



“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity”.  
2 Peter 3:18

Reading: Isaiah 4:2-5:7; 2 Peter 1:3-11; 2 Peter 3:11-18

## Introduction

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## Introduction

I don't know about you, but I love gardening. There's just something about getting out there, planting a little seedling, or tree, tending it, and seeing it grow. Growth brings such pleasure, especially when that growth results in producing much fruit. When we lived in the country outside Bunbury in a little place called Burekup, we had an orange orchard – about 90 or so trees. They were just little saplings when we moved in. Over the ten years we were there, my husband nurtured and cared for them. He cherished them and gave them so much interest that sometimes I would get jealous and go out in the orchard, stand there, like an orange tree, just to get his attention! But did those trees ever respond to his love and care by growing healthy and strong and producing amazing oranges. It was worth all the work and love that he gave them.

Now imagine yourself as a plant in God's garden, growing under His love and care. What does growth look like in your life? If you asked those who know you well, would they say you are a thriving and healthy plant or a plant that is just surviving? **Do you think you are growing and increasing in godliness?** What does this progress in growth look like over time in your life?

Glancing over the audience, there are sure to be various stages of growth among you, depending on your age, your circumstances, and your faith journey. Some of you may answer “yes” – you can see that God has changed you over the years you've walked with Him, while others of you may hesitate – you're just not really sure. Maybe you're even wondering if it's Scriptural to think that you *can* grow stronger in godliness.

Well, godly growth is Biblical. It's also not optional. If we are alive in Christ, we must grow; otherwise we aren't alive! That makes our topic for today so very vital to each one of us. We rightly spend much time speaking about how the gospel is good news for sinners, but part of the gospel that perhaps hasn't been talked about enough is the part about the beautiful work of the Spirit in the life of the believer to grow us into the image of Jesus Christ, to transform us. So often we talk about being saved by grace, but then the conversation seems to falter. Perhaps we're worried that if we speak about our growth that we may in some way be trying to contribute to our salvation. This, of course, would not be Biblical. Salvation is a finished work in our lives. **We**

don't have to grow to be saved, but we are growing because we have been saved! The grace that made us godly is not a powerless thing. It's a grace that results in faith going beyond what we believe and blossoming into a dynamic part of all we do.

So why do we often hesitate to think, let alone speak, about how we are becoming more godly? Certainly the Canons of Dort (Ch1 Art 12) don't have this hesitancy. There we read: *"The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance, however, not by inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins and a hunger and thirst for righteousness."*

Growth embedded in Jesus Christ makes us stronger and produces fruit in the lives of the elect. And so, this morning, we're going to look at why we need to grow and the means God gives us to grow. We're also going to identify ways to evaluate our growth and threats to that growth. We'll finish off by looking at growth spurts and our state of preparedness for the harvest.

Our key text for today taken from 2 Peter 3 reads: *"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity"*. So no matter where you find yourselves in the growth cycle this morning, sisters, it's wonderful that you are all here, as together we can explore what *godly growth* is all about. We'll use the tools of Scripture with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, coupled with the love of one another to undertake this introspection of our souls.

## 1. The Garden

### Gardening in Scripture

God frequently uses agricultural metaphors to explain spiritual truths to us. The Jewish people were almost all farmers and would have been extremely familiar with the growth cycle. It determined their yearly calendar and feasts. They were very aware of their *dependence* on God's opening of His hand to provide growth. So the parable of the sower, the parables of the wheat and

weeds, the references to God's field, vines, branches, pruning and harvesting all would have resonated with them.

Let's look for a moment at the role of gardens in Scripture. The first mention of a garden is found in Genesis 2. There we discover that God planted a garden in Eden and placed man there to tend and keep it. We also read from Isaiah 5 just now and saw how God planted His people Israel, wanting them to grow in holiness and godliness, to produce fruit for Him. God went to great lengths for His plants, digging up the ground, clearing the stones – in fact, God says, what more could I have done for my vineyard? But when God looked for His deserved harvest, the fruit was wild. And so He removed His protective hedge, broke down its wall, didn't prune it, and made it into a wasteland of briars and thorns.

The New Testament continues the planting and harvesting allegories. In John 15 Jesus calls Himself the Vine and we His branches. Matthew 13 recounts the twin parables of the sower and the weeds.

