

Growth As A Gift

On April 18, 1942, Army Corporal Jacob DeShazer boarded a bomber plane with his pilot, Lieutenant William Farrow, a co-pilot, navigator, and rear gunner. Their mission was to bomb Tokyo and its surrounding cities. When the mission was accomplished, they were to land on the shores of enemy territory and elude the opposing forces as they awaited further instructions. The bombing was a success, but they never received word as to where they were to land. With fuel running low, Lt. Farrow gave the order for all on board to jump. DeShazer made a safe landing and was taken prisoner by ten Japanese soldiers shortly thereafter. Though his life was spared, he was tortured ruthlessly before being placed into solitary confinement at a filthy prison camp. DeShazer remained in captivity for almost two years, struggling with starvation and illness.

After one of his fellow prisoners died of dysentery, Japanese authorities increased the rations of food and allowed the prisoners to have reading material, including a Bible. Because there was only one Bible, DeShazer had to wait six months to get his turn with it. Finally, when his turn came, DeShazer read the Scriptures over and over again. Though raised in a Christian home, faith had never been a personal thing to him. On the final day he was allowed to have the Bible, he read Romans 10:9 one more time, confessed his belief in Christ, and begged for forgiveness. DeShazer became a follower of Christ.

Immediately he realized this demanded changes in his life—both while in a prison camp and beyond (should he ever be released). In an article on DeShazer's life for Today's Christian, Elsie J. Larson shares what happened next:

Bad habits and attitudes don't just go away when a person accepts Christ. One day after the exercise period, DeShazer's guard hurried him toward his cell, shoved him inside, slamming the door on DeShazer's foot. Instead of opening the door, the guard kicked the prisoner's foot with his hobnailed boots.

DeShazer desperately pushed the door until he could free his foot. His mind blazed with rage. However, Jesus' words came to him: *"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you."*

Nursing his foot, DeShazer wished for a while that his mind would go blank; instead, all the Scripture God had helped him memorize flooded into his mind. Calming down, he decided, God commanded me to love. What a wonderful world it would be if we would all try to love one another. I'll try.

The next morning was the test. DeShazer greeted the guard respectfully in Japanese. The guard gave him a puzzled look and said nothing.

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Every morning, the prisoner offered friendly greetings and received no response. Then one morning the guard walked straight to DeShazer's cell, and spoke to him through the door. He was smiling. DeShazer asked about his family. From that time on, the guard treated him with respect and kindness, and once even brought him a boiled sweet potato. Another time, the guard slipped DeShazer figs and candy.

A year after his conversion, in June 1945, the Americans were transferred to a prison in Beijing (Peking). Conditions were worse than in Nanjing (Nanking). DeShazer nearly died of starvation and disease, but he grew spiritually. Like the prophet Daniel, he knelt and prayed diligently.

On August 6, 1945, the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, DeShazer woke up about 7 A.M. and was impressed to pray for peace. At 2 P.M., the Holy Spirit told the prisoner, "You don't need to pray any more. The victory is won." DeShazer thought this was a better way to receive world news than waiting for a radio report. Immediately, his thoughts turned to his captors. Wondering what would happen to the Japanese people, God gave him the answer: he was to eventually return to Japan and teach them about his Savior.

In 1948, Jacob DeShazer returned to Japan with his wife, Florence, as a missionary. By that time, Army chaplains had distributed more than a million tracts containing DeShazer's testimony titled, "I Was a Prisoner of the Japanese." Thousands of Japanese people wanted to see this man who could forgive his enemies. In his first few months in Japan, the former [bomber] had spoken in two hundred places. Soon he, with his wife Florence, helped Japanese Christians to establish churches. Although the church planting was going well, early in 1950, DeShazer longed for a revival for Japan. He fasted 40 days, praying for the salvation of the Japanese.

A few days after he ended his fast, a man came to his home and introduced himself—Mitsuo Fuchida, flight commander of the 360 planes that attacked Pearl Harbor. After reading DeShazer's testimony, Fuchida had purchased a New Testament, read it, and had accepted Christ. DeShazer welcomed him as a brother and counseled him to be baptized. Within a short time, Fuchida became an evangelist, preaching in Japan and all over the world.

In 1959 a dream came true for DeShazer when he moved to Nagoya to establish a Christian church in the city he had bombed. Because of one shared Bible, this man who first came to [bomb] Japan...returned on the wings of a dove to spread the "peace that passes understanding" in that country for the next thirty years.¹

Because of one Bible!

You probably know that although (mainly because of time restrictions) we typically read just one Scripture passage each week, that there are at least four Lectionary readings for each Sunday. Normally we choose one of the four, but I always read them all; and frequently there are very interesting 'connections' between them.

There is an Old Testament reading, a Psalm (sometimes two), an Epistle and a Gospel Reading, and each of them go through various books of the Bible, in a three year cycle. So the Scriptures that are

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'put together' most weeks are almost randomly connected, yet it rarely seems that way.

Today is an important day in the Church calendar – it is Ascension Sunday. This is the day that we remember the Ascension of Jesus to heaven; it is always one week before Pentecost, which is next weekend. The general theme of Ascension Sunday is Power. God's power at work in us. Instead of an Old Testament reading, there is an 'extra reading' from Acts 1 (which we didn't read this morning) that is the story of Jesus' Ascension. On Ascension Day we think of the promises of the Holy Spirit' coming and the resulting 'power surge' in the Church.

We read two other readings today: first, from Paul's wonderful prayer in Ephesians 1 (one of my favorite Scriptures), and a post-resurrection reading from Luke 24.

