



SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR “YOUNG MEN”

Session 1 • 1 John 2:12-14

INTRODUCTION

Malnutrition is a problem of epic proportion in our world today. Statistics tell us that 842 million people in the world do not have enough to eat; therefore, one out of six children worldwide are underweight, one out of every four children are undersized, millions of children suffer serious physical and mental health issues that stem from malnutrition, and poor nutrition causes nearly half of the deaths each year in children under five—that is 3.1 million children every year.

The results of malnutrition and stunted growth in our physical bodies are terribly sad, and can even include death. Unfortunately, however, many Christians experience stunted growth and they aren't even aware of it. As tragic as stunted physical growth is, stunted spiritual growth is even more devastating.

See, upon trusting in Christ Jesus as Savior and committing to follow Him, Christians begin a journey that must be characterized by spiritual growth. That's just the nature of life, isn't it? Just as physical life yearns to grow and advance, taking a human being from the realm of infancy into adulthood, so also spiritual life—the life of God—pulses with the energy of spiritual growth (e.g., it broke out of a tomb!).

If you are not growing (experiencing the power of God's life to change you), there's something wrong with you! 2 Peter 1:9 puts it this way, “For whoever lacks these qualities [i.e., whoever is not growing spiritually] is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.”¹ What a terribly tragic result of stunted growth!

On the other hand, those who are growing and witnessing the power of God's life to transform them have eternal confidence. Peter rejoices that those who “practice these qualities [i.e., those who experience spiritual growth]...will never fall, [and] in this way there will be richly

provided for [them] an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10b-11).² What assurance and confidence belongs to those who are growing spiritually!

In 1 John 2:12-14, John writes to Christians on a journey of spiritual growth. Using the common age-groups “children,” “young men,” and “fathers,” he identifies three different levels of spiritual maturity. As you read through 1 John 2:12-14, what level of spiritual growth best describes you?

- Spiritual “children” recognize that they have been reconciled to God through a relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Spiritual “young men” strive to be strengthened by Scripture in order to succeed in their spiritual struggles.
- Spiritual “fathers” have found fulfillment in their faithful fellowship with the Father.

Now, before we get into the specific section that provides us with our mission statement for the *Band of Brothers* ministry, let's notice three purposes that John has for writing this section.

1. He is offering assurance from spiritual growth.

Remember, according to 1 John 5:13, John is writing his entire epistle “to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.” In this section on spiritual growth, he is applying such assurance to all believers who find themselves in some stage of spiritual maturity. Whether you are spiritually a “child,” “young man,” or “father,” you can confidently rejoice in discovering how God's life is growing within you.

2. He is demonstrating progression to spiritual growth.

This passage demonstrates how each level of maturity lays the foundation for the next, and so we are reminded that we must all be obeying Christ so that He can move us forward from one level of growth to the next (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18). Even as little children must become young men before they can become fathers, so we must go through the “young men” stage of spiritual striving in order to progress from the spiritual immaturity of “children” to the spiritual maturity of “fathers.”

3. *He is suggesting goals for spiritual growth.*

Furthermore, I think there is another reason that John uses these common age-group markers (i.e., “children,” “young men,” “fathers”). Not only is he demonstrating a progression in the growth of spiritual life within us, but he also seems to be suggesting specific goals of spiritual growth that we ought to be working towards in those particular life-stages. In the family of faith, children need to be disciple with a rich understanding of the gospel and how it relates them to God; young men (and women) need to be challenged to love and learn Scripture, standing strongly against sin; and the older believers need to faithfully fellowship with God to discover His own faithfulness.

With these goals in mind, we have extracted from John’s counsel to “young men” our mission statement for *Band of Brothers*—“**striving together for the scriptural strength to succeed in our spiritual struggle.**” While we can all draw assurance from this passage as we see our own spiritual life and growth reflected in it, our exhortation to one another from John’s message to “young men” ought to be—“**brothers, strive for the scriptural strength to succeed in your spiritual struggle.**”

Stripped of the peripherals, our exhortation to ourselves is simply this, “Strive to succeed.” That phrase comes directly from John’s statement, “You have overcome the Evil One” (vv. 13b, 14b). The word “overcome” translates the Greek word “nikao” meaning “to be victorious” or “to conquer.” It is no secret that to overcome and be victorious in any endeavor requires an immense amount of “striving.” John is saying that this is the trademark of spiritual “young men”—they strive to overcome, lest they be overcome. They know victory!

So, brothers, “strive to succeed”! Is that exhortation not incredibly relevant for our stage in life? The tragedy of stunted spiritual growth seems to frequently (could we not say, primarily?) grip “young men.” We neglect to discipline ourselves to know God’s Word, we are filled with weakness and not strength in the face of temptation, and we live in perpetual cycles of failure-guilt-misery-resolve-failure-guilt-misery.