### **Purpose of growth**

Even though our society today does not relate to the agricultural processes on the same level as the Israelites, it's important for us to grasp these concepts Jesus uses to teach us. Dear sister plants: we are *covenant* seed planted in God's covenantal garden. We've been given everything by which we need to grow. We all live in our own little patch in God's vast garden that is the church throughout the world (1 Corinthians 3:9). The little patch we're in contains other plants we know well. Maybe it contains some younger, small seedlings, maybe some colourful teenage plants, maybe some grey haired plants that are close to being harvested. All around us are plants in various stages of growth. We know that His garden is enormous and we often think of plants afar off, as well, but realise that most of our effort lies close to the home patch, beginning with ourselves and other plants in our care.

God has done so much for us by placing us in His garden. We couldn't grow if we hadn't been planted there by Him. We are completely dependent on Him for our growth. He has given us everything we need in order to mature. And so, He desires to see our growth into strong, plants, able to bear fruit. Just like it gives us great pleasure to see fruit on plants we have cared for, it

delights God when we depend on Him and use what He's given to grow strong in faith and bear fruit for Him, fruit that brings Him glory."

## 2. The Growth

### Process of growth

So now that we realise that to grow means to increase in dependency on God and to glorify Him through the fruit we bear, how do we go from little fledgling seedlings to strong, mature, thriving plants that resemble Christ? The first thing to realise is perfection will never be reached in this life. With LD24 we confess: "*we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.*" So we need to strive for perfection, while knowing it will not be fully realised until the day of the harvest. So how do we strive? How do we grow strong?

The book of 2 Peter is all about growing in the faith. Peter's passion for growth shines from its very pages. Perhaps because he too was transformed by *Christ's power*. He grew from denying Christ to being the rock on which Christ built His church. If anyone could write about growing in godliness it was Peter! And he starts in chapter 1 by showing us that it is only through Christ's divine power that we can grow (1:3,4): "*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*" Increasing in godliness comes from **growing in** your knowledge of God and Christ-like qualities and **dying** to the world's corruption and sin. **Growth in godliness means that through faith that is deeply grounded in Christ we *more and more* become like Him!** Belonging to Him makes a difference to the way we live!

The catechism describes this coming to life of our new nature in Q&A 90: "*It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.*"

But it's not always easy, is it. Our old nature still pulls; it can't be killed this side of heaven. This growing in godliness isn't always as clear cut as we would like it to be. There's tension, tension that exists between the flourishing plant we want to be and the plant that we used to be and

sometimes still act like we are. But as we grow in faith and godliness we will begin to resemble the plant God wants us to be.

### **Three sources of nourishment for growth**

Apart from Jesus Christ we can't do anything (John 15:5). We certainly can't grow in our own power. And we don't have to. Because we have been grafted into Christ, the germinating power is from His Spirit and we receive the best nourishment ever (Romans 11:17)! **Christ is our Source of growth, and abiding in Him we receive all we need to bear fruit.** Jesus tells us this in John 15: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself...neither can you, unless you abide in Me. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit."*

When we are grafted into Christ and abide in Him, our growth is sure to follow. Abiding in Christ means that the fruit growing from our plant is a result of our plant being connected to the Source and receiving nourishment from it. To paraphrase the Lord's Supper form: *He nourishes and refreshes our hungry and thirsty plants with His crucified body and shed blood to the day of the harvest.* When we abide in Christ, we form an inseparable unity with Him. We are no longer our own but belong to our faithful Saviour.

So, when **abiding in Christ**, what nourishment do we receive that enables growth? When Peter says in 2 Peter 1:3 that God has given us everything we need for a godly life, what specifically does he mean? Let's look at three types of nourishment that we receive:

#### ***Nourishment source 1: God's Word and Sacraments***

Our Gardener gives us His Word as a growth instruction manual. We receive fertiliser twice a week as we listen to **God's Word proclaimed** to us by His gardening assistants (the ministers). Other assistants (elders and deacons) visit us in our homes and keep a watchful and caring eye over our plants. Then there are the **remembrance feasts** (Lord's Supper celebrations) that we attend with the other plants around us, reminding us of the love and care our Gardener has for us and what He's all done for us. We also witness the **promises made to the new plants** joining our plots (baptism). Powerful promises are given to us in the Word (1 Peter 1:4), promises to help us in

growing in knowledge and grace. Promises to prosper our growth, promises to give us hope and a future (Jeremiah 29).

**God's Word is powerful** in the life of His plants, even transcending time, speaking to the plants of today as much as it did to the plants of old. It can change any wilting plant into a flourishing one. It speaks to plants of all ages and stages. Never underestimate its power! It will not return empty, Isaiah 55 tells us, but will **accomplish God's purposes**. And, we are starting to understand that God's purpose for the life of His plants is strong growth that leads to fruit that in turn leads to His glory! So let's devotedly use and value this means for growth: God's Word and sacraments!

