

Do you find "every day with Jesus sweeter than the day before"?

Using the language of an old gospel-meeting rouser, this question asks us to monitor our daily walk with our Lord. How are we doing? Are we growing in our faith? Are we drawing closer to Christ? Is our relationship to him improving? Or are we standing still—or even sliding backwards? The Bible urges us to stay alert. Most people who fall back into darkness do not make a conscious decision to do so—they just drift away. We mustn't let that happen to us!

Some Possible Answers

No, I see growth, but not every day. Our relationship with the Lord has its ups and downs. One day we feel closer to him than the next. The downs are never his fault. He remains faithful. But we do not necessarily have to blame ourselves either. Sometimes we feel distant from God because of the circumstances in which we find ourselves; the stretch of the Way we have to travel. Even the psalmists dared to complain that God seemed far away from them during troubled times.

Yet even through hard times we may experience growth if we do what the psalmists did: cling in faith to our great God. He will come through. Suffering may for a time make God seem far from us. It may rob us of the sweetness of our relationship to Christ. But it cannot stunt our spiritual growth. Only our neglect can do that.

Yes, at least most days. Some of us have the uncanny ability to absorb life's blows and turn their punch into spiritual energy. Like judo experts, we may be able to deflect the force of our opposition, making it help us rather than hurt us. On good days we celebrate. On bad days we learn. Good and bad times, each in their own way, deepen and strengthen our bond to Christ. As M. Scott Peck observed in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, "the only obstacle to our spiritual growth is laziness."

Every day, no; every year or decade, yes. When children consult the growth chart daily, they become easily discouraged. They grow so slowly they cannot measure it. Only when they look back to where they were a year or two ago, do they perk up.

In our spiritual life the same thing is often true: We may notice the odd growth spurt but often see nothing on a day-to-day basis. Yet when we look

back to where we were in our relationship to God five years ago, we notice we've come a long way. We know more about God and his ways. We experience more deeply our bond to him. And we know better how we may serve him.

The Church Says

Why does God . . . want [the Ten Commandments] preached so pointedly?

First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness.

Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.

(*Heidelberg Catechism* Q. & A. 115)

Hotseat Question

What kind of "spiritual growth chart" do you have? Do you use it regularly?

Check It Out

Ephesians 3:14-21; 1 Peter 1:22-2:5; 2 Peter 3:17-18

Q: Looking back 2 years how have you grown spiritually?

A: There's a difference between growing in knowledge and growing spiritually.

**What does God want you to say to him in your prayers?**

*The Heidelberg Catechism considers prayer the most important part of our response to God. That's understandable. We're his children, and he wants us to talk to him. But what should we say to God? Will he be pleased if all we ever manage to send up is a quick "thanks for the grub" before supper or a wish-list of needed items before retiring? If prayer is "the Christian's vital breath," we may need to make it fresher than we usually do. What does God deserve to hear from you?*

### Some Possible Answers

**Adoration.** God created us to glorify him, to make his name great in the world. We should praise him by the things we do, the things we tell others, and the things we tell him. When the splendor of the starry heavens overwhelms us, we should tell him how we marvel at his majesty. When we delight in scampering sea otters or the brilliant colors of fall, we should compliment him on his handiwork.

We can glorify God anywhere, anytime. We need not assume a classical pose (too risky with a steering wheel in your hands!). More than any master artist, God craves our feedback. And he deserves it.

**Confession.** When we pray, we should openly recognize who we are. In all humility we should tell God we do not deserve his attention, his love, or his forgiveness. We must ask forgiveness for the things we do that hurt him.

Unspoken guilt lingers to hurt both of us. Only when we take the effort to openly confess our sins will we experience the healing of God's forgiving grace.

**Thanksgiving.** No words in all creation sound as much like music to God's ears as a heartfelt, "Thanks, Dad!" We should discipline ourselves to become more observant of God's blessings. We're experts at remembering what we want. But when God comes through for us, we often either fail to notice or forget to acknowledge his blessings. Our prayer life need not be regimented, but it should be disciplined.

