physical growth stages of a plant

Read Mark 4:28-29 once more. This passage describes the growth stages of wheat.

The exact transition from one stage to the next cannot be determined. The farmer cannot tell the exact moment when a stalk becomes an ear or when the rows of seeds appear in the ear.

However these stages of growth are unavoidable under normal circumstances. Nothing can stop the growth process. Normally everything that lives and grows will die one day, but can never remain in the same condition. Plants, trees, animals and people grow or die. They cannot stand still. When they grow, they must develop through different growth stages.



2. The spiritual growth stages of a Christian

Christians also develop through different stages of spiritual growth.

They cannot stand still. If they do not grow, they die!

(1) Read Hebrews 5:11 - 6:3. The writer exhorts his Hebrew readers in strong words.

He said that with a view to time these Hebrew Christians should already have been teachers. But they did not grow.

The writer speaks of three stages of Christian growth: the infants, the mature and the teachers (workers).

Each group has its own characteristics:

	Infants (children)	Mature	Teachers (workers)
characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ hard to explain the Bible to them (5:11) ➤ they are slow to learn; they need much time, motivation, repetition and encouragement (5:11) ➤ they need a teacher to explain to them the elementary truths of the Bible (the milk) and to help them to grow to maturity (5:12-13; 6:1-2) ➤ they are untrained – they do not know how to apply the Bible (5:13) ➤ they cannot distinguish good from evil (5:14) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they learn the whole will of God (Acts 20:27) (the solid food) by studying the Bible by themselves (5:14) ➤ they train themselves by constant use and application of the Bible (5:14) ➤ they distinguish good from evil because of their knowledge of the Bible (5:14) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they teach others to grow to maturity (from the infant stage to the mature stage) (5:12)

(2) Read 1 Corinthians 2:15 - 3:11. Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth about the meaning of being 'spiritual'. Also he describes three stages of Christian growth:

the children, the spiritual and the workers. They have the following characteristics:

	Infants (children)	Spiritual (mature)	Workers
characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they are not spiritual (3:1) ➤ they are jealous ➤ they quarrel (3:3) ➤ they act like mere men (unbelievers) (3:3). ➤ they divide into parties (3:4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they are spiritual (2:15) ➤ they think like Christ (2:16) ➤ they make judgements about all things (have discernment) (2:15) ➤ they cannot be discerned or estimated aright by unbelievers (2:14) or by believers who are still unspiritual (2:15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they are servants of God, each with an assigned task (3:5): Some plant or lay the foundation (Christ): they evangelise (3:6,10). ➤ Others care for the plants or build on the foundation: they make disciples (3:6,10).

(3) Read 1 John 2:12-14. John wrote to Christians. Also he describes three stages of Christian growth: the children, the

young men and the fathers. They have the following characteristics:

	Children	Young men	Fathers
character.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they received forgiveness ➤ they know God personally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they are strong ➤ God's Word lives in them ➤ they have overcome the evil one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ they know God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (cf. 1 John 1:1-3) ➤ as 'fathers' they have spiritual children

D. In which stage (phase) of growth are you?

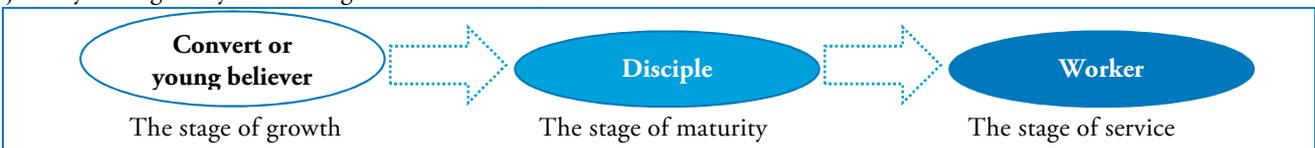
1. Christian growth

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews and the apostles Paul and John unanimously teach that Christians ought to grow spiritually. To be a Christian means to grow constantly. The spiritual growth process is an exciting journey throughout your life. A genuine Christian does

not passively attend meetings – he is actively involved in growing and in serving.

2. The stages of Christian growth

The Bible teaches three stages of growth. Every Christian ought to pass through each stage to the next during his life. The stages of growth overlap one another.



3. In which stage of spiritual growth are you?

If you are a recent convert to Jesus Christ or young believer:

- you need the elementary teachings of the Bible
- you need a teacher (mentor, coach) to help you to grow
- your goal is to grow to spiritual maturity (= to become a disciple of Jesus Christ)

If you are a worker of Jesus Christ

(= a servant of God and his Church):

- you need to keep on developing as a disciple of Jesus Christ
- you serve God by leading people to Jesus Christ and/or by building up new believers
- your goal is to glorify God, extend his kingdom and influence people to become their best for God

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ (= a mature follower of Jesus Christ):

- you are responsible for your own spiritual growth and behaviour
- you study and apply the Bible by yourself and together with other Christians
- your goal is to bear more and more fruit (= to become a worker of Jesus Christ)

Questions:

In which stage (phase) of growth are you?

What do you need to do to keep on growing to the next stage?