

Growing Young – Part I – *Ephesians 4:20-23*

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I. GROWING OLD

I want to start today by telling you the story of a young girl that any of us could know, and I'm sure most of us can relate to in many ways. I want to share with you how she grew old in her ways of thinking.

Now this girl was born to parents who attended church regularly, had many Christian friends and who genuinely seemed to be very nice and well-adjusted people. Her early years at home were quite happy and like most kids she had a pretty optimistic view of life and found it very easy to trust her parents, her teachers and generally most people she met. Also like most kids she was pretty self-centered and strong-willed and very focused on getting what she wanted and trying to meet her own wants and needs even at the expense of others. And, of course, she was very troubled and upset when things didn't seem fair to her or when other kids seemed to have more toys or win more prizes or get better rewards than she did. She was also into Barbies and princesses and being as stylish and beautiful as possible. So all in all she was just an ordinary everyday girl living a typical American life.

But as she grew older life started to take a toll on her young mind. First she began to notice that no matter how many toys or Barbies or gifts she got, she always felt empty inside. She would get her hopes up so much for the next thing she wanted, but when she got it she always felt let down and unsatisfied. As she grew older she of course moved on from Barbies and chased after lots of other things, but the empty feeling remained every time.

Her mom and dad talked to her a lot about how material things can never satisfy and fulfill us, but when she watched them in their lives it seemed like they were doing the very same thing and spending all of their energies trying to get more things and build up more money and finally get that dream house they'd always wanted. They talked about God occasionally and of course they went to church every Sunday, but He seemed more like a side note in their lives while they spent most of their energies and time on other things.

Now when she was in junior high she started having some problems with a few of her friends from church. When she was at church they were really nice to her and seemed to be her good friends, but at school they would ignore her and wanted nothing to do with her. They would even say really rude things to her when she would try to be their friend and talk to them at school. She began to wonder if this church thing was really real or if people were just playing a religious game.

Also around that time she even more started questioning her faith when her science teacher opened up a textbook and started arguing that it had been scientifically proven that evolution is a fact and that the Creation account in the Bible is simply religious myth and a great story to tell your children at home. Rather than questioning that claim and realizing that no one can go back in time and scientifically prove that evolution has occurred, and rather than considering the gaping holes in the theory of evolution, she accepted the erroneous argument that since educated scientists say it's true, it must be true.

Then in 9th grade the biggest challenge she had ever faced in life arrived in a big way. She came home from school one day and found her mom crying uncontrollably. Her mom broke the news to her that her dad had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The doctors thought he probably only had a year to live at the most. It was the most unsettling moment of her life. The church immediately began praying fervently for him and he went through all the treatments available. And for awhile the cancer went into remission and even after two years her dad was still with them. But soon the dreaded news came that the cancer was back in full force. Within 3 months her dad passed away. So many emotions flooded through her over the next few months and year... sadness... anger at God... emptiness... loneliness... despair.

Lots of scars were formed on her heart during this time and rather than seeking God and crying out for Him, she began to distance herself from Him. Though she had gone through the motions of accepting Christ as her Savior when she was 6 years old, she had never really grown in her faith or even felt that it was real at all. And now she let this experience drive her even further away from God.

By now she was a senior in high school and she continued struggling through life and feeling empty and lonely and wondering what she was going to do with her life after high school. During this time she tried to find some comfort in her friends, and parties and lots of other diversions that were available to her. She also met a young man who really seemed to love her and think that she was the greatest thing ever. It was so refreshing to feel loved by a man and to have someone to help fill the void that had been left by her dad. But as their relationship developed it soon became clear that her new boyfriend wanted more than just companionship.