**Supplication.** We honor God when we ask him for the things we need. Far from discouraging us from doing so, Jesus promises, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7). And if God finds it better not to answer us with a yes right

away, Jesus encourages us to go right on asking. He concludes the parable of the persistent widow with these words: "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7-8).

### The Church Says

**Why do Christians need to pray?**

Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us. And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking him for them.

(Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 116)

### Hotseat Question

Should you pray when you don't feel like it, or is that hypocritical?

### Check It Out

Psalm. 50:7-15; Psalm 100; Matthew 6:5-15; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Besides  
prayer, what  
other ways  
do you have  
of daily  
staying in  
touch with  
your Lord?

*On the average, American Christians spend more than two hours per day glued to the tube. But we find less than ten minutes a day for our God. That's our loss as well as his: Unless we discipline ourselves to seek him, our spiritual lives remain impoverished shells of what they could be.  
How do you stay in touch?*

*Some Possible Answers*

**I study Scripture.** Nothing replaces personal Bible reading—not sermons, group studies, or even family devotions. God speaks to us in all these ways. But the one-on-one exchange of digging into the Word often meets our personal needs the best. It forms the platform from which we can meaningfully participate in communal learning settings.

**I read Christian literature.** Consulting the reflections and experiences of others helps us grow in the Lord. Christian literature widens our vision by providing us with fresh ways of seeing God through the eyes of others. But we must constantly check to be sure that what we read reflects scriptural truth. That's why Christian literature can add to, but never replace, our Bible reading.

**I enjoy Christian music.** Whether we sing like a lark or a rusty door hinge, music provides us with a powerful way of communicating with God. Lyrics and melodies can reach us in ways that other means of communication cannot. If we sing, or sing along, our words surely reach God. If we just listen, our spirits carry the message to heaven all the same.

**I take time out to reflect.** Many Christians find meditation a powerful way of meeting God. When we clear our schedules and our minds of all the busyness of daily living, we can center our attention on God himself. That takes discipline, because we're so readily distracted. Sometimes a verse from Scripture, a biblical image, or an important personal experience can help us focus on God. When we create space in our minds and hearts, God can fill it with his rest.

**I worship God in nature.** Tromping through the bush or just jogging Rover through the park can put us in touch with our Creator. When we see and feel his artistry, we see the Artist again. We experience the splendors he has laid out for us. And we give him the glory.

**I tune in to Christian broadcasting.** God does not ignore the wonders of technology: He's in transmitters and video tubes as well as the rustling grass. Many programs responsibly put us in touch with him over the airwaves. But we need to stay on our guard. By searching Scripture we must ferret out the good from the bad. The great Deceiver also knows transistors from transponders.

*The Church Says*

*Hallowed be your name means,*

Help us to really know you,  
to bless, worship, and praise you  
for all your works  
and for all that shines forth from them:  
your almighty power, wisdom, kindness,  
justice, mercy, and truth.

And it means,

Help us to direct all our living—  
what we think, say, and do—  
so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us  
but always honored and praised.

*(Heidelberg Catechism A. 122)*

*Hotseat Question*

Do you build devotional times into your schedule? How?

*Check It Out*

Psalms 139; Colossians 3:1-4, 15-17

You pledge to serve only God. Which idols in your life tempt you to break that promise?

*We think of idols as gruesome statues that pagans worshiped long ago. We cannot imagine ourselves actually falling into the same sin as they. But we do it all the time! We constantly invent new idols around which we wrap our hearts and lives. Whenever we enslave ourselves to anything instead of serving God, we've created an idol. We can spot idols by checking whether we sacrifice too many of our energies or resources to any one person or thing. Are we so addicted that we ignore God's command in other areas of life? Where are the idols that bring you to your knees?*

**Some Possible Answers**

**Wealth.** Greed for material possessions makes us waste too much precious time trying to make money. We ignore more important things. To the almighty buck we sacrifice time to rest and celebrate. We sacrifice time to do our part in church. We sacrifice our marriages, families, and friendships.

