

# GROWING IN GRACE

by Steve Zeisler

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Think for a moment about all the ways in which family language shapes us. Paul says that every family in heaven and on earth derives its name from God the Father (see Ephesians 3:15). The fatherhood of God is the foundation for every family experience. It is what makes it possible for any woman to be a good mother and any man to be a good father to their children. It is what makes it possible for brothers and sisters to care for one another in a home, a church, or any extended family. It is what makes it possible to be godly uncles, aunts and grandparents.

There is nothing more important to us than family life. It is longed for by everyone in every setting. The most successful businesses in the modern world try to emphasize a sense of family or community rather than just competition alone. Even gangs that exist in modern cities think of themselves as families. In *West Side Story* (in which gangs were more benign than they are now), there is a song talking about gang experience:

When you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way,  
From your first cigarette to your last dying day.  
When you're a Jet, you say what you can.  
You've got brothers around, you're a family man.

The fatherhood of God is the foundation for every family experience.

In the passage before us John has used a literary form, like a poem, to encourage his readers. It is filled with family language; it speaks of children, youths, fathers, and, by implication, John casts himself in the role of grandfather. All this family language is based on God the Father, and it is written to encourage believers in their faith. Let's read 1 John 2:12-14:

I write to you, dear children,  
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

I write to you, fathers,  
because you have known him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,  
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, dear children,  
because you have known the Father.

I write to you, fathers,  
because you have known him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,  
because you are strong,  
and the word of God lives in you,  
and you have overcome the evil one.

Bear in mind that none of these family words have any particular gender significance. There are places in the Bible when masculine and feminine need to be distinguished from each other; there are some important truths that are related to the respective and unique roles of father and mother, brother and sister, and so on. But gender is not at all in view here. He is talking about stages of growth from childhood to youth to older age.

Note also, the two sections into which this poem naturally divides.

John as a grandparent can write to children, youths, and fathers from the position of greater age than theirs. He is writing as a warrior who has survived the wars, from a position of the most senior disciple; the last apostle.

This little poem repeats images in each of its two stanzas. In the New International Version (NIV), which we're using here, it is specifically set out as verse, which is helpful because it makes clear what John is attempting. But there are some ways in which most English translations cover up some interpretive difficulties with this poem.

One question has to do with verse 12: "I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name." In this verse John may be beginning the poem, which would then be two stanzas of three addresses, one each to children, fathers, and youths. Or he may be hearkening back to chapter 2 verse 1 where he says similarly, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin." (The word *teknia*, "little born ones" or little babies, is used seven times in this book. It is one of John's favorite addresses. As a loving grandfather he speaks to everyone as "my dear little children.") If we didn't have the verses that follow, we would naturally assume this is the bookend to the statement that begins chapter 2. "I write this to you so that you will not sin" and "I write to you...because your sins have been forgiven...." are the great twin truths of the gospel. We are free not to sin any longer, and we are forgiven when we do sin-both operate together to give us life. But verse 12 also fits very well with what follows, and so we have to make a decision as to which set of ideas it belongs in. Perhaps John intended it to belong to both.

A second difficulty is that while in most English translations the present tense of the verb "write" is used ("I write to you") throughout both sections actually in Greek the aorist tense is used in the second stanza. There are grammatical reasons why the aorist or past tense may very well be understood to be present, but there is some debate among scholars about this.

Lastly, John uses different terms for "children" in verse 12 and verse 13. (The word for youths and the word for fathers is the same in each stanza.) *Teknia*, which means little babies, as we have just seen, is used in verse 12, while *paidia*, which means children who are school-aged, is used in verse 13. Having noted these things, however, we still find that what John teaches is clear and not difficult to understand.

### **A grandfather's encouragement**

Recall the stirring truths that open this letter. John writes, "God is light; and in him is no darkness at all," and he issues the challenge: "Whoever loves his brother lives in the light...." We have tremendous opportunity to live as God lives, to love as he loves, to experience his life, to pass it on to others.

The opening 1 1/2 chapters are also filled with warning. God cannot lie-"...in him is no darkness at all"-but you and I are fully capable of lying to other people, deceiving ourselves, and calling God a liar. "...Whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him." These great themes of challenge and warning have been preached faithfully by the one who is both witness and apostle, the grandfather who cares enough for his children to tell them of these things.

