

Chapter 7

Stages of Spiritual Growth: The Recursive Pattern of Grace:

1 John 2:12-14

To this point, John has been quite direct, offering tests of authentic faith. Walk in the light, not in darkness. Obey his commands. Love your brother, because hatred disqualifies your claim to be in the light.

These aren't suggestions.¹

While John aims these tests at false teachers, even true believers feel their searching power. The standards are clear and uncompromising. Fellowship with God depends on walking in the light. Knowing Christ is proven through obedience. Living in love distinguishes children of light from children of darkness.

Just when readers might feel crushed by these demands, John pauses.

Not to lower the bar. Not to soften the requirements. But to remind us of what God has already accomplished.

The light that exposed our need in chapters one and two now empowers our growth, giving strength for battle and deepening our communion with God.

The Word Before Us

First John, chapter 2, verses 12 through 14:

"I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 97. Stott explains that John's tests are not conditions we must fulfill in order to become Christians, but evidences that we are Christians.

who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." (1 John 2:12-14 ESV)

Listen to what John does here.

Three groups: children, fathers, young men. Not permanent categories but markers of spiritual formation.

Each receives affirmation. Each is reminded of what grace has already accomplished.

And through the repetition, that ancient Hebrew pattern of saying it twice, John establishes certainty.

What God begins, he sustains.

A Note on Terms and Interpretation

Before we explore each stage, two clarifications are needed.

First, the Greek terms. Masculine in form (little children, young men, fathers) but inclusive in function. This is spiritual family language, not biological designation. These stages describe all believers, women and men alike.²

Second, "little children."

Scholars debate this. Does John mean everyone, as he does elsewhere when he calls all his readers "little children"? Or does he mean a distinct group?

Some read "little children" here as John's affectionate umbrella term for the whole church, and he often uses it that way, but the repeated threefold structure in this passage suggests distinct groups at distinct depths of maturity.

Look at the structure. Children, young men, fathers. Then again: children, young men, fathers. Three parallel groups, not one large group plus two subsets.

² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 221. Wallace notes that masculine plurals in Koine Greek commonly functioned as generic plurals including both genders.

Look at the characteristics. Children know forgiveness and the Father. Young men overcome through the word. Fathers know the eternal Christ. These aren't random attributes but specific markers of formation.

We take the view that here, in this passage, John distinguishes between those new to faith and those more mature.³

The context guides us.

The Shift from Prose to Poetry

But notice something else. The form itself changes.

Up until now, John has written in flowing paragraphs, building arguments, drawing distinctions, setting tests. But here, in verses 12 through 14, the prose breaks into stanzas. The sentences become rhythmic, repetitive, almost liturgical.

Read it aloud and you'll feel the cadence.

"I am writing to you, little children." "I am writing to you, fathers." "I am writing to you, young men."

Then again:

"I write to you, children." "I write to you, fathers." "I write to you, young men."

This is Hebrew parallelism.⁴ The pattern of the Psalms, of prophetic oracle, of the benediction, of covenantal declaration. John is not simply informing. He is pronouncing. Each restatement drives the truth deeper, settling it into the foundations of the heart.

Why the shift? Because John moves from testing to testimony. From "here's what you must do" to "here's what God has done." The poetic form matches the pastoral purpose.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 73-74. Boice argues that John is addressing three distinct groups at different stages of spiritual development, not using 'children' as a general term for all believers.

⁴ Boice, *Epistles of John*, 75. Boice notes that John's repetitive style here reflects Hebrew parallelism, the foundational pattern of Old Testament poetry where truth is stated and then restated for emphasis.

These aren't aspirational standards. They're accomplished realities. The repetition declares: This is certain. This is settled. This is who you are.

What does John reveal about each stage of this spiritual formation?

Stage 1: Little Children - Forgiveness and Fatherhood

"I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I write to you, children, because you know the Father."

John begins where every life in Christ begins, with the youngest members of God's family. And he doesn't start with what they must do. He starts with what has been done for them.

"Your sins are forgiven for his name's sake."

Not because you've earned it. Not because you've proven yourself. Not because you said the right prayer. Not because you walked an aisle or filled out the evangelist's card. But for his name's sake.⁵

For the glory of Christ, because of who he is and what he accomplished. This is the bedrock. Forgiveness is the foundation of everything else.

But notice the pairing. First, *"Your sins are forgiven."* Then, *"You know the Father."*

These aren't two separate truths. They're inseparable.

