

Maturing in Jesus Mary Smith

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My husband, prophet Jim and I had gone to speak at a Conference in Africa. We were working in a beautiful Church - he was speaking in the morning, and I was speaking to women in the afternoon. One day, just after he had left, I began my teaching like this:- "Today, I want us to understand that, as God's women, we are saved by the blood of Jesus." Before I could continue, there was a great cry from the women "Alleluia! We are saved!" Something made me ask "What do you mean when you say 'I am saved?'" There was a silence. "Please tell me the biblical verses and stories you turn to when you say 'We are saved.'" There was longer silence. "Put up your hand if you are saved by Jesus." To my relief, most of the women lifted their hands. I took a deep breath, and pointing to one lady, I asked her to tell her story. She told me how she had attended an evangelistic meeting, heard about what Jesus had done for her, and had surrendered her life to him. It was a beautiful story. "Now" I said "tell me where in the Bible you would turn to explain your experience." More silence. This was getting embarrassing. "Well, can anybody help this lady out?" Eventually, after much encouragement, I managed to get one or two Bible references from the group.

Later, as I shared this with my husband, I began to understand that many of God's women in Africa are saved, and have a very real love for Jesus, but do not know where to look in the Bible for support and encouragement for their faith. This doesn't not only apply to salvation, but to many other areas as well. As a teacher, I immediately wanted to do something about this, so here I have collected together just a few of the main Christian experiences, and laid out the biblical foundations for them. I hope that this will result in stronger and more confident African women, better able to face the challenges to their daily lives and the challenges to their faith.

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“I’m saved?”

Study these verses in the Bible:-

1. The thief on the cross.	Luke 23: 39-43
2. Peter walking on the sea.	Matthew 14: 22-33
3. By grace we are saved.	Ephesians 2: 8
4. By the cross of Jesus.	1 Peter 1: 18-19

Teaching.

People are saved when they turn to Jesus. We all know this, but cannot often find the right place in the Bible to support it. But fortunately, this teaching is easily found. The thief on the cross is our starting point. Here we see that men are helpless to save themselves. This thief could do nothing to earn his salvation. In this one story we see the clear difference between the Christian faith and all other religions. Other religions teach that we can earn our salvation by the quality of our good works. But be honest - we all know that this is impossible. It is impossible to lead a life good enough for God. But Jesus showed that we are saved by his mercy and love. That's what the thief on the cross saw, and reached out towards. He did not reach in vain.

The story of Peter walking on the water makes exactly the same point. Peter started off well, but as soon as he saw the wind and the waves, he began to drown. Then he had to cry out to Jesus “Lord, save me.” This is the biblical teaching on salvation. We have to reach out for the hands of Jesus if we are going to be saved. There is no other way.

The Apostle Paul puts these things well. He says that we are saved by grace, and by grace alone. A good way to remember the meaning of grace is to say this:- “ Grace is God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” It is the goodness and mercy of God which sent his Son to be the way of our salvation. Peter finishes our teaching with his powerful statement about the uselessness of the things of the world to save us. After all, how could we possibly buy our way into the presence of God, which is what other faiths are telling us we can do. No! We are saved by the precious blood of Jesus, which on the cross gave us what we most needed - forgiveness, hope and new beginning. In other words - salvation.

Key verse to learn:- “Then Peter got out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out “Lord save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14: 29-31)

Saved by the cross

Study these verses in the Bible:-

Isaiah 53: 1-6	The suffering servant.
Mark chapters 14-15	The death of Jesus.
1 Peter 1:18	The end of our empty way of life.
Hebrews 2:14-15	Death destroyed by the death of Jesus.
Colossians 2:13-15	The victory of Jesus over the enemy.

Teaching.

God’s people know that their salvation was earned at the cross of Calvary. But that is often as far as their knowledge goes. The Bible has much to say about the cross. It gives us many different understandings. It teaches us:-

Jesus paid the price of sin. **(John 1:29)**

Jesus took our place. **(Romans 5:6)**

Jesus dealt with death. **(Hebrews 2: 14-15)**

Jesus made peace by his blood. **(Colossians 1:20)**

Jesus won a great victory. (Colossians 2:15)

Jesus set us free. (Ephesians 2:8)

Jesus broke the curse. (Galatians 3:13)

But how do we remember all this wide range of teaching? Each different piece of teaching has a powerful picture linked to it. These pictures will help us understand and remember what the Bible is teaching. Here are the pictures. Pick one or two of them, and learn them, with the verse which is attached to them. Then you will be able to use them to strengthen your faith, and the faith of other people. You will also be able to use them in your evangelisation.