#### *Nourishment source 2: Christ's Spirit (John 14:16)*

We are connected to the Vine, the Vine who saved us. But Christ didn't stop at saving us. He continues to nourish us through His Spirit. **His Spirit is our Helper**, always beside us, ever encouraging us to flourish. He guides us in the ways of truth, helping us to understand and use the instruction manual we've been given. He reminds us of the promises of the Gardener. He spurs us on to grow in godliness and turn away from corruption, to get rid of wild growth and encourages us to grow above our graft line. The Spirit helps us digest the food the Gardener provides and to use it for our growth. And when we see growth, the **Spirit assures us** that we have indeed been called to be a plant that will one day be harvested and taken to the new garden being prepared for us (Romans 8:16-17).

#### *Nourishment source 3: A close covenantal relationship of love with our Gardener*

The close connection we enjoy with our Gardener is what Scripture calls God's covenant. It is a unique divine relationship in which we have our place as God's plants in His garden. As plants we need to grow to maturity, increasing in the wisdom of God and obediently fulfilling the Gardener's directives for our growth. This relationship is a very meaningful one, one beyond comparison! Our Gardener's divine love provides us with all things we need for body and soul. His love came to us first, and we respond to Him in thankfulness, growing in our knowledge and love of Him, wanting our whole life to be to His glory. And so, the more our covenant life with our Gardener grows, the more we grow. **Our relationship with our Gardener becomes the most important thing in our lives**. We carve out room in our busy existence for Him. We long to spend time thinking about Him and meditating

on Him. Sounds simple, doesn't it. After all, the modern plant can go to a myriad of blogs, websites, have the greatest apps on its phone that make it so easy to meditate on God's Word, even though it has zero free time. But is this what meditating means? The righteous man of Psalm 1 we are told, the man planted by streams of water who yields fruit, meditates day and night. This was no 30 second kiss and drop in the morning! **To meditate means to think deeply about something, or in this case, Someone.** It means sitting down with the One who is most important to you and conversing with Him, conversing in love, in vulnerability, listening for His still, quiet voice in this world of noise. It means growing ever closer to God. It means looking forward to spending time with Him, that it's the highlight of your day, that it's something you can't do without, don't want to do without. And while devotionals, and apps, and blogs, and books are all things we can use to help us in our relationship, there is *nothing* like the powerful, life-giving love letter that God has given directly to you. There is nothing like Him speaking to you and you responding to Him in prayer. There is nothing like sitting still in His presence after your time together and just simply enjoying His face shining upon you. **You can't meditate fast.** You need to slow it down and absorb the beauty and majesty of your Gardener. Meditating on God and His Word is where growing in the knowledge of God blossoms into a relationship of growing in love *with* God. **It's where knowing things about God leads to knowing God Himself!** It's where religion becomes a relationship.

When we start our day meditating on God, even perhaps memorising the Words He has spoken to us, we will carry thoughts of Him throughout our entire day. That's what Psalm 1 is talking about. Our leaf will not wither but rather our tree will prosper, because we delight in God. Talking to Him becomes our very spiritual breath. It's crucial to our growth to spend time with God and be still in His presence every day (Psalm 46; 1 Kings 19:12).

### **Evaluating growth**

But what about if you're not sure whether you're growing, or what kind of fruit you're bearing? If you're not sure whether you have, as we read from the Canons of Dort (Ch1 Art12): "*a hunger and thirst for righteousness?*" Well, the Bible contains many places where we can assess our growth, in fact, many more than we have time for today. The fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5 is one well known list. The beatitudes are also a very helpful tool for checking our attitudes. But since today we're focusing on 2 Peter, we'll explore the seven fruits the apostle encourages us to use in order to

enrich and add to our treasured faith, fruits that are found on strong, growing plants abiding in Christ. 2 Peter 1:5-11 lists them for us, and although we read them earlier, let's read them once again:

*“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

**Virtue.** In Greek, virtue describes a heart that's morally pure. From this heart springs a moral life. In the context of married women, it could mean how faithful you are to your husband, whether you seek attentions of other men, or whether you wish your husband was more like another man. As a single woman it could mean not lusting after men or making compromises about who you will date. The growing godly woman strives to grow in virtue!

**Knowledge.** There's so much to learn about God from the Bible and the world He created. It's a treasure trove that knows no limits. Knowledge here denotes rich insight into Who God is. Do you make time to do this? Are you as dedicated to spending time in growing in the knowledge of God as you are to eating breakfast, going to the gym, or picking up that morning coffee? The growing godly woman strives to grow in the knowledge of God!