Now she had been trained very well in church that according to God's Word sex before marriage is wrong and harmful in people's lives. She tried to communicate this to her boyfriend, but he didn't understand it and of course he didn't like it. He told her that he loved her so much and that if she really loved him back, she would not hold this part of herself back from him. He told her that she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with and so there was no reason why they should have to wait until they went through an official ceremony. And what she didn't realize and didn't communicate to him was that if he really loved her, he would honor her morals and convictions and not ask her to compromise her beliefs in order to meet his physical desires. So being weak and distant from God, she gave herself to him.

And you probably know the rest of the story. When they graduated from high school he informed her that they needed to go their separate ways and that they just weren't right for each other. And the scars that formed in her heart at that point were the deepest and most painful she had ever had. She had completely given herself to a person, only to have him walk away and conclude she wasn't good enough.

I share this story today to give us an example of how that callous forms in our heart that we talked about last week in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17 to 19. This story I told you may be one person's experience. But the fact remains that every one of us faces a wide variety of difficulties and challenges as we go from being a trusting child to a full grown adult with lots of scars and damaged areas and usually a mindset that makes it extremely difficult to trust.

In short, the story I just told you illustrates the process of growing old in our minds... Moving from childlike faith to hardened skepticism and doubting... This is how our we end up walking in the futility of our minds, darkened in our understanding, excluded from the life of God because of ignorance and hardness of heart; calloused and giving ourselves over to sensuality and the pursuit of whatever brings us pleasure or gives us a temporary reprieve from the pain of life. Without that close relationship with God and His work in our lives, we all end up walking in darkness and becoming hard of heart and calloused.

But the good news I have for us today is that God doesn't leave us there. When we come to Christ, He gives us the opportunity to grow young again. And that's what I'm going to call our message today: **Growing Young – Part 1**. And that should also tell you that were going to talk about growing young for at least the next two weeks. What we'll be talking about is the process of being renewed in the spirit of our minds. So if you haven't already, turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4, and today we'll be focusing on verses 20 through 23. Let's read verses 17 through 24 to get started:

17 So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, 18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

II. HEARING AND LEARNING CHRIST

As we pick up in verse 20 today, I want you to notice that before we can start the process of growing young, there's something absolutely essential that must happen first: we need to learn Christ. This process of learning Christ starts when we first hear the good news of salvation through faith in Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Last week I provided an opportunity for anyone who was here to take a big step and dive into a lifelong relationship with Christ. And if anyone here today has still never done that, please take the time to talk to me afterwards or talk to one of the deacons or someone else you know who has a relationship with Jesus Christ. Without coming to new life through faith in Christ, the only option for you is to continue growing old and walking in the futility of your mind. Growing young is only possible in relationship with Christ.

So the process of learning Christ starts at salvation, but it continues for the rest of our lives. Now if you look at verse 21, the first part of learning Christ involves hearing Him. We each need to hear the message Christ is speaking directly to each of us. One of the best ways to hear that message from Christ himself is to read the Gospels: the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If you're wanting to learn who Christ really is and hear what He has said about the way of salvation and about walking with Him and about how life operates, then you need to get to know Him through the permanent record He has left with us of the time when He became flesh and dwelt among us.

I particularly like the book of John for someone who's just getting to know Christ and what He's about, because it's a very organized and methodical presentation of the essential facts about who Christ is. So if any of you out there are new believers or maybe just here trying to figure out what Christ and Christianity is all about, spend some time in the book of John and ask God to open up your eyes to understand the truths that are written there. You will find truths that not only will lead you to new life in Christ, but will also help you grow in your newfound faith.

So we not only hear Christ in the Gospels and in the rest of Scripture, but He's also alive and well right now (Amen?!) and still speaks to each of us today. Many times it's through His Word, but He also still speaks to us personally and guides and directs us in every moment of our lives as we walk by His Spirit and learn to listen to and follow His leading. But the key to recognizing and following His voice is that whatever He tells us and directs us to do will always be consistent with the truths of Scripture. If you ever hear a voice telling you to do something that contradicts Scripture, then you can know it's not the voice of Christ. That's why we need to learn and know His Word and let it permeate our minds and thoughts.

