

The Tree and Me

by Dee Bowman

It was just a little tree when we put it out. We had just moved in and the lawn was still just patches of grass planted here and there and expected to grow into a lush lawn. The little tree was right in the middle of the front yard. It was a Sweet Gum. It was sort of cute, but very small.

Over the years it seemed as if the tree's growth was just sitting there, not growing, that it was just going to remain the three inches in diameter and seven or eight feet tall. In fact, Norma talked with a landscaping fellow who was working next door for the neighbor and asked about pulling it up on account of the fact that it just didn't seem to be growing much. "Oh, no," he said, "don't do that." "It's a beautiful tree and it'll grow. You just gotta give it some time. It'll grow."

That tree is now a huge, forty foot tree with spreading branches that shade not only our front yard, but the entire area around. It's tall and stately and reigns over the whole neighborhood. It's beautiful in the fall when the leaves turn red and yellow and bronze and it sparkles in the evening sun. Our house can be identified by the "look for the biggest tree in the area" affirmation. Oh, and one other thing: the sweet gum balls are horrible in the fall! We pick up bags of them and they still come. They aren't good for anything, just mess up things.

Growth is good. Actually, if something doesn't grow, we get worried—just like we did with the tree. But isn't it strange that far too few of us ever get too concerned about our spiritual growth? If our kids didn't grow we'd be in a panic. And we're actually ready to dig up a plant that doesn't grow. How is it then that we pay little attention to the need to grow spiritually? The scriptures teach the necessity of it and yet many of us who should by now be strong, healthy, mature Christians are in fact, spiritual dwarfs. Our spiritual growth is stunted. And what's saddest of all, some of us just ignore our stunted spiritual bodies.

Proper nourishment is necessary to growth. You can't grow without food. Peter says (1 Pet. 2:2), "desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby." A constant diet of spiritual food is necessary for one to grow to spiritual maturity. The problem seems to be a lack of spiritual appetite. Our appetite for food is a natural instinct in the physical realm, but it is a willful decision in the spiritual sphere—you have to decide to have a spiritual appetite. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness," says Jesus in the mountain message, "for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). You have to decide to get hungry.

Patience is an integral part of growth. Remember when you would stretch out as far as you could when your dad was measuring your height? You wanted to get bigger, right? But it takes time. “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,” says Peter (2 Pet. 3:18). You do it a little at a time. That’s why it’s so important that you get the nourishment that is furnished in Bible classes, or in your private study. It’s these little increments that make a healthy spiritual you. And it’s entirely in order to eat some in between meals. Snack some. It’s good for you.

Balance is necessary for spiritual maturity. Cancer is growth out of control. When you get so that you don’t have a balanced diet, you’re apt to place your spiritual health in jeopardy. Your spiritual body needs the right amount of all the truth, not just a concentration of one part of. It’s not right to eat dessert and nothing else, or hamburgers and nothing else. You have to have the broccoli and the green leafy stuff, too. A balanced diet is hard. It takes concern, planning, and discipline to make it work. But the result is a strong, healthy spiritual you. God gave various things to make our spiritual maturity possible so that “we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things...” (Eph. 4:14-15).

Growth is an individual matter, too. You do your own growing; nobody can do it for you. While our growth may have an effect on others (Rom. 12:5), it is peculiarly ours and we must do it by ourselves. “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth.” (2 Thess. 1:3). Notice that the faith and love were individual matters, attended to by each person. Growth is an “every one of you” matter. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). He says that right after having said that “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess” at the final ordering of things. Spiritual growth is yours and nobody else’s.

The tree is fine—except for the gum balls. It’s big and strong and very beautiful. But it still has those gum balls—prickly and hard. Spiritual growth has its gum balls, too, you know. You have to continually get rid of the bad stuff or you can’t grow like you ought. God makes forgiveness possible so that we can purge ourselves from our bad stuff (Heb. 9:14). He’ll help you get rid of all the bad stuff, if you’ll let him.

I’m proud we didn’t cut the tree down. I only hope my spiritual growth has come up in some measure to the likeness of that tree. Don’t you?