Jesus paid the price of sin. (John 1:29)

Imagine that you have gone to the market, to buy food. You see many lovely fruits, and knowing that your family like all these things, you put them all in your basket. Then the seller asks you for the money. You suddenly realise that you have none. The seller gets angry. “You are a thief” he cries “you want my fruit, but you won’t pay.” You try to defend yourself, but a crowd has gathered, all shouting and pushing you. You panic, and then suddenly a friend steps into the crowd, and pays your money. The crowd go away, the seller is happy, and you are free to go back to your family - with your fruits!

In the same way, Jesus has paid the price for our sin, so that we can live in peace, and enjoy the blessings of God.

Jesus took our place. (Romans 5:6)

You are standing in a court of law. You have done something wrong - you know you have, and now the sentence is coming. You have no influence over this court or this Judge. In fact you know you are guilty, and you fear for your future. No more freedom, no more being with your family or friends, no more time to talk in the Market or sit under a tree. Your whole life is about to be destroyed. But just before the Judge speaks the terrible words “guilty” a man stands up in the court, and says “Judge, I will go to prison instead of this person.” The Judge agrees, and you are free - free to go

and do the things you like doing, to be with your friends, to sit and enjoy your freedom.

In the same way, Jesus has stood in our place, so that justice might be satisfied, and we might be free from our sentence.

Jesus dealt with death. (Hebrews 2: 14-15)

In the forest there was a very large snake. Everyone was afraid of this snake, because it was big, powerful and very dangerous. Anyone it saw it bit, and that person was sure to die. Everyone was told “beware of the snake in the forest.” One day, you are walking home on the path through the forest, when the snake appears in front of you. You are afraid, because you know that the snake will bite you, and you are going to die. You want to run, but you are so terrified, that you just stand. The snake hisses and comes near to you. You shut your eyes, waiting for the terrible bite, and pain and death. But nothing happens. You open your eyes, and see that that snake is dead! Its head has been cut off. You run back to the village and shout “The snake is dead! I have seen it with its head cut off. We need no longer be afraid of the snake!”

In the same way, Jesus has destroyed death, so that we who love him might not have to live with the fear of death.

Jesus made peace by his blood. (Colossians 1:20)

Two men were gambling in the village, and suddenly one of them stood up and shouted to the other “You are cheating.” In no time, all the village was aroused, and fighting broke out, as people took sides. One child ran to find the Mama of the village, and although she was very small, she pushed her way through the fighting, until she faced the two men who had started it all. For a while she spoke, and when she had finished, the two men shook hands, the fighting stopped, and life returned to normal.

In the same way, Jesus has made peace for us - between us and the justice of God, by his blood shed on the cross..

Jesus won a great victory. (Colossians 2:15)

The Christians in the orphanage were in despair. They had spent all the money they had, and now the children were without food. They knew that something had to happen quickly, but they didn't know what could happen. They felt completely defeated. They had opened the orphanage to care for hungry children, and they believed God had called them to this, but now they had failed. "Perhaps something will happen today" said the Manager of the orphanage. But although he looked out all day, nothing happened.

Then, late in the evening, a car arrived. He went out to meet it. Two men stepped out, and said "We think God has spoken to us, and you need this money." They gave him an envelope, and drove away. When he opened it, there was enough money to buy food for all the children. "Alleluia" he cried. "We have won a great victory." There was much food for all the children that night.

In the same way, Jesus has won a great victory for us. He has defeated the enemy, and given us new hope. Alleluia!

Jesus set us free. (Ephesians 2:8)

A man borrowed money for a project, and then found he could not pay it back. Day after day he worried about this, and day after day the one he had borrowed from would say "If you don't pay, I will have you thrown into prison." He tried everything he could think of, but still he could not repay. The one owed the money said "Tomorrow, I am coming for my money, and if you don't have it, you are going to prison, and I will make sure it is the worst prison I can find."

The next day came, and the debtor was terrified. He hid inside his home, and would not even come out. A friend of the man he owed money came to the door and called out "Peter, come out. I have something to tell you." Shaking with fear, the debtor opened the door. "It's OK" the man said, "he forgives you this debt. You are free."