Forgiveness opens the door to relationship. To know God as Father is the fruit of having sins forgiven through the Son. This is adoption language.⁶ Brought from alienation into intimacy, from condemnation into family.

The child doesn't simply know about the Father. They know the Father. It's relational, personal, immediate.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 168. Lloyd-Jones emphasizes that everything in the Christian life starts with what God has done for His name's sake, not what we have done.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 233. Bavinck explains the forgiveness of sins is the gateway to adoption; we cannot know God as Father apart from reconciliation through the Son.

"*Abba, Father*" isn't a theological statement. It's the language of home. This isn't passing acquaintance but ongoing, deepening communion with the Father through the forgiveness won by the Son.

The Wonder That Never Fades

The mature believer doesn't graduate from needing forgiveness. They don't outgrow dependence on grace. If anything, their awareness of sin deepens, and so does their gratitude for mercy. The father in the faith still prays, "*Forgive us our debts*" (Matthew 6:12 ESV). The seasoned saint still marvels that God calls them his own.

Childlike faith isn't naïveté. It's the refusal to let familiarity erode wonder. It's trust that remains unguarded even after disappointment.

It's the posture Jesus commended: "*Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matthew 18:3 ESV)

Stage 2: Young Men - Word-Anchored Strength

"I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." (1 John 2:13-14 ESV)

Now John turns to those in the thick of battle.

The young men in the faith are marked by three intertwined realities: they have overcome the evil one, they are strong, and the word of God abides in them.⁷

Notice the progression.

First, John declares their victory: they have overcome, a settled victory with ongoing effect.

Then he reveals the source: "*You are strong, and the word of God abides in you*" (1 John 2:14 ESV).

⁷ Stott, *Letters of John*, 100. The word of God 'abiding' in believers is John's characteristic way of describing the permanent residence of divine truth in the heart.

The victory flows from strength. The strength comes from the word dwelling richly within.

This is not occasional Bible reading. This is saturation. God's word has taken up residence, shaping thought, guiding action, steadying the soul in the daily battle against sin, deception, and spiritual opposition.

The Nature of the Battle

The evil one is named directly.

This isn't vague spiritual struggle or internal doubt. It is opposition from a personal adversary whose works Christ came to destroy (which we will cover in 1 John 3). And the young men have overcome, not by cleverness or willpower, but by the word that abides in them, the same Word who has already defeated the enemy.

This is the stage of active engagement.

- Where the child rests in forgiveness, the young warrior applies truth.
- Where the child trusts the Father's voice, the young man wields the Father's word.

They have been tested, and the testing has revealed that God's truth holds.

Think of young David facing Goliath, not with Saul's armor but with stones and the name of the LORD. This is not passive reception. It is active faithfulness.

The young in the faith are learning to stand firm, to hold ground, to remain faithful when the pressure mounts.

Strength That Comes From Abiding

The strength is not self-generated.

John is careful: *"You are strong, because the word of God abides in you."*

In this verse, "the word of God" refers first to God's message: the gospel and apostolic teaching they have heard from the beginning. When that word is believed, memorized,

meditated upon, and lived out, it becomes the believer's defense and weapon, "*living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*" (Hebrews 4:12 ESV).

Within the wider Johannine story, this abiding word is never detached from the One who speaks it. Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh. He makes Himself known through the message about Him. As that message is received and obeyed, the Spirit uses it to draw believers into deeper fellowship with Christ Himself.

Through this abiding word, the young men are strengthened by Christ Himself. The word becomes internal infrastructure, shaping reflexes, forming convictions, anchoring identity. It produces both strength for battle and discernment for navigation, enabling them to distinguish truth from deception.

This is how they overcome: not through human willpower but through the transforming presence of God's word within.

The Greek perfect tense here, *nenikēkate*, captures both realities: the certainty of victory already won in Christ and the ongoing engagement required to stand firm in that triumph.⁸ The mature believer returns to battle not to re-win old victories, but to experience Christ's victory at ever-deeper levels of trust and dependence.

Stage 3: Fathers - Deep Communion with the Eternal One

"I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning." (1 John 2:13-14 ESV)

John's address to the fathers is the shortest, and the most profound. He says the same thing twice, word for word. "*You know him who is from the beginning.*"

No variation. No elaboration. Just repetition, driving home one central, immovable reality.

⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 574-576. The perfect tense *nenikēkate* indicates a completed action with results that continue into the present.