I'd like to do something a little bit different here today with these two passages, and the Acts 1 passage. Instead of focusing on just one of them, I'd like to point out something that I noticed, a theme, runs through three of them. It is not the main point of any of them, but it is important, nonetheless.

I'll put them up on the screen:

Acts 1:5 is a promise of Jesus just before his Ascension...

For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Ephesians 1: 17 – 19 is the heart of Paul's prayer:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

And **Luke 24: 44 – 45**

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Now, allow me to highlight a few words in these verses:

Acts 1:5

For John baptized with water, but **in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."**

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Ephesians 1: 17 – 19

I keep asking **that** the **God** of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, **may give you** the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. **I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know** the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

And Luke 24: 44 – 45

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

What is at the heart of all three of these Scriptures is something important, something crucial that can – *should*- happen to u; something that apparently is part of every healthy, normal Christian life. And the best I can come up with here to describe it is to call it ‘passive growth’ or as the title of this message, “growth as a gift”.

Because, clearly, that’s what this is. In Ephesians, Paul is writing to people who are not only already believers in Christ, but these are believers whose discipleship and example has been *noticed* outside of the their community.

Paul says in Verses 15 – 16,

...ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all his people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

Ever since I heard about you, I can’t stop giving thanks for you! And I am constantly praying for you, (and here’s the thing) we would expect that the next statement would be something like this: “I’m praying that you would continue in your hard work, your seeking, studying, finding more areas of service to Christ! I’m praying that you would hang in there, work hard, and don’t give up!” wouldn’t you? At least, if you were the pastor?

But instead Paul prays, asking that God would do something *in* these good people that they were, again, apparently unable to do for themselves. “I pray that God *may give you* the Spirit of wisdom and revelation...” I pray that the “eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may *know*... know something more than you know now, something deeper, something more wonderful than you know now.”

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And in the Luke 24 passage, Jesus is teaching them, trying to help them understand what had happened in the past week, or the past three years, or the past 2,000 years. And it doesn't say that "the disciples, with a great effort of will, and a sudden leap of logic, shouted 'Eureka!', and they finally *got it!* It says rather, "Then **he** opened their minds, so they could understand the Scriptures."

This part of their spiritual growth was not a result of anything that they did, (except, perhaps their being open to it.) It was growth as a *gift*. Something that they simply *received*.

And framing all of this is the promise of the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost, which was on the way. This would be the beginning of the 'clothing of the church with the covering and the very mind of Christ.'

I wondered this week, in this context about some of the biblical promises such as Philippians 1:6

“...I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you
will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Again, this is, technically speaking a passive thing from our perspective. This work is not something that we are doing, but it is something that God is doing in us.

Now, as a balance to this, we need to remember that there are also plenty of Scripture passages that talk about our own responsibility and involvement in our growth. Philippians 2:12 comes to mind where Paul instructs us to “work out our own salvation in fear and trembling”. Or Jesus' constant commands to 'follow me', or 'pick up your cross' and so forth.

There is surely an aspect of the expectation of our co-operation in the matter of our spiritual growth. But on the other hand, there is as well, another part of this that is more mystical, even indefinable; it is a gift direct from God.

When Jesus said to his disciples, “It is better for you if I go” could this be what he was referring to? In the amazing plan of God, it was necessary for Jesus to physically *leave*, in order that the Holy Spirit

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might come. And through the Holy Spirit comes this aspect of growth in Christ that we would not have otherwise.

It wasn't simply that one Bible that resulted in that extraordinary tale that I opened up with here this morning; it was one Bible *and the power of the Holy Spirit* opening minds, leading people, confronting them with their sin as well as the amazing grace that was available to all. The people needed to *read it*, they needed to think – but so much of this was Growth as a Gift from God.

A 2008 Harris Interactive survey sponsored by CarMD.com found that 10 percent of the 2,041 U.S. adults polled were driving a car whose “Check Engine” light was on. An alarming 50 percent of those whose cars were showing signs of an impending breakdown indicated the light had been on for over 3 months. Another 10 percent said the light had been on between 1–2 months. Kristin Brocoff, marketing manager for CarMD.com, says it's a particularly sobering statistic, because “the U.S. government put the on-board diagnostic system in place to...alert drivers when their vehicle was emitting too many emissions or had a problem. This light can signify something potentially costly and possibly dangerous to the passengers or others on the road. It's important that drivers treat it seriously.”

The survey found drivers had a whole litany of excuses for ignoring the light. Some turned a blind eye toward the indicator because the severity of the problem seemed questionable due to the car “running fine.” Others pointed to a lack of sufficient funds. Still others simply noted that they just didn't have time to worry about diagnostics and subsequent repairs.²

There is a similar kind of diagnostic system that has been placed inside of each of us. It is God's Spirit working with us, to reveal, to clarify, to expose, to teach... this is the function of the Holy Spirit. I have a high enough opinion about the value of our free will that I don't believe, for the most part that this inner working of the Spirit is something that we can not ignore. I don't think it helps us without our acceptance.

² Associated Press, “Ten Percent of U.S. Drivers Have Their ‘Check Engine’ Light On,” www.yahoo.com/news (6-10-08), and “Snapshots: How long the light's been on,” USA Today (6-22-08).

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I believe that we surely choose our own destinies and the course of our lives. But how much better it would be for us to listen carefully to that inner voice? How important is it then, to find quiet time in our days for reflection and inner listening, to allow the Spirit 'the space' that is needed to teach us God's truths, to lead us – to open *our* minds, to enlighten the eyes of our hearts that we may surely *know* the the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance in all his people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

May we all continue to seek, knowing that God's promise is that in doing so, we will find.

Amen