

The Stages of Spiritual Maturity

1 John 2:13

13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.

Introduction:

John writes his epistle to an unknown group of believers. And yet, though their geographic or cultural identity is mysterious, their position in Christ is obvious. John refers to them as undergoing spiritual maturity and as having the potential for fellowship with God through Jesus. In fact, John identifies and defines four distinct spiritual maturities to his audience. The first group is identified in verse 12, the fourth and third group identified in verse 13, and the second group identified in verse 14. In defining these four groups, John exposes the four stages of spiritual maturation which envelopes the entire spiritual growth process of the believer from his spiritual infancy to his spiritual fatherhood. Take a look at the text of verse 13:

1. "I am writing to you...":

- a. John defines clearly the cause behind his writing to each of the different maturity levels through this phrase. His usage of repetition with this phrase in verse 12 and then again in verse 13 are emphatic in nature.
- b. This emphasis expresses the sincerity in John's tone regarding the importance of his audience receiving the words he is writing.
- c. The phrase is translated from γραφω υμιν (grah-phoh hoo-min) which identifies within itself both the writer and the recipient.
- d. γραφω means "to write." It is used here to identify that John is writing his message out for his audience to read, most likely because he wasn't in the same location as his audience. Had he have been in that same location, the tone and fervor by which his message is recorded would no doubt have warranted verbal instruction. Through γραφω John emphasizes, "I am really performing the action to write..."
- e. The recipient of his writing is identified by υμιν. Υμιν literally means, "you all." Its grammatical construction is one that identifies that the "you all" is receiving that which is being written.
- f. In each of John's three "I write" statements (vv. 12 and 13), he affixes an identifier to express the group of individuals to which he is writing.

2. "Fathers...":

- a. From the word *πατερες* (pah-tehr-ehs), John addresses "fathers" specifically.
- b. *πατερες* is used to express a number of different types of fathers, but in each type expresses some sort of fatherly relationship. Three expressions are common through *πατερες*:
 1. The biological relationship of a father to his son. The emphasis placed with this usage of *πατερες* is one of genealogical or paternal role of the father over his family.
 2. The relationship of an elderly man in the church or in society. This relationship is one of a leader over others because of his age and thus maturity. "Fathers" in this sense is metaphorical, but also quite representative of the roles these aged individuals hold as examples of mature men to the younger men around them.
 3. Most typically, *πατερες* is a reference to the first person of the Trinity, God the Father. It is God the Father who has the sovereign leadership in carrying out His will on earth as He pleases. God is both the Father of humanity, and yet the Father of all those who believe. It is this third usage of *πατερες* which is the most dominant and common in Scripture.
- c. John's usage of *πατερες* is in keeping with the second most common usage: the metaphorical description of an older, more matured man (Number 2 in the list above). This man is a father by maturity and example.
- d. John identifies that he is writing to these spiritual fathers who are examples to those younger in the faith (maturity wise, not age wise). This is the highest maturity level identified by John in verses 12-14.

3. "Because you know...":

- a. John identifies the determining factor which separates the spiritual fathers in maturity from the "young men," "children," and "little babies."
- b. *οτι* (ho-tee) has been translated as "because." It literally means, "on account of." It is used to express the cause behind an action or state of existence.
- c. *οτι* modifies the action of John's writing by expressing the cause of his writing to the "fathers." In other words, John is writing to spiritual fathers on account of their being spiritual fathers. It is in the distinction of what defines them as having matured to spiritual fatherhood that clarity is retained once more.
- d. It is "on account of" the spiritual fathers having come to comprehensively know the Lord Jesus that John writes.
- e. *εγνωκατε* (ehg-no-kah-the) means "to comprehensively know." It identifies one who has academic knowledge of something, and as a result understands or comprehends that which is known.