The Depth of Knowing

"Him who is from the beginning" takes us back to John's opening: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes" (1 John 1:1 ESV). This is the eternal Christ. The Word made flesh, the one who was with God and was God, the one through whom all things were made.

The fathers don't just know about Christ. They know Christ relationally. Not οἶδα (oida), intellectual knowledge, but γινώσκω (ginōskō), the experiential knowing that comes through relationship.⁹

To *know him* is the goal. Not just to know his commands, his promises, his character. But to know him. Personally. Deeply. With the kind of intimacy that comes only through long years of walking together, suffering together, abiding together.

The Mark of Maturity

Spiritual fathers aren't marked by theological prowess or ministry accomplishments. They're marked by intimacy with God.

They've spent years in his presence. They've learned his voice. They've seen his faithfulness through seasons of light and shadow. And that knowing has shaped them, quieted them, deepened them, anchored them.

This is the maturity Jesus spoke of: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3 ESV).

Eternal life isn't a future destination. It's present communion.

The mature are not anxious to prove themselves. They're not driven by applause or threatened by criticism. They know the One who matters most, and his opinion settles all others.

⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 358. The verb γινώσκω in Johannine literature typically denotes experiential, relational knowledge as opposed to οἶδα which indicates cognitive awareness or factual knowledge.

The Role of Spiritual Fatherhood

But maturity isn't for self-congratulation. Fathers exist to serve the family. They carry wisdom, the kind forged in long obedience. They've seen patterns. They've learned what matters and what doesn't. They know when to speak and when to stay silent.

And they mentor. They don't hoard their knowledge. They pour it out. They make time for the child learning to trust. They encourage the young warrior in the thick of battle. They model what it looks like to love God with steady, unhurried devotion.

Paul captures this role: *"For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers"* (1 Corinthians 4:15 ESV). Fathers are rare, not because maturity is unattainable, but because it requires what our age resists: time, patience, and sustained presence with God.

The Recursive Pattern: Spiraling Together in Koinonia

But what pattern emerges when we step back and view these stages as a whole?

Most modern theologians unpack this passage linearly, progression like a ladder, where one rung is left behind as we step onto the next.

This reading has merit. John does present these categories in developmental order. We should be growing, maturing, bearing fruit.

Yet something puzzles us.

John addresses all three groups simultaneously, present tense, as current realities in the church. He doesn't write, "You were children" or "You will become fathers." Instead, he declares *"I am writing to you, children... young men... fathers"*, all present, all together, in one body.

They aren't three separate classes meeting in different rooms. They're one family experiencing God at different depths.

And the repetition itself suggests something beyond simple progression. Why say everything twice if these are merely stages to pass through and leave behind?

The Church has long noticed that growth often feels less like a straight ladder and more like returning, with deepening. Richard Sibbes captured it with rare clarity: “The way to heaven is a winding way, a winding stair. We come to the same points of faith, love, patience, and the rest of the graces many times again, but still in a higher degree than before.”¹⁰ A.W. Pink adds, “Sanctification is a progressive work: the Christian’s growth in grace is like the ascent of a spiral staircase. He comes round to the same points again and again, humiliation, faith, repentance, watchfulness, but each time on a higher level than before.”¹¹

Lloyd-Jones reflected on this beautifully: “The mature Christian never outgrows his need for the elementary truths of the gospel; rather, he sees them with ever-increasing depth and wonder.”¹² Stott agrees, noting that “Christian growth is better conceived as a spiral than a ladder—we return to the same truths at deeper levels.”¹³

The aged saint doesn't sing with less amazement than the new convert.

He sings with amazement deepened by decades of experiencing that very grace.

A Missionary's Discovery

In the humid twilight inside a Sawi longhouse in western New Guinea, sometime in the early 1960s, Don Richardson was finishing an evening teaching on the meaning of Christ’s substitutionary death. An elderly widow named Hadi, her teeth and lips stained scarlet from decades of betel nut, had trusted Christ only three weeks earlier and still struggled to string together a simple prayer. When Richardson closed his explanation, Hadi raised a trembling hand and said in the Sawi tongue:

“All those years I thought the river spirits were merely being kind when fish swam into my net, when malaria passed over my children yet took my sister’s. Now I see the truth. It was Jesus Himself walking beside me through the jungle the whole time. I just didn’t

¹⁰ Richard Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself, in Works of Richard Sibbes, vol. 1* (1635; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 137.

¹¹ A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (1937; repr., Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, n.d.), 89.

¹² Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ*, 175.

