



Journey To Faith: The Trip For A Lifetime

by
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Participant's Guide

Journey To Faith: The Trip For A Lifetime

RETREAT SCHEDULE

First Day:

30 minutes	Registration	7:00 - 7:30 pm
15 minutes	Opening Devotion	7:30 - 7:45 pm
60 minutes	Get Acquainted Activity	7:45 - 8:45 pm
60 minutes	What Is Spiritual Growth?	8:45 - 9:45 pm
15 minutes	Fellowship Time	9:45 - 10:00 pm

Second Day:

60 minutes	Breakfast	7:30 - 8:30 am
15 minutes	Morning Devotion	8:30 - 8:45 am
75 minutes	Stages of Spiritual Growth	8:45 - 10:00 am
15 minutes	Break	10:00 - 10:15 am
75 minutes	Marks of Spiritual Growth	10:15 - 11:30 am
30 minutes	Sharing Activity	11:30 - 12:00 pm
60 minutes	Lunch	12:00 - 1:00 pm
60 minutes	Nurturing Spiritual Growth	1:00 - 2:00 pm
15 minutes	Closing Devotion	2:00 - 2:15 pm
15 minutes	Announcements/Wrap-Up	2:15 - 2:30 pm

All Scripture references in this Retreat are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

OPENING DEVOTION

Invocation

Leader: We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Song Suggestion: "To God Be the Glory" The Other Songbook, page 241 or
"Glory Be to God the Father" LW 173 or TLH 244

Psalm 91, read responsively.

Leader: He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
People: I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."
Leader: Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.
People: He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
Leader: You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,
People: Nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.
Leader: A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.
People: You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.
Leader: If you make the Most High your dwelling--even the Lord, who is my refuge--
People: Then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.
Leader: For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;
People: They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
Leader: You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
People: "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name."
Leader: He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.
People: With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."

Song Suggestion: "On Eagle's Wings" The Other Songbook, page 155 or
"His Banner Over Me Is Love" The Other Songbook, page 69 or
"My Faith Looks Trustingly" LW 378 or
"My Faith Looks Up To Thee" TLH 394

Scripture: Hebrews 11: 1-3, 11-16

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand

that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age -- and Sarah herself was barren -- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their god, for he has prepared a city for them.

Prayer: Read responsively.

Leader: Gracious, Heavenly Father, we praise you for the unlimited forgiveness which you have granted us. Father, once again we ask for that forgiveness for the sins we have committed this day.

People: Grant us the courage and the strength to resist temptation.

Leader: Thank you, Father, for the precious blood of your Son, Jesus, which cleanses us from our sins.

People: Help us to remember that Jesus is still with us -- here and now.

Leader: Father, our journey through life in this world is sometimes difficult -- even to the point where we fall into despair.

People: Remind us that your Holy Spirit, the great Comforter, is living in our hearts.

Leader: We rejoice in the knowledge that our faith can continue to grow and expand.

People: Give us faith like that of Abraham.

Leader: Father, how can we ever thank you for the love and fellowship we experience when we come together to worship you and to study your Word?

People: Build and strengthen our bonds of Christian friendship.

Leader: Praise to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever and ever!

People: Alleluia! Amen!

Song Suggestion: "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" The Other Songbook, page 240 or
"If You But Trust in God to Guide You" LW 420, verses 1, 2, and 4
"If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee" TLH 518, verses 1, 2, and 7

Session 1:

What Is Spiritual Growth?

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. 2 Thessalonians 1:3

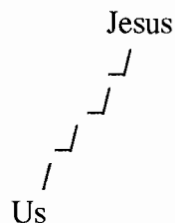
Welcome aboard! We're about to embark on a journey which promises to be both exciting and fun! During the time we are together here we are going to examine the process of spiritual growth. We may sometimes refer to spiritual growth as "Christian growth" or "growing in our faith." We all have ideas of what spiritual growth means to us and should feel free to share those ideas as we attempt to answer the following questions:

- † What is spiritual growth?
- † Why should I be concerned with growing spiritually?
- † Where am I in my own spiritual growth?
- † Why is it important to recognize where others are?
- † How can I nurture spiritual growth in myself and others?