Now the second part of learning Christ according to verse 21 is being taught in Him. This part of the process involves mature believers teaching the truths of Scripture in ways that we can understand and apply to our lives. Sermons can be very useful in this process as pastors spend time on in-depth study of Scripture and then share the truths they've learned with the believers under their care. Another very effective part of being taught in Him can be small group or one-on-one Bible studies. One of the benefits of being taught through this method is the opportunity for discussion and questions and each person being able to share what God has shown them in their own study.

But whatever the method of being taught in Christ, the important thing is that we are learning the truths of Scripture from those who are mature and solid in their faith and have a well-rounded knowledge and understanding of the Bible as a whole. By being taught in Christ we can get a strong foundation in the Word of God that will keep us from falling away when life gets difficult or when Satan tries to throw us off track with lies and by creating doubts in our minds. This is why it's so important that new believers, and mature believers for that matter, find a church where they can fellowship with others who believe in Christ and have opportunities to regularly hear the teaching of God's Word. We're not meant to go it alone and being alone in our faith makes us very vulnerable to attacks from predators and those who want to belittle or destroy our faith in God.

And as we look again at verse 21 we see the reason why hearing Christ and being taught in Him is so important. We need to hear Christ and be taught in Him because truth is in Him. In this world we're surrounded by lies every day. Has anybody had experience with lies lately? We experience lies quite often when we interact with other people, some white and some boldly intentional. We hear lies from our kids. We hear politicians telling lies constantly. We hear lots of lies on TV...advertisements promote every imaginable item as being the next thing we need or the gadget that will finally solve our problems for only \$19.95! And movies and TV shows portray lifestyles that are recklessly immoral and out of step with God's design. And in fact the worldview that the majority of the world now accepts has been developed based upon the false assumption that there is no God and that everything we see around us is just the result of random accident and chance. And this worldview is being taught to our kids in school. Lies are all around us.

So when we find a completely reliable and trustworthy source of truth, we should grab onto it with all that we have and learn everything we can about it. We should see it as a light shining in a dark place and run towards it. John chapter 1 verses 14 to 17 gives us a beautiful picture of the fact that truth is found Jesus Christ:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

Jesus Christ, the only begotten God, is full of grace and truth. Through Moses we understood our sinfulness and we got an idea through the Law of God's holiness and what His standards are. But through Jesus Christ grace and truth were finally realized. Jesus Christ, through His life and actions and words, gave us a beautiful picture of what God is really like. He showed us full and profound truth about God that had never been understood before. He showed us that we could never keep the Law and live up to God's perfect standards, and that the Law was really intended to show us our own sinfulness and our need for a Savior. It was meant to lead us to Christ.

Do you want to know what God the Father is like? Then get to know Jesus. Jesus is truth like we've never known it before. He's the Light of the world. He illumines... He brings to light... He shows us the way to go. And just in case you think He can only provide you with a little guidance and maybe a small dose of wisdom to help you on your way, consider Colossians 2, verses 2 to 3, where Paul talks about his intense efforts to bring encouragement and growth to believers through Christ. He tells us that he does it all for this purpose:

That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Paul desire is that believers will come to see and understand that perfect truth and ALL the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in one central location: Jesus Christ Himself. In our quest for truth and meaning in life, our focus must always be on knowing and walking with and loving Jesus Christ. He's the mother lode of truth and wisdom and knowledge and the only One who can bring meaning and direction and fulfillment to our lives.

III. LAYING ASIDE THE OLD SELF

Now as we move on to verse 22 of Ephesians chapter 4, we see Paul reminding us that if we've truly learned Christ correctly and have come to know and love Him and understand His will for our lives, we'll realize that our old way of living and thinking needs to go... It needs to be taken off like dirty clothes... It was crucified with Jesus Christ on the cross and we need to treat it like the dead thing it is and bury it forever. We need to take that old self that has grown old through the choices we've made and through our efforts to live life without God, and leave it behind for good.