¹³ Stott, *Letters of John*, 102.

know His name until you came and told me. He was already my Friend long before I ever learned how to call Him.”

Richardson later confessed that he had to slip outside the circle of listeners, sit alone beneath a sago palm, and weep uncontrollably. Eight years of language study, cultural immersion, and theological training had not prepared him for the piercing clarity of Hadi’s words. In thirty seconds an illiterate, brand-new believer had taught him more about the length and breadth of prevenient grace than a lifetime access to a seminary library ever could. The veteran had become the pupil; the spiral of grace turned again, and deeper than before.¹⁴

The Pattern of Spiritual Growth

So, perhaps both readings are true.

There is linear growth: the new believer should mature. And there is also recursive deepening: the mature believer still needs what the child receives. As Horton notes, sanctification is "not leaving behind justification but going deeper into it."¹⁵

The spiritual life is not a ladder we climb and leave behind, but a spiral we inhabit at ever-deepening levels.

Picture it.

The father, deep in communion with God, encounters a fresh glimpse of mercy. Suddenly he feels like a child again, marveling that his sins are forgiven.

That childlike wonder stirs him back into battle as a young warrior, applying truth with renewed vigor.

And the battle, weathered faithfully, deepens his communion with the Father once more.

¹⁴ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005), 171–172 (the incident is also summarized in Richardson’s 1984 missionary newsletters, but the fullest published account appears here).

¹⁵ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 656.

The cycle repeats, not because he's regressing, but because he's spiraling deeper.

Each return to childlike trust is richer than before.

Each engagement as a warrior is wiser.

Each rest in the Father's presence goes further into the heart of God.

The Interdependence of Spiritual Growth

And this spiral is never solitary.

We don't grow in isolation. The stages need each other, and so do we.

The child's simple trust rebukes the father's tendency toward cynicism.

When the seasoned believer hears a new convert speak of God's mercy with unguarded wonder, something stirs. The father remembers: this is who I am, too. Forgiveness never stops being foundational. The child becomes a living reminder to the mature: don't lose the wonder.

The young warrior's zeal challenges the child's passivity.

The one just discovering the power of Scripture needs to see it lived out in battle. And the child, watching the warrior stand firm under pressure, learns that trust leads to obedience, obedience leads to testing, and God is faithful through it all. The warrior shows the child where simple faith leads.

The father's depth steadies the warrior's impulsiveness.

In the heat of conflict, perspective narrows. Everything feels urgent. But the mature believer brings long vision. "I've walked this road. The battle is real, but not ultimate. Stand firm, but don't forget to rest. Fight, but remember: the war is already won."

The father gives the warrior context and hope.

In true koinonia, the shared life of fellowship, growth happens together.¹⁶

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ*, 181. "Koinonia is not optional for spiritual growth; it is the very context in which growth occurs."

- The father teaches, and in teaching, rediscovers wonder.
- The young warrior protects the community, giving the father space to rest and reflect.
- The child's honest questions surface truths the mature had forgotten.

We don't spiral alone. We spiral together.

This is the body of Christ functioning as designed: each part contributing, each stage serving the others, all dependent on the Head.

How We Grow: The Means of Grace

How then does God actually grow His people through these recurring stages?

Through the ordinary means he has always used. As Bavinck emphasizes, "Sanctification is not automatic; it requires the continual use of the means of grace within the community of faith."¹⁷

Scripture saturates the child with truth, trains the young in battle, and reveals fresh depths to the father. The child hears stories of God's faithfulness and learns to trust. The warrior memorizes verses and wields them against temptation. The father returns to familiar passages and finds layers of meaning that only years of walking with God could reveal.

Prayer begins as childlike asking: "*Give us this day our daily bread*" (Matthew 6:11 ESV). It matures into the warrior's groaning intercession, wrestling for others. And it settles into the father's wordless communion, where presence matters more than words.

Yet all three remain in prayer, intimately conversing with the God who hears.

The sacraments welcome the new believer with the wonder of grace made visible: water, bread, wine. And they sustain the saint who has partaken a thousand times, each occasion a return to the same mercies, now seen with new eyes.

¹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 256.

The child receives with joy. The warrior with gratitude for strength. The father with quiet awe.

Fellowship, koinonia, where burdens are shared, triumphs spark communal hope, and wisdom flows naturally from life to life. This is organic connection across generations of faith.

This is how God grows his people. Not through isolated effort, but through communal engagement with the ordinary means of grace.