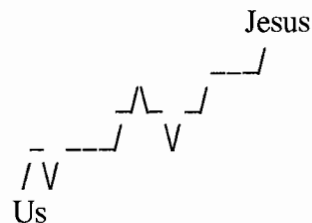
Before we get started, let's review three very important points:

1. Spiritual growth is a never-ending process. You could say the process culminates when we reach our final destination, heaven, but for our time on this side of heaven, we need to consider the growth process as being continuous.
2. Everyone experiences spiritual growth at different times and at different rates. There is no prescribed pattern or standard to which we all conform. God's time, not ours, governs our rate of growth. Don't fall into the trap of comparing yourself to others!
3. We do not always move forward on our **Journey To Faith**. There are times when we reach a plateau or even slip backwards in our growth. For example:

What we THINK should happen:



What REALLY happens:



With that said, let's take a look at what spiritual growth really is as well as what it is NOT.

Spiritual Growth is NOT:

1. **Hyper-religiosity** - What is meant by this is a reliance upon specific behaviors. Simply doing "religious" things such as attending conferences, workshops, and retreats does not necessarily result in spiritual maturity. This is not to say that it is not helpful to attend conferences and seminars in an effort to become more knowledgeable about the Bible and God's will for us. We just should not take them to an extreme. We need to examine the motives behind the things we do. We should ask ourselves if we are doing something "because we've always done it that way" or perhaps "because everyone else is doing it." Just remember, even people who brush their teeth after every meal are "religious!"

✍ What does Matthew 23:5 say regarding motives?

✍ What should our motivation be in all that we do according to Ephesians 6:7?

2. **Leaving everything up to God.** Once again, we are referring to extreme cases. We realize that God is gracious and provides for our every need. We also count on Him as our refuge and our strength in times of crisis. But certainly God expects us to take some action toward solving our problems.

You may have heard the story of the man who was caught in the midst of a terrible flood. As the flood waters engulfed the first floor of his home, some neighbors came by in a boat and offered to take him to safety. "No," he replied, "God will take care of me." As the man decided he'd better move to the second floor of the house, some rescue workers came by in another boat and offered him a ride. "No thanks," he replied, "I'm counting on God to take care of me." Eventually, the man was forced to flee to the roof of his house to escape the rapidly-rising flood waters. At that moment, a rescue helicopter came to his aid. But, once again, the man declined the offer of assistance, stating he was in God's hands. Shortly thereafter, the man was washed away by the flood waters and drowned. When he arrived in heaven and came face to face with God, he asked why God had not provided a means of escape for him. With much patience, God replied, "I sent two boats and a helicopter. What more could you expect?"

✍ How does this story differ from the account of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6 and 7?

✍ What was expected of Noah?

✍ Describe some times in your own life when some action on your part was clearly required in order to solve a problem.

3. **Conforming to some artificial standard of spirituality.** There is no "yardstick" or "checklist" for measuring spiritual growth. When our actions are driven by a desire to live up to some artificial standard, we run the risk of crossing over from spiritual growth to hypocrisy. And, should we begin to apply the same artificial standard to others, we become guilty of judging others.

✍ What does Matthew 6:1-17 have to say about this? List three areas in which acceptable and non-acceptable behaviors are contrasted.

✍ Refer to Matthew 7:1-5 for a reminder about judging others!

Spiritual Growth IS:

1. **God working in us through the Holy Spirit to make us more like Christ.** It's a team effort! God makes His will known to us through His word and the Holy Spirit. Carrying out that will and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts is our responsibility. Several images come to mind which illustrate this. You might picture a series of hearts gradually fading from black (sinful) to white (pure like Jesus):



Or, an image of yourself surrounded by the shape of a dove representing the Holy Spirit:



Use the space below (or the back of this page) to draw your own "picture of spiritual growth." Be sure to include yourself!