In the same way, Jesus has set us free from the debts of sin, and the power of the enemy, that we might be free and live in joy.

Jesus broke the curse. (Galatians 1:13)

A woman went to the fetish, because she wanted to harm one of God's people. "Put a curse on this person" she said, and gave her money. The Fetish priest chanted a powerful curse, and it flew towards God's person. Surely this person would be broken by this curse? But as the curse came to God's person, it did not strike the heart of the person, but struck the cross of Christ, which was lifted high over God's person, as it is for all who love Jesus. The curse was completely destroyed. The woman who had gone to the fetish went to see the results of her work, but found God's person happy and at peace. "What has happened to the curse" she asked? "Broken by the cross of Jesus" was the reply.

Key verse to learn:- "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
(Romans 5:1)

Mature in Jesus Part 2

"Where do you think you are going?"

Study these verses in the Bible:-

1. John 5:24.	No judgment for God's people.
2 John 14:1-2	There is a place prepared for you
3. Revelation 22:27	Lamb's book of life
4. Philippians 1:21	For me to live is Christ, to die is gain

Teaching.

Many of God's people are confused about heaven, which is sad, because that is where we are going! The Bible teaches us a lot about how we get there, and what Heaven is like. For us, knowing that we are going there is very important. Let's study heaven together.

The Apostle John starts the teaching, by explaining that all who believe in Jesus will not have to face the judgment, which comes at the end of time. Jesus has paid the price of our freedom. We are not judged, because it is

already written in heaven that we belong to him. The blood shed at the cross is enough for us. When we die, we pass into the place he has prepared for us, as He himself taught in John chapter 14. What else have we to worry about? The Apostle Paul says just this in his letter to the Philippians - “For me to live is Christ to die is gain.” In other words, the Christian cannot lose. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die we die to the Lord and pass into his presence forever.

What is heaven like? The Bible gives us many insights into heaven. We learn that:-

- Heaven is where God is. (Revelation 4)
- It's a place for those who love him. (John 14:23 Revelation 22:27)
- The decision to go there is made here on earth, by our response to Jesus. There is no second chance. (Mark 8:38 Revelation 22:27)
- There is no place where we wait, to be cleansed of our sin. That is all dealt with at the cross. (John 1:35: Revelation 5:5)
- We will retain our unique personalities. (Mark 9:4)
- Our relationships with each other will be far deeper than any marriage relationship. (Mark 12:25)
- It is a place of beauty, of worship, and of joy. (Revelation 21:4)
- There is work to do - to pray, to worship, and to be involved with God in his eternal work. (Revelation 5:13)
- We are linked with God's people here on earth. There is only one Church. (Hebrews 12:1)

There is a lot more teaching - about heaven and all the things concerning it. In fact the Bible is very detailed about our heavenly home, and if God's people want to know, they can study for themselves, especially in the book of Revelation. But what is written here is enough to support our hope that we are going there - to the place where God is forever. What more could we ask for?

Key verse to learn. Philippians 1:21 “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.”

“The Holy Spirit will do it!”

Study these verses in the Bible:-

1. Acts 1 and 2: 1-4
2. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30
3. Ephesians 4:11
4. Galatians 5:22-23

Teaching.

We can easily say the words “Holy Spirit” but what does this mean? Our God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Romans 5: 5-8) The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to equip us for the Christian life which Jesus wants us to lead. He empowers us for service. He does this in two main ways - first by gifting us and second by producing the fruits of his presence in our lives. These two experiences need to be understood together. Let’s look in more detail at Holy Spirit:-

His person.

Jesus promised to send us “another Counselor” (John 14:15), the Holy Spirit, who would lead us into all truth. The Holy Spirit is in a unique relationship with the Father and the Son. (Mark 1:10-11: Romans 8:9-11) His function is to equip us for following Jesus. So he gives us power, (Acts 1:8 and Acts 2:1-4) and we have to be filled with that power daily. (Ephesians 5:18)

His presence in the life of the believer.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is shown in the life of the believer in two ways - gifts and fruit.

His gifts.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are seen in 1 Corinthians 12: 7-11 and 27-31. There are also lists in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10. It is good to study these gifts, but we must also remember that these titles are very general. For

example, “evangelist” is one word, but has many different forms. The same is true for all the gifts. We should want these gifts, but not forget that the greatest of them is love. (1 Corinthians 13) What gift do you see developing in your life? Perhaps you should ask your Pastor, group leader, or a Christian friend.