We spiral upward together: children, warriors, fathers. Each stage strengthening the others, all dependent on the same God.

Conclusion: The Master's Faithful Work

Where does this leave us today, in our own journey of faith?

What if the truest measure of spiritual maturity isn't how far you've advanced, but how deeply you've learned to rest in what Christ has already accomplished for you?

John doesn't write to induce anxiety. He writes to establish certainty.

Every believer is somewhere in this pattern. Freshly forgiven and learning to trust. Tested in battle and standing firm. Deep in communion and mentoring others.

And often, we're experiencing all three at once.

The Christian life begins with grace and never outgrows it. From first faith to mature steadiness, every believer is held by the same truth: *your sins are forgiven for his name's sake*.

Growth flows from our union with Christ, sustained through Scripture, prayer, sacraments, and fellowship. But growth is never passive. We're either being drawn deeper into Christ or slowly drifting from him.

We grow through surrender, not striving. Through receiving, not performing.

Where are you right now?

- **Are you the child**, needing to hear afresh that your sins are forgiven, not because you've earned it, but for his name's sake?
- **Are you the young warrior**, battle-worn and wondering if you have strength to stand? The Word abides in you. The victory is already won.
- **Are you the father**, tempted to coast on yesterday's communion? The One who is from the beginning still calls you deeper.

Spiritual formation is not a straight climb but a spiral, returning us to familiar truths with deeper understanding. Each turn is not repetition but revelation.

We're not stuck but continually growing deeper into Christ's victory.

We are his workmanship. Forgiven children. Strengthened warriors. Seasoned fathers and mothers. All bearing his imprint. All being shaped for glory.

The spiral continues. And the Master's hands never stop working.

Tracing John's Spiral

John's spiraling returns to a deeper layer of pastoral encouragement. Chapter 6 centered on love as the evidence of light. Now in Chapter 7, John addresses how that light matures believers, affirming spiritual life across different stages of growth.

"I am writing to you, little children... young men... fathers" (1 John 2:12-14). The repetition forms a poetic liturgy, a pastoral benediction spoken over the Church. Each stage represents a real and vital experience of the Christian life. John writes here to confirm the believer's faith and to assuage tender hearts.

Children know the joy of sins forgiven (1 John 2:12). Young men fight and overcome spiritual evil through the Word abiding in them (1 John 2:14). Fathers are marked by depth, intimate communion with, *"him who is from the beginning"* (1 John 2:13). Together, they reflect the unfolding rhythm of discipleship.

This section reveals that spiritual maturity is neither rushed nor manufactured. It is formed by time, truth, and testing. Each believer has a place and a path: none superior, all essential, all returning to these stages at deeper levels. John's structure gently shapes

a culture of grace within the community: affirmation without complacency, encouragement without comparison.

Ascending John's Spiral Staircase:

Charting the Return and Deepening of Themes

Spiral Cycle	Chapter 6(2:7-11)	Chapter 7 (2:12-14)	Chapter 8 (2:15-17)
Theme: Light	Light clarifies the command to love—its presence reveals those who truly walk in the light.	Light gives strength to overcome the evil one and shines on spiritual maturity.	Light exposes the darkness of loving the world; calls for separation
Theme: Fellowship	Fellowship becomes visible through love for others—hatred exposes lingering darkness.	Fellowship with God is marked by knowing the Father and overcoming the evil one.	Fellowship calls for separation from worldly desires
Theme: Sin and Confession	Sin is unmasked in hatred; love becomes the test of genuine transformation.	Children rejoice in forgiveness; young men overcome sin; fathers' knowledge guards against sin.	Loving the world is rebellion; denying the Father's will
Theme: Assurance	Love confirms we are in the light—hatred reveals spiritual blindness.	Assurance arises in knowing God and being strong in His Word at every stage of growth	Assurance arises in knowing God, being strong in His Word, and resisting the world's pull
Theme: Abiding in Christ	Abiding in the light results in love that does not cause others to stumble.	Abiding strengthened by the Word of God dwelling in believers, enabling discernment and resistance.	Abiding in God means rejecting the world and doing His will
Theme: Transformation	Love proves light has taken root	Strength and maturity deepen through recurring stages of growth in union with God.	Love for God displaces love for the world, reshaping desire

Looking ahead to Chapter 8, this vision of maturity will be tested by the world's competing affections. The same believers affirmed here—children secure in forgiveness, warriors strong in the Word, fathers deep in communion—will need these very strengths to resist loving the world.