Here's a practical example of how this "team effort" works. Let's say you want to do better at your personal devotion and prayer time and you feel that getting up ten minutes earlier each morning would be a good start. In this situation:

Who has planted the seed that makes you desire to spend more time in devotions and prayer?

Who has to set the alarm clock 10 minutes earlier?!?!?!?

2. **God touching our lives and remolding us at deeper and deeper levels.** This is where we see God working specifically in our own lives. For those who feel mature in their faith, there is great satisfaction in looking back to the times where spiritual growth spurts took place. For all of us, there is the promise of exciting times yet to come. We will focus on these stages of growth in our next session.

Why do we desire to grow in our faith?

I'm sure all of us would acknowledge that spiritual growth is a good thing. But, have you ever really thought about why? After all, once we have come to faith and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, our place in heaven is assured. So, why go to all this extra effort? What do the following passages have to say about the reasons we desire to grow in our faith?

◆ Ephesians 6:10-18

◆ 2 Peter 1:3-10 and 3:17-18

◆ James 1:2-8

◆ Galatians 5:22-25

Summary:

Do you feel comfortable with our definition of spiritual growth? What about our reasons for being concerned with spiritual growth? In our next session we'll take a much closer look at the stages of spiritual growth.

MORNING DEVOTION

Song Suggestion: "This Is The Day" The Other Songbook, page 234 or
"O Day of Rest and Gladness" LW 203, TLH 9, verses 1, 2

Psalm 98, read responsively.

- Leader: Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.
- People: The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
- Leader: He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.
- People: Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music.
- Leader: Make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,
- People: With trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn -- shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
- Leader: Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
- People: Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;
- Leader: Let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Prayer:

Dear God, be with us this day as we explore this thing called FAITH which you have given us. Help us to remember that it is a precious gift from you and one to be cherished. Help us to see the importance of nurturing our faith and wanting it to grow. We ask that you would fill our hearts with joy and thanksgiving today. In the name of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Song Suggestion: "I Am Trusting You, Lord Jesus" LW 408 or
"I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus" TLH 428

Session 2:

Stages of Spiritual Growth

Earlier, we defined spiritual growth as God touching and remolding us at deeper and deeper levels or stages. Now we'll learn what those stages are and we'll see if we can't relate them to our own personal growth experiences. These stages are:

INTELLECTUAL GROWTH
ETHICAL GROWTH
DEVOTIONAL GROWTH
EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Though we tend to move from one stage to another, *these stages do not occur sequentially*. There is plenty of overlapping in our lives. Sometimes we circle back through these stages, but with an even deeper meaning. Our path would look something like a spiral staircase. Looking down from the top, it would appear to be just a circle. From the side, though, you can see the progress upward. Also, one stage may last a very long time and we may grow in more than one area at a time. We are dealing in years and not in days! Let's take a closer look at each of these stages.

INTELLECTUAL GROWTH

The intellectual stage is where we first learn to know about Jesus and accept the fact that He is God's Son. We recognize that eternal life is ours through this belief. We arrive at this stage in different ways. For some, it comes very early in childhood -- encouraged by parental guidance. These fortunate Christians can't recall a time when they did not believe in Jesus as their Savior. For others, this knowledge may come later in life. And, sadly, for some, it never comes at all.

For some, the journey through this stage in their faith is a difficult one, full of questions and doubts. Do any of these sound familiar to you? Can you think of other questions people ask?

- ✓ How do I know there is a God?
- ✓ What happens when people die?
- ✓ If there really is a God, why do so many terrible things happen?
- ✓ How do I know the Bible is God's Word?
- ✓ How can I be sure that Jesus is God's Son?
- ✓ God, if you are really there you will _____. (Pick one: heal my sick friend; lead me to a new job; send me a good husband/wife.)

In groups of two or three, answer/discuss the following:

- ⇒ Share when you first knew Jesus to be your Savior.

