

He Must Increase; I Must Decrease

- 1 O Jesus Christ, grow Thou in me,
And all things else recede;
My heart be daily nearer Thee,
From sin be daily freed.

Each day let Thy supporting might
My weakness still embrace;
My darkness vanish in Thy light,
Thy life my death efface.
- 2 In Thy bright beams which on me fall,
Fade every evil thought;
That I am nothing, Thou art all,
I would be daily taught.
- 3 More of Thy glory let me see,
Thou Holy, Wise, and True;
I would Thy living image be,
In joy and sorrow too.
- 4 Fill me with gladness from above,
Hold me by strength divine;
Lord, let the glow of Thy great love
Through all my being shine.
- 5 Make this poor self grow less and less,
Be Thou my life and aim;
Oh, make me daily through Thy grace
More meet to bear Thy name. (*Hymns*, #395)

The above hymn was written by Johann C. Lavater, the son of a physician in Zürich, Switzerland. Lavater was born on November 15, 1741. According to John Julian's *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, Lavater "entered the Academic Gymnasium at Zürich in 1758, and in the end of 1759 began his studies in its theological department. After completing his course he was ordained in the spring of 1762." Julian writes that

Lavater was one of the most celebrated and influential literary characters of his time; a most popular and striking preacher; and a lovable, genuine, frank-hearted man, who was the object of an almost incredible veneration.

All his literary works, including his hymns, were written in German. This hymn, "O Jesus Christ, Grow Thou in Me," was translated by Mrs. E. L. Smith and published in English in the early 1860s.

This hymn is a worshipful prayer in pursuit of growth in

the divine life and for the fading away of the natural life. The hymn's burden and contents may have been inspired by the declaration of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30). After Jesus was baptized by John, He began to baptize people who were coming to Him. The disciples of John, realizing that more people were being baptized by the Lord Jesus, were troubled and questioned John concerning His ministry. John reiterated his previous testimony: "I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him" (v. 28). Then he told his disciples that Christ is the Bridegroom who has the bride and that as the friend of the Bridegroom, he, John, rejoiced to hear the voice of the Bridegroom. Therefore, he boldly proclaimed, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Missing the Crucial Result of the Increase of Christ—the Bride

Although his hymn is quite full and substantial concerning the increase of Christ in the lives of individual believers, Lavater fails to make the crucial connection between the Christian growth and the intended manifestation of that growth, which is the corporate Body of Christ, the many members of Christ made alive by and built together in life to become one universal, corporate entity. According to the context of John 3:29, the increase of Christ is a corporate entity, His bride, a living composition of all the regenerated people (cf. Rom. 12:4-5). Prior to and following the statement of John the Baptist concerning the increase of Christ, the narrative in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John proclaims the rich attributes of the Lord Jesus: He is the Bridegroom who has the bride (v. 29); He speaks the words of God and gives the Spirit without measure (vv. 32-34), and those who believe into Him through His word receive His eternal life in, as, and through the Spirit (v. 36). The increase of Christ in the context of John 3 is not merely Christ's becoming more exalted, more recognized, or more prominent. His increase is the spreading of His life and nature into His many believers who together constitute the bride as His corporate counterpart. The Gospel of John abundantly testifies concerning the person of Christ in terms of His all-inclusiveness as the Word of God, His person as the only begotten Son of God, His source as the One sent by the Father, His attributes as the One who Himself is life, light, the eternal One, the way,

and the truth. His purpose in coming is to give eternal life to those who believe, to bring them out of darkness into light, to feed them with Himself as the bread of life, and to give them to drink of Himself as the water of life. He is the unique means by which human beings may come to the Father. He and the Father will come to dwell with His lovers. He is the vine, and those who abide in Him are the fruit-bearing branches. This great mystery of Christ and the church as His bride is a substantially missing element in this hymn. Without the revelation of the corporate aspect of the increase of Christ, there is no goal as the object of Christ's increase, and there is no way for the individual believer to fully reach maturity.

An Overview of the Central Points

Nevertheless, the growth and development of the life of Christ in the individual believer is a prominent focus in the life and writings of the apostles. The hymn has several salient points, which are necessary for the daily growth of Christ in a regenerated believer. All believers must grow and progress by the development of Christ as the seed of life, which was received at the moment when we first believed. The burden of the hymn clearly reflects this great need in the Christian life.

The hymn begins with an entreaty that sets the tone for the rest of the hymn: "O Jesus Christ, grow Thou in me, / And all things else recede." Genuine Christian growth in life is the growth of Jesus Christ in the believers. As Christ increases in us, "all things else recede," and the meaning and value of everything other than Christ in us fades into nothingness. After petitioning Christ to grow in him, the author cries out for enlightenment to be imparted to teach him in an experiential manner the all-inclusiveness of Christ in contrast to his own nothingness. Following this, there is an obvious echo of Paul's word to the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 3:18 related to seeing the glory of Christ and being changed into the living image of the Christ of glory in every circumstance. The hymn then speaks of the need for the operation of power and the flowing of love for the increase of Christ in a believer and of the believer's need for absolute dependence on the grace of God in order to take Christ as his life and aim. The burden and cry of the writer of the hymn begins with the desire for the growth of Christ within him, continues with the specific aspects of this growth and development, and consummates with the hope of being transformed into Christ's living image and thus being qualified to bear His wonderful name, living out His glorious expression and becoming His qualified representative.