In the end this idol leaves us dirt poor—despite a fat bank account. Surrounding ourselves with meaningless junk does not fill the aching void inside. Jesus commands, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings . . . You cannot serve both God and Money" (Luke 16:9,13).

**Popularity.** The relentless crush of peer pressure makes us sacrifice our loved ones, our self-respect, and our morality. It slices our God-given unity up into competing, self-centered little cliques. It hollows out our relationships, driving us to use each other for our own ends. Genuine openness goes out the window so that we can maintain our all-important "image."

For a brief moment in the spotlight, we throw away our happiness in this world and the next. For when the spotlight's glare passes from us, this idol leaves us permanently in the dark.

**Pleasure.** Pleasure is good, not bad. God created us to enjoy life. He promises us eternal life filled with pleasure. But when we make pleasure itself our goal, when we give up everything for the "quick fix," we reduce our lives to the tiresome, always-disappointing search for kicks.

Jesus tells us to forego some pleasures now so that we can do his work. In the long run he will reward us with lasting happiness and joy. "If anyone

would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).  
Fame, alcohol, sex, television, food, cars, parties, laziness, respectability, power, hobbies, pride, and so on.

**The Church Says**

Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word.

(Heidelberg Catechism A 95)

**Hotseat Question**

When you've identified an idol, how do you dismantle it?

*Check It Out*  
1 Corinthians 10:6-14; Galatians 4:8-11; Ephesians 5:5; Phillipians 3:17-4:1

*Take a class*  
*Share with*  
*Share with*

God requires you to live a chaste life. What does that mean to you?

*The so-called sexual revolution has created some much-needed openness for discussing our sexuality. But is has also duped millions into believing that sexual sins are acceptable and even desirable. Whether you're single or married, God still asks you to live a morally pure life. Given your present marital status, what does God require of you?*

*Some Possible Answers*

As a single person, it means that I reserve sexual intercourse for marriage. God made us sexual beings, and we need never shy away from that fact. However, the Bible clearly forbids us to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. God intends this gift to enrich a fully mature, committed relationship, not a casual fling. Nor does he want us to use it to shore up a faltering romance.

Misusing our sexuality leads to pain outside of a relationship and confusion in an immature one. If we truly love someone, we do what's really right for that person: we build our relationship step by obedient step, God's way may be the hardest, but it's also the happiest.

It means that I don't wallow in indecency. Pornography hurts. Whether it comes in the form of glossy magazines or hilly talk, it injures us. It dirties our God-given sexuality and robs us of our dignity. The Bible shows us a better way: It tells us to stop idolizing sexual organs and to begin seeing each other as God intends: as sisters and brothers in Christ. Indecency poisons our relationships and cheapens our real bond in the Lord.

It means that "shacking up," trial marriages, open marriages, and homosexual activities are out. The Bible understands how strongly we may be tempted to form such relationships. That's why it warns us so sharply away from them. Such relationships just lead us further into the distortions that tear our lives apart. They exact an unacceptably high toll on us, on others, and on our God.

As a married person, it means that I remain faithful to my partner. Faithfulness in marriages requires more than avoiding sexual misconduct. It requires that husband and wife take time and effort to share and celebrate the intimacy God has given them. The opposite of faithfulness is not unfaithfulness but neglect.

It means that in every relationship I show appropriate love. Chastity means that we show that love, and only that love, which is appropriate to each of our relationships. We should love our parents in a very different way than we love our enemies. But in either case, we should be as Christ to them.

*The Church Says*

God condemns all unchastity. We should therefore thoroughly detest it and, married or single, live decent and chaste lives.

*(Heidelberg Catechism A 108)*

We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why he forbids everything which incites unchastity, whether it be actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires.

*(Heidelberg Catechism A 109)*

*Hotseat Question*

Can God forgive your sexual sins? Can you forgive yourself for these sins?

*Check It Out*

Romans 1:21-27; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 7:1-9