- ⇒ Did you (or someone you know well) ever struggle with any of the questions listed above? How did you (or they) answer or resolve them?
- ⇒ Do you think this type of questioning is a good sign or a bad sign? Why?
- ⇒ Do you know of anyone currently struggling to arrive at this stage? What might you do to make their journey a smoother one?

Read the account of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. The first half of verse 3 says, "He wanted to see who Jesus was ..."

- ☞ Why do you suppose Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus?
- ☞ What obstacle kept Zacchaeus from being able to see Jesus?
- ☞ What obstacles today keep people from "seeing Jesus"?
- ☞ What can we do to remove those obstacles?

Does this sort of intellectual growth ever really stop? Aren't you always learning something new through Bible study which shows you another aspect of God's perfect plan for your salvation? Share a recent insight with the group.

ETHICAL GROWTH

Here we are talking about being at the point in faith where we want to do what the Bible says we should and to avoid those things it forbids. We become more aware of the temptations around us and the sins which consume us. As with all stages of growth we all arrive at different points at different times. Some examples of what occurs at this stage are:

- ✓ Deciding to tithe or significantly increase the amount of our offerings (recognizing the stewardship role of a Christian.)
- ✓ Acknowledging the need to forgive others, no matter how great the trespass.
- ✓ Feeling the need to confess our sins and the need for repentance.
- ✓ Realizing there are not "big sins" (the ones other people commit) and "little sins" (the ones we commit), just SINS.
- ✓ Discriminating when choosing books, TV shows, movies, etc.
- ✓ Being conscious that our behavior is a witness to all.
- ✓ Recognizing that we need to carry out the great commission.
- ✓ Accepting God's will in our lives by agreeing to take on a new role or responsibility at church.

In groups of two or three take a few moments to add to the list above. Then:

- ⇒ Share with each other times when you have experienced these types of changes in your own thinking or actions.

Read Luke 17:1-5.

- ☞ Who are the "little ones" mentioned in verse 3? Have you ever felt the way the disciples did in verse 5?

Do we ever reach a point where we can be satisfied with the level of our moral or ethical growth? Probably not! This is also an area where we need to be especially cautious about judging others. Most of these increases in ethical growth are very personal in nature. They are commitments made between ourselves and God and are not always shared with others.

DEVOTIONAL GROWTH

The devotional stage is where we realize our need to pray and to study God's Word. We are truly devoted to God.

For example, a large number of Christians regularly attend Sunday worship services, but do not participate in any additional form of Bible study (personal or group.) At some point though, they may choose to participate in a Sunday morning adult study. From there, they may add a small group or home Bible study. At first, Bible study may be looked at as a chore. After a while though, the stories take on new meaning and the lessons hit closer to home. Eventually, the Bible becomes an indispensable resource and a source of comfort.

One's prayer life progresses in much the same way. We may first become comfortable praying in a small group or during family devotions. At some point we may reserve a small amount of time on a regular basis. The amount of time and the regularity may both vary! Eventually, we find ourselves praying throughout the day. No prayer is too small!

We often experience this type of growth through participation in LWML activities. We may begin with a society meeting. Then perhaps, a zone rally or a Christian Growth workshop is held nearby and we decide to check them out. Those are usually such satisfying experiences that we are more eager to take advantage of the opportunity to attend a retreat or convention. And, ultimately, we may experience the indescribable thrill of attending an International Lutheran Women's Missionary League convention!

In groups of two or three:

- ⇒ Share some times when you have felt challenged by the Holy Spirit to increase your devotional efforts. What were the reasons? What have the benefits been?

Take a moment for some personal reflection. Try to trace the path your devotional growth has taken. Then say a prayer of thanks for the progress you have made!