But this little poem, is all about encouragement: "You're doing great, you're going to make it! What I see in you is beauty. When I look at the little children [let's assume that verse 12 is part of the poem], what I see are those who are experiencing forgiveness and identity in their Father. When I look at the youths, what I see are those succeeding in all the challenges of life. When I look at the fathers among you, what I see are those who have a marvelously deep and rich and unchanging relationship with Jesus Christ. What I see is good!" He doesn't just say, "I hope it works out for you." Isn't it great to have a grandparent to support and believe in you, or someone who has lived with the Lord a long time? I hope what John writes is encouraging to you personally.

### **Children-given grace and identity**

Let's look at these three stages. What word of encouragement does Grandpa want to give to a newcomer to the

faith, one who has just stepped into the glorious freedom of knowing Christ? Two things: First, at the end of verse 12, "Your sins have been forgiven on account of his name." How often do we return to the very first thing-that we're forgiven? We're forgiven not because we deserve to be forgiven, not because we're doing better, but on account of his name. We have an awesome Savior, who has paid the price for our sins. In his name we are forgiven for what we did yesterday, for what we did this morning. There is no end to this remarkable experience of forgiveness, the truth that begins our life in Christ.

The other thing he says of children in the second stanza is, "I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father." In this the identity issue is solved. You know in whose family you are. You know what your name is because you know your Father's name. However dysfunctional and chaotic our pre-Christian world was, the fatherhood of God becomes a source of security for us. Our new identity can't be taken away. Two great truths-we are forgiven and we are accepted by God-are the great foundation on which babies in Christ can start living life.

### **Fathers-captivated by the Lord**

What distinguishes fathers? What is characteristic of the stage of maturity? Interestingly, John makes no changes at all between his first and second addresses to fathers. In the respective stanzas he changes the focus in what he says about little ones and what he says about youths. But he says twice, "I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning."

In chapter 1 verse 1, "that which was from the beginning" refers to the person of Christ. John is saying that maturity is a relationship with God in all his infinite, amazing beauty. It is a relationship that is deep and fulfilling and challenging and new every morning and satisfying enough that we become freer and freer to think of him, not ourselves. It is not just the fatherhood of God that we appreciate, nor the freedom from sin that comes from Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. More and more are we captivated by the Lord's personality, his heart, his creativity, by the beauty and joy that make up who he is.

It is characteristic of children and youths that they are aware of themselves in the way they relate to God, "My sins have been forgiven, and my Father has given me an identity," or, "I am battling the evil one and becoming strong and knowing the word of God." And it's perfectly good; there is no censure of this. John likes children to be children and youths to be youths. But the focus of the grownups is captured by One who is so much greater that they are less and less aware of themselves in his presence.

Now, it isn't as if grownups are different from the youths in the sense of no longer being engaged in battle with the enemy. They aren't put out to pasture someplace. Nor are they any less a child of their Father, nor any less a forgiven sinner. All of the things that apply to the first two stages apply to them as well. It's just that they don't have to invest as much self-focus in doing battle or in recognizing God's fatherhood.

You have probably seen that principle at work in many other experiences of life. When you first engage a problem, it demands a great deal of your attention, and you're very aware of yourself working on it. When I was eight years old my dad took me to a barber shop, opened the door, and said, "Son, go in and tell the barber what kind of haircut you want. The rest of your life you're going to have to get haircuts. Today you're going to start learning how to do so on your own." I remember thinking that it was a big deal at the time; I was shy and I didn't know what I would tell the barber; I thought I would probably get it wrong. But I don't have a lot of trepidation anymore about going to the barber. I still have to look him in the eye and tell him what kind of haircut I want, but it doesn't take a lot of attention. I'm not very much aware of myself doing it.

The first time you drove on the freeway, it was scary, right? There was so much to focus on; you were looking in mirrors and watching the speedometer and paying attention to all the cars around you. It took a lot of effort, and you were very aware of yourself doing it. An experienced freeway driver has to focus on all the same things and make just as many judgments, but the process requires less self awareness.

The other day some friends were telling me about an anticipated audit by the IRS. They were nervous, having never been through the experience before. Shortly after that I talked to someone who had been audited many times, and to them it was an inconvenience but no big deal. IRS audits are something you can get through. It's

a hassle, but nothing more.