His fruit. Galatians 5: 22

Along with the growth of the gifts of the Spirit come the fruits of the Spirit. A fruit tree is no good without fruit. In fact without fruit, how can it prove to be a fruit tree? The same is true for the believer. We must produce fruit - how else can we prove the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Each fruit listed in Galatians chapter 5 is a blessing to us, but like the gifts each fruit is general heading. There are many demonstrations of love, many ways of experiencing joy and so on. The list needs to be studied with prayer and with care. Where are the fruits, or some of them, showing themselves in your life?

There is a common expression in Africa- “The Holy Spirit can do it!” He certainly can, but this must not be used as an excuse for laziness, or a lack of disciplined study of what the Bible teaches.

Key verse to learn: “Be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18)

The Bible has the answer!

Study these Bible verses:

- Psalm 119:105. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”
- 2 Timothy 3:16 “All scripture is God breathed..”
- Matthew 5:17 Jesus came to fulfill the law.

Every preacher says “the Bible says.” But how does the Bible speak? It’s not a cassette we can put into a machine, which will give us all the answers we need. What must we do to hear the Bible speaking to our daily lives? We need a simple method of study. There are some books which help us study the Bible daily, and these are useful if we can afford them. But there is an easy method for Bible study, which won’t cost anything:-

Choose a book from the Bible.

Read 10 to 15 verses a day. Try to read a whole story or piece of teaching. The Bible is divided up into easy sections already, to help us in our study. Read books of the Bible which will help you. Start with any of these:- the Gospels of Mark, and Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, Genesis, Exodus, 1 and 2 Samuel, Jonah, Haggai. I suggest these books first, because they contain many stories, and are easy to read and understand. Perhaps you don't have a Bible, or are not so good at reading. This need not stop you. Find someone else who has a Bible, and study together. There are audio cassettes of the Bible. Perhaps your Church can buy one or two of them, and you can all listen and study together.

Then:-

1. Pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance.
2. Read / listen to your passage.
3. Ask yourself:-
 - What is the most important part of this passage?
 - How can this touch my life as a Christian?
 - What am I going to do about it?
4. Pray that what you have learnt you will do. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

Some people have a small notebook, in which they write down the things God is showing them in the Bible. This is useful, because it builds up into a really good reference book. If you can afford such a book and pen, this is a good idea. However, it is not essential. If you are studying carefully, day by day, the Holy Spirit will store up many treasures in your heart. If we do this every day, then over the years, we will read much of the Bible, and the Holy Spirit will change our lives.

Here is a plan of the first 9 chapters of Mark's Gospel, which lasts for four weeks. This will give you a good idea of how the Bible divides up for study.

Monday	Chapter 1: verses 1-13
Tuesday	Chapter 1: verses 14-28

Wednesday	Chapter 1: verses 29-45
Thursday	Chapter 2: verses 1-12
Friday	Chapter 2: verses 13-22
Saturday	Chapter 2:verses 23-28
Sunday	Chapter 3: verses 1-12

Monday	Chapter 3: verses 13-34
Tuesday	Chapter 4: verses 1-9
Wednesday	Chapter 4: verses 10-25
Thursday	Chapter 4: verses 26-41
Friday	Chapter 5: verses 1-20
Saturday	Chapter 5: verses 21-34
Sunday	Chapter 5: verses 35-43

Monday	Chapter 6: verses 1-12
Tuesday	Chapter 6: verses 13-29
Wednesday	Chapter 6: verses 30-44
Thursday	Chapter 6: verses 45-56
Friday	Chapter 7: verses 1-13
Saturday	Chapter 7: verses 14-23
Sunday	Chapter 7: verses 24-37

Monday	Chapter 8: verses 1-9
Tuesday	Chapter 8: verses 10- 25
Wednesday	Chapter 8: verses 27-38
Thursday	Chapter 9: verses 1-12
Friday	Chapter 9: verses 14-29
Saturday	Chapter 9: verses 30-37
Sunday	Chapter 9: verses 38-50

“I belong to the body!”

Study these Bible verses:-

- John 15:5 Staying in the vine.
- 1 Cor 12:12-13 Staying in the body.
- Ephesians 5:25 The love of Jesus for the body.

Teaching.