EMOTIONAL GROWTH

As we continue to grow and mature in our faith we tend to go from thinking about what God has done for us or what He expects from us to feeling these things. For instance, thinking about all the blessings which God has poured out upon someone might cause a very emotional response -- perhaps in the form of tears or just an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

Another example might be the way we feel during worship services. The words in a familiar hymn may take on deeper meaning or stir up new feelings in us. A particular phrase in the Lord's Prayer such as "forgive us our trespasses" may bring to our hearts an unconfessed sin. The words of the benediction may truly bring us peace.

This is not to say that anyone who doesn't cry through an entire worship service is not spiritually mature! We all express feelings and emotions differently. The point here is that, over the course of our spiritual growth journey, we can expect a heightened awareness of our very real relationship with the Triune God.

In groups of two or three:

- ⇒ Share some times when you have felt very close to God.
- ⇒ What tends to bring on an emotional response from you?

SUMMARY OF THE STAGES OF GROWTH

Here are a few key points which pertain to all stages of growth:

1. This is a reiteration of what we said in the first section, but it is worth repeating. We all grow at different rates and at different times. Don't be discouraged if you feel that you are not at a particular stage or level of growth at this time in your life. Do be excited at the prospects God has in store for you!
2. These stages do not occur sequentially. They overlap. They crisscross. You will find that advances in intellectual/academic knowledge have an affect on ethical or devotional growth. spurts in devotional growth almost always spawn an increase in emotional growth.
3. Growth is not always progressive. It is, at times, regressive. Don't be discouraged by this! Everyone experiences times when they just don't feel spiritually excited.

Session 3:

Marks of Spiritual Growth

We have already warned of comparing one's spiritual growth to an artificial standard, but sometimes, it is important to be able to know where you are on your journey. There are two primary reasons for wanting to know this:

- ❶ As you look back on your life, you will be encouraged by what you see. Being able to recognize specific ways and times in which God was at work in your life is exciting. Sharing these insights with others is a great way to share your faith.
- ❷ It helps to set goals for ourselves. By recognizing areas where our growth has been sluggish, we may recognize the need to put more emphasis on various aspects of our spiritual life.

So, what characteristics do we find in a person who is spiritually mature? Let's look at a few of them:

Consistency: By this we mean the ability to persevere through the challenges in life, relying on God's power to get us through. These are the people who take Hebrews 12:1-2 seriously. Consistency may also apply to our actions as well as our feelings. With increased faith comes more regular worship attendance, prayer, and Bible study. We begin to alter the priorities in our lives as we "fix our eyes on Jesus" and "throw off everything that hinders."

- ⇒ When have you had to persevere during a challenging time in your life?
- ⇒ In what ways do you feel your spiritual growth was affected during those times?
- ⇒ On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, where would you rate yourself on consistency? Why? List some of the areas where you feel you could improve in the consistency of your spiritual life.

Increased Awareness: This simply means that we are seeing things more and more the way Jesus would -- as though looking through His eyes. Read the story of Jesus healing the blind man in Mark 8:22-26. This situation is somewhat unique in that Jesus touched the man's eyes two times. The first time the man could see, but not very clearly. The second time he "saw everything clearly." We can think of Jesus touching each of us throughout our lifetime -- each time enabling us to see more clearly God's will for us.

There are many examples of how this increased awareness might be evident in our lives. Perhaps there is a person who is particularly hard to get along with or who seems to just "rub us the wrong way." We can be sure that if we ask God to help us in our relationship with that person, we will eventually be able to see her differently. When that does happen, who will have been changed?

Along with increased awareness comes increased compassion for others and an increased sense of urgency regarding unbelievers. We are not only more aware of the feelings and needs of those around us and around the world, but we are more driven to do something about it. We begin to move from "talking the talk" to "walking the walk."

We may become more aware of:

- ✓ A non-Christian co-worker or neighbor for whom we carry a burden.
- ✓ A need to contribute to a disaster recovery effort.
- ✓ A favorite television program which portrays non-Christian values.
- ✓ Political situations about which we need to speak out.
- ✓ Undesirable habits or behaviors (of our own!)