The point in John's poem is similar. What is characteristic of fathers is that they have become able to think about someone other than themselves. They are overtaken by their sense of the Eternal One, the One who is from the beginning.

I have a Scripture verse hanging on the wall in my study, Psalm 27:4:

"One thing I ask of the Lord,  
this is what I seek;  
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord  
and to meditate in his temple."

In writing that psalm, David reduced life to one thing that deserved all his attention: to dwell in the presence of God, to gaze on his beauty, with all the emotional satisfaction that goes with that; and to meditate on or to seek to know his thoughts, with all the intellectual satisfaction that goes with that. In spiritual maturity the mind and heart of the Lord himself become completely satisfying.

### **Youths---defeating the evil one**

The third group John addresses is youths. This is that long stage between childhood and seniority. In the first stanza he says, "I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one." In the second stanza, the end of verse 14, he says, "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one." Jesus said of the evil one, or the devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning...he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Death and deception are the trademarks of the evil one. And John sees in the youths before him, in those who are in the growing stage of their faith, who are expanding in their knowledge of God and taking a stand for Jesus' sake, the defeat of the murderer and liar. What a marvelous thing to say! He doesn't say, "Well, you might turn out okay-one in ten do. You've got a chance." Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). We already have the victory in Christ, John the grandfather and Jesus the Lord both speak confidently of the disciples who are making a mark in this world for the sake of life and truth, so that the murderer and liar is defeated. What a marvelous calling it is to minister in a world where the enemy has sown death and destruction, robbing people by broadcasting darkness. Where he has murdered we stand for truth and life.

The second stanza says, "...You are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one." In this church the majority of us are probably spiritual youths. There are a good many new Christians among us, those who are savoring their identity with God as their Father and the fact that their sins are forgiven. There are, thank God, grownups among us, too. This church is very privileged to have a high percentage of fathers. But most of us are in the middle, still aware of ourselves in the battle; still making both good and bad choices. So John says, "You are strong," whether we feel like we are or not. We have strength; we know nothing of power, we know nothing of support, we know nothing of armies behind us that we cannot see. We're strong in the face of the evil one and his machinations.

And the word of God lives in us. The weapon with which we battle the evil one is the truth, to have it live in us, to believe it, to speak it, to be fitted with the word of God and his thoughts, the realities of God and all that he has done. It is the truth of Scripture, not just warm Christian sentiment or religious platitudes, that is our source of strength.

### **Family language**

Family language is the most powerful language in the world. It is on this basis that we will be shaped, made to understand ourselves, motivated, and strengthened to be who we ought to be and experience life as we ought to experience it.

In 2 Timothy Paul encourages a tentative young man who had a great deal of responsibility and unlimited opportunity in front of him, but who didn't believe in himself. The book of 2 Timothy is a bucking-up letter to him. It begins, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus...." That is very reminiscent of the beginning of 1 John: Life appeared-the promise of life in Christ Jesus! "...To Timothy, my dear son...." Timothy was almost certainly abandoned by his father at some early age. Paul became his spiritual father, filling the needed role for a godly senior man who was there for Timothy. He frequently calls Timothy "my dear son" in his writings.

"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did...." Paul himself had fathers, perhaps his own biological father and grandfathers in Judaism who taught him the word of God (although they couldn't have been Christians, but they may have been godly). But Paul is able to look back to all of his forebears in the faith, to David, Moses, Daniel, and the others. He is saying, "I'm not the first one. I stand in a stream of believing humanity. I have fathers, and you're my son." Both of those ideas encouraged Timothy to be who he needed to be. "...With a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." As Paul had forefathers, Timothy had foremothers. They served as inspirations to Timothy, and in the long run God would form himself in this young man because of family ties.

That is why John in this letter talks about believers as growing up from childhood to young adulthood to seniority. It is appropriate for us to remember that ultimately this language is the language that God is going to use to form the life of Christ in us, too. He is our Father, and every family in heaven and on earth derives its name from him. Let's be grateful for the human instruments who have taught us that. Let's see beyond them to him, to the point where we know the One who is from the beginning and we love him more than we love anyone or anything else.

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