Growing in the Divine Life

The hymn begins with a prayer that the Lord Jesus would grow in us: "O Jesus Christ, grow Thou in me, /

And all things else recede; / My heart be daily nearer Thee, / From sin be daily freed." Wonderfully, Lavater speaks not only of Christ being in a believer but of His need to grow within a believer. Paul's prayer that the Father would strengthen the believers in Ephesus with power through His Spirit into the inner man so that Christ could make His home in their hearts by faith reflects this thought (Eph. 3:16-17). Christ's growth in the believers involves His making His home in our hearts—the mind, emotion, will, and conscience—so that we think what He thinks, feel what He feels, desire and choose what He desires and chooses, and so that our consciences are not only washed in His blood but pure and without offense to both God and man. The majority of Christians today have little or no consciousness of such a need.

We must seek the Lord and open our entire being to Him so that He is not restricted or frustrated from bringing us into such harmony with Him and with one another so that we may be full of strength to apprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ, to know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ, and to be filled unto all the fullness of God (vv. 18-19). This kind of thought rarely passes through the mind of the average believer today. This need, however, motivated and energized the writer to pray with much depth of feeling for the continual increase and spread of the person of Christ into every part of his inner being.

The Need of Enlightenment

After introducing the burden for the growth of Christ in a believer, the remainder of the hymn is a series of experiences within the process of growth, beginning with the need of enlightenment in stanza 2: "In Thy bright beams which on me fall, / Fade every evil thought; / That I am nothing, Thou art all, / I would be daily taught." We have a great need to be enlightened to receive a vision of the Christ of God who has come to be our everything. We need to pray that the Father would grant us a spirit of wisdom and revelation to enlighten the eyes of our heart so that we may know fully the things into which God is calling us, specifically, the hope of His calling, the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe (Eph. 1:16-19). When this kind of light occupies our thoughts, our hearts will be lifted up into another sphere where God is everything, and all evil thoughts fade away.

Under this shining, each one of us needs to be daily taught that "I am nothing, Thou art all." This is absolutely not a matter of holding on to a doctrinal fact that the Father has exalted Christ above all things, time, persons, and powers. It is a matter of daily learning, an

experiential learning of the meaning of that fact in our personal life and living; Paul taught that such an experience is a matter of “learning Christ” (4:20). We learn Him by hearing Him (not by hearing about Him) and being taught in Him (not by being taught about Him) according to the reality which is in Him (referring to the living of the Lord Jesus as seen in the four Gospels). How desperate is our need that His bright beams fall upon us, exposing the emptiness of much of our living and causing us to realize moment by moment “that I am nothing, Thou art all.”

Beholding His Glory and Being Changed into His Image

Under the bright shining of His beams upon us, stanza 3 then speaks of looking upon the Lord Jesus and beholding His glory: “More of Thy glory let me see, / Thou Holy, Wise, and True; / I would Thy living image be, / In joy and sorrow too.” To enter into such an experiential fellowship with the Lord Jesus requires time—time to read and study the Bible, time to wait on Him, time to muse on His Word, time to pray, time to call on His name, time to sing, praise, and worship Him. Such time is indispensable in the midst of our demanding, sometimes hectic, schedule and occupation with all manner of things and persons. This stanza is based on the teaching found in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, which says,

Whenever their heart turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.

Our heart must turn to the Lord before we can see anything. We are unable to see, to comprehend, anything spiritual, real, or meaningful in human life apart from beholding the Lord. For this our heart must turn from everything to Him. Must we helplessly persist in a multitude of occupations whose ends are emptiness and darkness? Or will we with resolution of heart cry out to the Lord for the strength to stop each day to hear what is in His heart? This is not a time to bring our thoughts and requests to lay before Him. Rather, it is a time to hear what He wants to speak to us.

Filled with Joy and Held by Strength

Stanza 4 speaks of an aspiration related to His joy and strength: “Fill me with gladness from above, / Hold me by strength divine; / Lord, let the glow of Thy great love / Through all my being shine.” As we draw near to Him, the attractiveness of His loving person captivates and gains us. Thus, we will be delivered from the attractions

of the world, extracted from so many damaging behaviors, and released from the dictates of our egocentric self and lustful flesh. Words can never teach us, testimonies cannot free us, threats can never turn us, and mere resolutions cannot motivate us sufficiently to enable us to live a normal Christian life to gain more of Christ and to allow Him to fill every part of our being. Therefore, our cry must be for the Father to fill us with gladness from above and hold us by strength divine to let the glow of His great love through all our being shine.

Growth Being a Lifelong Process

According to stanza 5, as we are filled with the divine life, our poor self grows less and less; however, this life change does not result in an immediate change in our character or even in our thinking and behavior. Although our life source has changed and we have become a new creation, our inner man needs to be renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). A new believer is a babe who needs to grow and mature in the divine life. When a sinner receives the life of God, he receives it into his human spirit. The growth of this life is a lifelong process by which this life spreads into his mind, emotion, and will.

During this lifelong process, the soul-life is subdued, broken, and transformed into the same image of the Lord Jesus Christ (3:18). As “this poor self grows less and less,” and Christ becomes our “life and aim,” we gradually lose the confidence and the characteristics of the old man. And day by day Christ grows in us until all our being will be qualified to bear His name. Then we will become an expressive continuation of the life and living of the Lord Jesus. He will be expressed and glorified by our living that bears His dear name, and we will become the reflection of the image of the One whom we are beholding.

The chorus of the hymn tracks this daily process of the growth of Christ: “Each day let Thy supporting might / My weakness still embrace; / My darkness vanish in Thy light, / Thy life my death efface.” In our daily practice, His strength is wrapped around our weaknesses, our darkness is overcome by His light, and our death is swallowed up by His life. As a consequence, gradually, often imperceptibly, we are being changed into the image of the One whom we pursue.

by Gary Kaiser

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