Add to the list things for which you have felt an increased awareness:

The Fruit of the Spirit Becomes More Apparent: This is what is described in Galatians 5:16-26. We should see a decline in the acts of the sinful nature and an increase in fruit of the Spirit.

Verses 19-21 list the acts of the sinful nature: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like."

- ☞ What crosses your mind when you read over this list? Do you tend to check them off against your own behavior?
- ☞ Do you tend to categorize these actions into "big sins" and "little sins?" Which do you see as the "big sins?" The "little ones?"
- ☞ Do you regularly confess your sins (even the REALLY little ones) and ask God to forgive you for them?
- ☞ Read Romans 7:14-25. Do you ever feel the way Paul describes? "Who will rescue me (you, us) from this body of death?"

Verses 22-25 list the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." We realize that being spiritually mature doesn't mean that we will wake up one day and find all of these things present in all aspects of our lives? But, over time, we should be aware of more of the fruit of the Spirit replacing more of the aspects of our sinful nature.

Remember too that these characteristics in us are not just to help us get through the "major" situations in our lives. Each day is full of "minor" situations in which we can practice these things. For instance, imagine the following situations.

- ✓ A slow and inconsiderate driver.

- ✓ A person who seems to be taking entirely too long at the (pick one) supermarket checkout / post office / automatic teller machine.
- ✓ A small child who wants to "help" you with whatever it is you are doing.
- ✓ Someone who makes an unkind remark about you or someone you love.

Now, in groups of two or three, answer the following questions:

- ⇒ How would you react to each of these situations today?
- ⇒ How would your reactions to the above have been different six months ago? Two years ago? Five years ago? Why would your reactions differ?
- ⇒ Share some times when you have felt gifted with the "fruit of the Spirit."

We can think of these marks of spiritual growth as being like the rings you see in the cross-section of a tree. The rings tell the story of the tree's life -- good years and bad years, climate and weather conditions, and many other factors. All these things determine the width of a ring for any given growing season. If at the end of every year, we look back at our own spiritual growth we will see wide variations, also. However, our progress may appear just the opposite of that of a tree. A "good year" for a tree should yield a wider ring (i.e. greater growth) than would a "bad year." For us though, it seems the most trying times bring with them a need to draw closer to God which results in a bigger jump in our faith. While the easier times tend to bring with them more passivity and apathy.

In Romans 5:1-5 we receive encouragement for bearing the difficult times in our lives. What is promised to us through our faith in Jesus Christ? What additional characteristics can be gained through suffering?

SUMMARY OF THE MARKS OF GROWTH

We have seen in this section that spiritual growth is evident through increases in consistency, awareness, and in the presence of the fruit of the Spirit. Take some time to reflect on these aspects in your own life. Also, think of someone you know who you feel is a spiritually mature Christian. What characteristics are evident in that person? Give thanks to God for blessing you with a special role model!

Session 4:

Nurturing Spiritual Growth

Just like any living, growing thing, our faith must be nurtured and encouraged if it is to become healthy and vibrant. If we think of our process of spiritual growth as a journey, as we have here, what things do we need in order to stay on track and assure that we are making progress?

A Compass and Plenty of Fuel: We may not carry a compass in our hands to find our way, but we do have the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit guides and directs us as to what God's will is for us. Furthermore, our direction-finder is perfect. It will never fail as long as we rely on it and not ourselves. We have in our hearts the most sophisticated "guidance system" known to mankind! See John 14:26-27 for a reminder of this promise.

- ☞ How does Romans 12:2 describe God's will?
- ☞ What does Proverbs 20:24 have to say about our direction in life?
- ☞ According to 1 Peter 1:23-25 and James 1:18-25, what is the "fuel" that keeps us going on our journey to faith?
- ☞ How often do you refuel? Is it often enough?