- f. It should be noted that εγνωκατε does not imply an complete comprehensive knowledge, or exhaustive knowledge. Yet, the understanding of a working knowledge is inherently provided.
 - g. As such, egnokate identifies the spiritual fathers as having come to a comprehensive, working knowledge. It is this comprehensive, working knowledge which defines their maturity level.
 - h. John defines, then, spiritual fathers as those who have performed the action to comprehensively know the Lord Jesus.
 - i. It is on account of their comprehensive, working knowledge of Lord Jesus that John is writing to the spiritual fathers.
 - j. This is the highest earthly stage of spiritual maturation, the stage of being spiritual fathers. Believers are “spiritual fathers” when they have come to a comprehensive working knowledge of Lord Jesus.
 - k. It should be noted as well that this is not a knowledge of Christ, or the Savior role of Jesus. As such, this is not an identification that the “spiritual fathers” have come to recognize Jesus as their Savior. The context is experiential in nature, rather than positional. Thus, they have come to a comprehensive, working knowledge of the Lord Jesus in who He is (His character), how He operates (His practices), and His Lordship (His eternal position).
 - l. John identifies he writes to the spiritual fathers, those who have come to a comprehensive, working knowledge of the Lord Jesus.
4. “Him who has been from the beginning...”:
- a. John uses the phrase τον απ αρχης (ton ahp par-kaes) to identify the Lord Jesus.
 - b. The phrase is literally, “the away from beginning.”
 - c. It is used to describe the person or thing of which the spiritual fathers have come to a comprehensive, working knowledge.
 - d. The lack of clarity in the literal English translation is the result of the English mindset competing with that of the Koine Greek mindset. The English language requires that the definite article (“the”) is followed by a noun or substantive of some fashion. Koine Greek is not so demanding. This is largely due to the history of the definite article as having grown out of the demonstrative pronoun classification. In its demonstrative history, the Koine definite article was used to specify by proximity an object or person. In that sense, it possessed the meaning of “that.” All that to say, the Koine Greek mindset allows for the definite article to operate independent of a noun or other substantive for the purpose of pointing out the person or thing to which it refers.
 - e. τον is the definite article used by John to point out the One which the spiritual fathers have come to comprehensively know. Its grammar identifies that a boundary is being established and that which is in the boundary is that which is being pointed to by

του.

f. That which *του* points to is *απ αρχης* which is literally, “away from beginning.” This is a phrase used to describe an individual who has been in existence since a beginning. It is used here to describe Jesus as the One of whom the spiritual fathers have comprehensive knowledge.

g. A number of statements concerning the identification of what “away from beginning” could be supplied, however context of John’s writing expresses it as a reference to his opening statements to this group of believers in verses 1-3 of chapter 1 of this epistle.

1. “What was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our own eyes, that which we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life, and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

h. John opens his epistle by identifying Jesus Christ as that which “was from beginning.” The same phrase *απ αρχης* is used in this identification. It is therefore, God’s Son, Jesus Christ which is being referred to by John in verse 13.

i. John identifies that he is writing to the spiritual fathers on account of their comprehensive, working knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is this level of comprehensive knowledge of Jesus which marks their spiritual maturity at the spiritual father stage.

5. In defining the spiritual fathers as those having a comprehensive knowledge of Jesus, John identifies the highest stage in spiritual growth to which a believer can progress during their time on earth. Moving beyond this comprehensive working knowledge of Jesus requires a more complete knowledge of Him only ascertained by His presence.

a. 2 Peter 1:5-8 identifies that the purpose of spiritual maturity is to facilitate the believer’s growth into the “true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

b. 2 Peter 1:5-8 also identifies that there are processes and protocols in place through which the believer advances from one stage to another in the process of spiritual maturation.

6. This is the second group John identifies to his audience, but it is the highest level of spiritual maturity available on earth, apart from the physical presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7. Further harmony is found in Romans 8:29 which identifies those whom God foreknew would believe in the work of Christ were predestined to conformity to His Son, the firstborn. An identification that those who would believe would then be spiritually matured to the image of Jesus Christ.

8. The spiritual maturation process is designed to grow the believer towards Christ likeness, starting with their infancy and progressing towards their comprehensive knowledge of Him.

9. God has supplied the necessary resources to accomplish this endeavor as Ephesians 4:11-13 identifies:

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”