This old self, also known as our flesh or the natural man, has had plenty of time to run our lives and has failed miserably to bring results and fulfillment and meaning. Scripture tells us a lot of things about what this old self is like and we talked extensively about it last week. We're told that it's decaying or growing old... It's looking at what is seen and ignoring what is not seen with the eyes... It's walking by sight, not by faith... It does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness... It's hostile to the Word of God and spends lots of time trying to ignore it's truths and it's applicability to our lives... There is nothing good in our old self... And it cannot please God no matter how many "good deeds" it tries to do... And the only thing the old self brings to us is death and emptiness.

Paul tells us that it's time to leave or old ways of living and thinking behind and instead embark on a journey of growing young again.

IV. GROWING YOUNG IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND

Now you've heard me talk about this concept of growing young several times now and some of you may be wondering where in the world I got that concept out of the passage we're looking at today in Ephesians chapter 4. And I'd be happy to tell you, but then I'd have to kill you! No, in all seriousness, the answer is found in verse 23, where Paul introduces us to the alternative of living in our old self and its emptiness and futility. He tells us to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. And it's this word, "renewed," that brings us the concept of growing young.

The Greek word here is *ananeo-o*, and according to *Vines*, it means "to renew or make young." Here we have a beautiful, descriptive word offered by the Lord as a vivid contrast to the way we used to live with an old, crusty, hardened heart, calloused and numb. God is offering us an opportunity here to reverse the spiritual aging process and leave behind the skepticism and doubting and bitterness and negativity of a hardened old person and return to simple childlike faith and sensitivity and love and moldability, trusting in the hands of our loving Father and our perfect Savior, Jesus Christ. He is calling us to grow young again in the spirit of our minds.

Now you may wonder if this growing young is something that happens instantly at salvation or whether it's something that takes place over time. Wouldn't it be great if we were just instantly young again?! Well, to get the answer that question let's look briefly at 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 verses 16 to 18, another passage that speaks of this growing young process. Paul says there:

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

This is such a great passage for our topic today because it's talking about exactly the same thing Paul has been sharing with us in Ephesians chapter 4. We see a reference to our outer man or our old self that is decaying or growing old, and then our inner man or our new self that is being renewed day by day.

And what's clear from verse 18 is that this renewal or growing young is NOT instantaneous, but rather something that occurs over time, day by day. Our inner man is being renewed. It's a process that's going on right now and will continue day by day throughout our lives. And isn't it a great promise and an encouraging hope, that while our bodies may be growing old, our inner man and the spirit of our mind can be going the opposite direction as we come to a deeper and deeper knowledge of Christ and walk in that day-by-day, moment-by-moment, love relationship with Him... As we find our wisdom and knowledge in Him and rely on Him for the truth we need to live our lives and face whatever life brings our way.

Notice also in the 2nd Corinthians passage that afflictions and challenges and difficulties do not need to de-rail this process of growing young. Remember the girl in our example I gave you at the beginning of today's message. The difficulties and challenges and mistakes in her life were causing scars and hardness of heart and bitterness and a "growing old" process. But when we leave our old self behind and start the renewal process, the afflictions and difficulties can actually be used by God to enhance the growing young process as we keep our eyes and our hope fixed on our Savior and on eternal things and experience Christ walking with us and carrying us through even the most difficult of circumstances, working each of them together for good in our lives.

This is the process that Paul describes clearly in Romans 5:3-5. He says:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

We are truly growing young in the spirit of our minds when we can rejoice in sufferings, because knowing that God is using them for good in our lives and that He is developing our character and showing us time and time again that He is able to see us through even the darkest of times. Truly that is something the old self could never do. And with each experience we walk through, as we see God through His Spirit giving us the power and the strength and the ability to continue to honor and trust Him, our hope grows and we grow younger in our minds and stronger in our faith and draw closer and closer in our relationship with Him.