Encouraging Others: We should certainly all be concerned with our own personal spiritual growth. But, we must also do what we can to nurture and encourage the growth of those around us. Just as adults are responsible for the welfare of children, spiritually mature Christians must look after spiritual "infants." Of course a person's age is not necessarily an indication of spiritual maturity! Following are some general guidelines and ideas for nurturing growth in other Christians:

- ✓ Extend personal invitations to Bible study, small group activities, fellowship activities, etc. Face-to-face is best, but a phone call is a good idea, too.
- ✓ Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes to see if you can identify obstacles which are preventing them from being more involved. Is money or transportation a problem? What about child-care needs? Perhaps an overbearing or jealous spouse is involved. Not all obstacles can be removed, but be sure to address the ones over which you have some control.
- ✓ Never give up! You just don't know when the time might be ripe for an invitation to be accepted. The Holy Spirit may have planted some new seeds since the last time you approached a person. Perhaps there has been a change in lifestyle which would allow for more time to participate such as a switch from a full-time to a part-time job, children entering school or leaving the nest.
- ✓ Don't make decisions for someone else. Too often we say things like, "I don't think she'd be interested" or "she's never participated before so I don't think I'll ask." HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Now, let's move from general ideals to some more specific ones.

- ⇒ Recall times in your own life when a more mature Christian encouraged you. What specific things did that person do which encouraged your spiritual growth?
- ⇒ Who do you know that might be considered an "infant" in his or her spiritual growth? (If no one comes to mind, pray that God will direct you to someone!)
- ⇒ What specific things might you do to encourage that person?

Look up the verses listed below and put a check mark in the column(s) to which they best apply. Keep these verses in mind as you think of ways to nurture and encourage the people you know.

Scripture Text	Academic	Ethical	Devotional	Emotional
Exodus 20:1-17				
Psalms 100				
Malachi 3:10				
John 3:16				
1 Corinthians 15:57				
Colossians 4:2				
Ephesians 2:8-9				
Ephesians 4:1-6				
Philippians 4:4-7				
1 Thessalonians 5:16				

SUMMARY OF NURTURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

At the start of this study, we said our goal was to be able to answer the following questions:

- † What is spiritual growth?
- † Why should I be concerned with growing spiritually?
- † Where am I in my own spiritual growth?
- † Why is it important to recognize where others are?
- † How can I nurture spiritual growth in myself and others?

Do you feel that you have reached that goal? Do you feel good about your own personal spiritual growth? If not, do you have an improvement plan in mind? What about the growth of others? Were you able to think of someone who could use some encouragement? Just remember that you aren't on this journey to faith all by yourself. You have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with you every step of the way!

JOHN 14:27:

"PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU; MY PEACE I GIVE YOU. I DO NOT GIVE TO YOU AS THE WORLD GIVES. DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED AND DO NOT BE AFRAID."

CLOSING DEVOTION

Prayer: Read responsively.

Leader: Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you for the experiences we've had this day. We rejoice in knowing that your Holy Spirit has brought us to faith a saving faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

People: Thank you for our faith, Lord.

Leader: We realize that we will encounter obstacles during our lives which will hinder the growth of our faith. We ask that you would stay close by us and remove those obstacles which block our path to you.

People: Keep us moving forward in our faith, Lord.

Leader: We know that we are all at different stages of growth in our faith, Lord. Please help us to recognize those differences but never to judge.

People: Keep our faith pure, Lord.

Leader: We are so grateful for the gifts of the Spirit which we receive through our faith. We ask that you would increase within us the fruit of the Spirit.

People: Keep our faith fruitful, Lord.

Leader: Father, keep us mindful of those around us who may be struggling with their faith or even may have strayed from their faith. Plant in our minds ways in which we might be used to encourage them in their daily walk.

People: Give us an enthusiastic faith, Lord.

Leader: And, Father, help us to remember to live our faith in all that we say and do, giving all glory and honor to you.

People: Help us to share our faith, Lord.

Leader: To God be the glory forever and ever.

People: So be it.

All: Amen!

Song Suggestion: "Lord, Be Glorified" The Other Songbook, page 15

"Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow" LW 461 or TLH 644