To “young men” weak, scripture-less, and defeated, the grace of God trumpets through the darkness here, calling us to “strive to succeed!” And where God commands, He enables. In your “child”-like state of spiritual immaturity, God promises you in 1 John 4:4, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Again, John preaches the “good news” in 1 John 5:4 and comforts, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” Jesus Himself is the foundation of that promising invitation to “strive to succeed,” for He said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Yes indeed, then, let us “strive to succeed,” that we might “overcome the Evil One” in all those areas of our lives in which he currently has a stronghold but in which Christ died to make us overcomers!

We now turn back to our passage and ask two questions about our need as “young men” to “strive to succeed.” The answers provide the additional details contained in our mission statement.

WHY MUST WE STRIVE TO SUCCEED?

We must strive to succeed because there is an “Evil One” who would destroy you.

Ephesians 6:12 — The magnitude of Satan’s mighty evil is described in this passage. “We do not wrestle [strive] against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

John 17:15 — Understanding the danger of the “Evil One,” Jesus prayed just before He died, “I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the Evil One.”

1. ***The “Evil One” is spiritual.***

- *Ephesians 2:2* — Satan is the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” He wants us to walk by sight so he can destroy our faith.

2. ***The “Evil One” is strong.***

- *1 John 5:19* — “The whole world lies in the power of the Evil One.”
- *1 John 3:12* — The “Evil One” destroyed Cain, who was the privileged son of Adam and Eve.

3. ***The “Evil One” is sinister.***

- *1 Peter 5:8* — Satan hates you! Therefore, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

4. ***The “Evil One” is scheming.***

- *John 13:38* — He doesn’t always break all hell loose; instead, he often just creates hypocrites. “The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the Evil One.”
- *Ephesians 6:16* — Sometimes, he is more overt and the “flaming darts of the Evil One” are hurled at us.
- *1 John 2:15-17* — He uses our fleshly desires and an alluring world—brilliant! “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires.”

Application: Spiritual “young men” get it—they understand that they are in a spiritual struggle. Do you? Are you “striving to succeed in your *spiritual struggle*”? Or is it still a game? Still just an “issue that you’re working on”? You’ll never succeed if you underestimate your enemy.

HOW MUST WE STRIVE TO SUCCEED?

We must strive to succeed by abiding in God’s Word.

The only way that God’s Word can “abide” in us is if we are “abiding” in it. The word “abide” means to “remain” or “dwell.” When we are abiding in God’s Word (and His Word is therefore abiding in us), God promises that spiritual stability and growth (i.e., “strong...overcome the Evil One”) will take place. God’s Word is the only source of spiritual nutrition that God has ordained.

1. ***Proving the promise***

- *John 17:15, 17*
 - *What? (v. 15)* — Jesus prays for us to be kept from the “Evil One.”
 - *How? (v. 17)* — Jesus prays for us to be “sanctified by the truth; Your Word is truth.”
 - *Ephesians 5:26* — This happens, not casually, but only “by the washing of water with the Word.”
- *John 15:4, 7*
 - *V. 4* — We will only grow spiritually (i.e., “bear fruit”) if we are “abiding in Christ.”
 - *V. 7* — “Abiding in Christ” is synonymous with His “word abiding in us.”
- *Other passages of promise:* 1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; James 5:21

2. *Practicing the promise*

- *Psalm 119:9-11* — “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word. With my whole heart I seek You; let me not wander from Your commandments! I have stored up Your Word in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”
 - One of the “Evil One’s” schemes is to ask us, “Hath God said” (cf. Genesis 3:1). How can we answer that with spiritual strength, unless we know and obey what God has said?
- *Matthew 13:19* — “When anyone hears the Word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the Evil One comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.”
 - Has God’s Word been snatched away from your heart? Replant it! Read it, think about it, memorize it, talk about it! Ask God to break up the fallow ground of your heart (Jeremiah 4:3-4) so that when the seed is replanted, it will grow!

Application: Spiritual “young men” understand that they will be “strong” to “overcome the Evil One” only if “the Word of God abides in [them].” Do you? Are you “striving for the *scriptural strength* to succeed”? Or, are you still rejecting the promise of God Word, in some stupid thought that you’ll find a different way? You’ll never succeed if you are ignoring God’s Word.

CONCLUSION

Malnutrition and stunted growth claim the lives of more than 3 million children each year. How many professing Christians are slowly dying due to spiritual malnutrition and stunted growth?

Against the backdrop of our experienced failure and defeat, John offers assurance to “young men” and suggests to us a goal that by the grace of God we really can attain—we can know victory! We can “overcome the Evil One.” We can be “strong”! Therefore, brothers, let us “strive for the scriptural strength to succeed in our spiritual struggle.”

The Book of the Revelation contains incredible promises for “him who overcomes” (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), but none is better than what is written in Revelation 21:7—“He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son” (NASB).

¹ Jesus even takes it a step further. He said that the branch that doesn’t bear fruit (i.e., it isn’t growing properly), “is thrown away...and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6).

² Jesus also comments on those who are growing and says that those who “bear much fruit...prove to be [His] disciples” (John 15:8).