One stick cannot heat the pot! One animal does not make a flock. We can't really belong to Jesus if we are not in the body of Christ. The body of Christ here on earth is the Church. We are part of the body which is the whole church with Jesus as its head. This brings us many blessings, and I would not want to be without them. It also brings many struggles, but every family has its struggles - this is a mark of the living vibrant family. Some people tell me that they can be a Christian without belonging to a Church. I do not agree with them. The Bible speaks from beginning to end about God's people living together as a community. We belong together, and cannot last long without other members of the body being with us. People who live outside the body seldom grow as Christians, and easily fade away. They can fall into heresy, and there is no one to warn them. Most of all, they lack the support and comfort which other Christians can bring to them.

What does it mean in practice to belong to the body?

- Commitment to one Church, where I can belong and I can serve.
- Regular attendance, and support of one Church, so it can grow strong.
- Loving the members of the Church where I belong, and encouraging them.
- Working out God's plan for my life with the members of my Church.

MOSTLY - it means we are living as God intended. We are in line with his will, and we will be blessed.

The problem is that many of God's people, especially in Africa, do not commit themselves to one local fellowship, where they can grow, and give their support. They drift around from Church to Church, from Preacher to Preacher, from Pastor to Pastor. This is NOT belonging to the body. This is a shallow commitment, which brings blessing to nobody, encouragement to nobody, and growth to no part of the body. It comes into being because so many of God's people in Africa want "My blessing now!" Looking too much at what faith can do for them, they forget that they have to give much to the body, if they want to get much back from it.

This has got to stop. It is not a Biblical position, and any who are doing this are dangerously close to living outside of the body. That can only lead to trouble.

Key verse to learn. “We who are many are one body” (1 Cor 10:17)

“Forgive us - forgive them.”

Study these Bible verses:-

- 1 John 1:8-9 We are forgiven.
- Hebrews 9: 14 No more guilt.
- Matthew 6:12 Forgiving others.

Teaching

There are two parts to forgiveness, and the Bible explains both.

1 John 1:8-9

The first part involves ourselves. We think that even when we have confessed, we still need to feel guilty. Nothing could be more wrong! Once we have confessed, then that is the end of it. No more guilt! We may have to take some action - perhaps seeking out someone and apologising, or asking for forgiveness, returning something stolen - and the Holy Spirit will give his guidance here. But forgiveness means forgiveness - total and complete, because of what Jesus has done on the cross. Many of God's people do not understand this, and do not live in the power of this teaching. The Bible is quite clear:- Jesus took our sins and nailed them to them to the cross, so that we do not have to endure the pain and sorrow of sin. It is time for many of God's people to move into this experience of being forgiven, and if that means you, why not start now? Confess your sins, claim the blood of Jesus, and walk away forgiven. Jesus takes our sins, and places them behind the cross. He puts them there so that we can't see them anymore. So many of us have to move into this forgiveness.

Matthew 6:12

The second part is that we must forgive others. I've heard many people say “I can never forgive him or her for what they have done.” But our own forgiveness depends on us forgiving others. Jesus said that we should pray “Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors.” The two go together - we are forgiven, and forgive. We must have a forgiving heart - is

this true of you? Your experience of forgiveness can start now, and so can your experience of forgiving others. It is not easy. It's good to begin by bringing any unforgiveness we have to God, so that he can change our heart. Forgiving others begins in the change of our own heart. If we cannot forgive from the heart, then our forgiving is of little value. The Lord has to begin with us.

This is not easy. There is no easy way to learn forgiveness. No amount of jumping around in worship will do it. No amount of "my miracle now" will do it. Forgiveness is a miracle, but it is also a slow and hard discipline to learn. But without it, we will never be able to truly know and follow Jesus.

I once met a woman who was so angry! Everything she did and said seemed to come from an angry heart. One day she came to see me, and I asked her why she was so angry. "It's my husband. I can't forgive him for the things he has done." I explained the Biblical position of forgiveness to her, and she went away even more angry!! But some days later she came back. "I have done that" she said, "but I'm still angry for the things God has done." I asked her what things, but she wouldn't tell me. "You will have to ask God's forgiveness for this attitude" I said, and she was very angry with me! Some day later, she came back, and cried for a long time. "I have asked forgiveness from God" she said "but I am still angry with myself." I asked her what she was angry about, and she told me that some years earlier, her baby had died just as it was born. She was angry with herself for what she thought she had done. We talked, and she prayed and went away. Some months later I got a letter from her. It just said "I'm not angry anymore." Praise God for the blessing of forgiveness.

Key verse to learn "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34)