Hope grows the more and more we see how much God has truly changed us, and how far He has taken us away from our old self and our old ways of living and thinking.

Now of course in every situation and difficulty we always have the choice of how we're going to respond. Our old self will try to rise up and lead us into doubt and bitterness and anger against God and into questioning His love and His motives. And that's the choice we will face time and time again. Will we go back to our old ways and return to the growing old process? Or will we take off that old self and instead choose to trust the One who loves us and knows us and promises to walk with us and strengthen us and make us young again in our minds as we do it?

What kind of challenges are you facing in your own life today? How do you find yourself responding and interacting with God? Would you say your response is more in line with your old self or with the new self that God has created for you in righteousness and holiness? The Lord knows how hard it is for us to leave behind our old ways and to trust Him even when things seem unfair or overly harsh or more than we can handle. Our Savior knows what it's like very well because He Himself walked through some of the most unjust, unfair and utterly painful experiences when He dwelt among us and eventually walked to the cross to endure the very wrath of God the Father on our behalf. Believe me, He can relate to what each of us is going through and feeling on a day-to-day basis and in those moments when life and death seem to crash in around us.

Let's choose to trust Him and draw near to Him and believe in simple faith that He will walk with us through every difficulty and every joy and every experience in our lives and in the process cause us to grow young again and leave behind our calloused hearts and our doubting and our bitterness and blaming of others. Why would we ever want to choose to grow old and bitter and hard, when we've been offered the beautiful opportunity to grow young again? The choice is ours.

Now we have a lot more to discover about this growing young process, and next week we'll continue looking at what Scripture teaches us about being renewed in the spirit of our minds. But I want to leave you today with one last encouraging thought. I just love how the Bible is so consistent throughout and as I was researching the use of the word, "renewed," I came across a passage in Psalm 103 that will give us a great ending thought for today.

You may remember that I preached a couple of messages on Psalm 103 after I finished preaching through Ephesians chapter 3. I believe the Lord drew me to that Psalm because, like the first three chapters of Ephesians, it reminds us of some of the blessings and gifts that God has generously poured out on His children. I felt it was important at that time to draw our attention to God again and what He's done for us and the gifts and tools He's provided for us, before we started examining the last half of Ephesians, where Paul deals with our behavior and what a walking worthy life looks like.

This is because without that understanding of who we now are in Christ... and of the power of the Spirit dwelling within us... and of the depth of God's love for us... and of the fact that it's only through God and His work within us that we can ever live a walking worthy life... I was concerned that chapters 4 through 6 of Ephesians would end up sounding just like a big to do list of rules that we just needed to try to crank out in our own strength and willpower.

So as we end today, I want to take us back briefly to Psalm 103 and look at verses 2 to 5, where we see another Scriptural reference to being renewed. And what I want you to see here is that God is fully committed to bringing about this renewal or growing young process in your life. Here in these 4 verses we see 6 amazing benefits that God is providing to each of us in order to bring about the growing young process in our lives and cause us to rise up in His power to the point where we will mount up with wings like eagles. Let's read Psalm 103, verses 2 to 5:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.

Can you see in these verses God's commitment to you and His deep love for you and the way He's working diligently to cause you to grow young in the spirit of your mind and rise up in His power? He forgives all your sins. He is your Healer, spiritually and physically. Through Christ He has taken you out from under His wrath and removed you from the path that was leading to hell and eternal punishment for your sin. He daily pours out His lovingkindness and compassion on you in a multitude of ways. He provides for you and takes care of your daily needs and provides you with many other blessings and gifts to satisfy your years and

show you His love. And He does these things so that you will grow young in the way you think and live, and learn to rise up in His power and live as the new creation He has created you to be, leaving your old self behind and stepping into the beautiful new self He has created for you. What an amazing God we have and how blessed we are to be His children!