### **Self control**

Are you able to control yourself – your thoughts, your words, your actions, your emotions? Are you perhaps an addictive personality that struggles with self control? Are you controlling your phone, your social media, your tongue, your eating, your shopping, your temper, or are they controlling you? Are you curbing your longings for things of this world? The growing godly woman strives to grow in self-control.

### **Steadfastness**

Another word for steadfastness is perseverance, or patient endurance. Without perseverance we would give up and say, “I can't do this God, you're asking too much of me, you're making my life much too difficult. I can't even

survive here, much less grow.” Perseverance means remembering and believing that we have access to God’s divine power which has given us everything we need for a godly life (2 Peter 1:3). Perseverance means using this power and persevering in the face of a difficult marriage, persevering after a sleep deprived night caring for sick children, persevering through the emotionally charged teenage years, persevering in the face of illness, difficulties and challenges. The growing godly woman strives to grow in perseverance!

### **Godliness**

Godliness is reflecting God’s character in your life. In older books it is often referred to as piety, or fear of the Lord. Can people see Christ when they see you? Do you reflect His morality, His virtues? Or do you just blend into the landscape of the fallen world around you? Do others notice that you respect God more and more and see this respect displayed in your outward actions? The growing godly woman strives to grow in godliness!

### **Brotherly affection**

For today, we might call this one sisterly affection! It speaks about the affection that we’re to have for one another as sisters in Christ. It’s affection for the sister that we find annoying. It’s affection for the sister we find arrogant. It’s affection for the sister we find critical. It’s affection for the sister that’s hurt us. It’s affection for the elderly, the lonely, the sick. It’s affection for someone who isn’t like us. It’s affection that goes past our feelings and translates into our actions and prayers. This is a tall order. But affection doesn’t mean you have to hang out with everyone all the time and be close friends with them. But it does mean you must be affectionate toward them, sincerely, from the heart. The growing godly woman strives to grow in sisterly affection.

### **Love**

We need to make every effort to perfect our faith with all-encompassing love. The original language seems to denote that this love is a general love for everyone, Christian or not. It’s being kind to everyone in all circumstances. It’s a kindness that supersedes everything, having as its source the love of Christ for us. Can people see Christ’s love flow out of you when they watch how you respond to situations, how you treat others? Do you react with kindness when you are rear-ended in busy traffic? When someone cuts in front of you in the Woolworths line up? How about when you

receive those annoying phone calls from overseas telemarketers? How do you respond? In John 13:34 Jesus commands: *“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”* Jesus gave His life for you sisters. What can you do to give to others? The growing godly woman strives to grow in love.

That’s quite the growth checker the apostle Peter provides for us. Does it leave you feeling inadequate, like you haven’t grown enough and aren’t bearing enough fruit? I know I felt that way when I stopped and measured myself against them. But remember: God is not looking for perfection – He knows we are weak and sinful. That’s why He gives us His divine power, His Holy Spirit, to enable us! So don’t expect strength in yourself; don’t think great of yourself and your abilities, but be genuine in your life with God and with one another, abiding in Christ, acknowledging it is Him that supplies your every need for growth. But make no mistake: **Our Gardener, dear plants, is looking for evidence of our growth. Strong growth that bears fruit.** Many people not grafted into Christ, people we see in the world around us, seem to bear fruit. They may be kind, may show self control, may even live a moral lifestyle. But the fact is that their fruit is fruit that is merely stapled to the tree. It won’t last, but will rot away eventually. **It’s not enough that you’re simply bearing fruit.** You need to bear fruit that will last, and for that you need to live in covenant obedience to your Gardener, longing for and using the nourishment He provides. If we aren’t in Christ, our fruit becomes nothing but self-righteousness or legalistic Christianity. So **merely trying our best won’t do it.** Our hearts must be connected to the love of Christ. That is the only way to grow and bear fruit that will last.

In Christ, our motivation for growth is thankfulness for His self-sacrificial love toward us, a love that resulted in us abiding in Him. He paid the ultimate price in the garden – the garden of Gethsemane – to plant us in God’s garden of grace. He paid the ultimate price so that we could be joined to Him, so we could draw all our strength from Him and grow in Him. So check your growth using the guides given in the Bible! Check what nourishment you are feeding your soul with. Pray for power and courage to make the changes needed to enable growth. To enable your life to bring God glory. And don’t be discouraged. John Calvin once said: *“No one can travel so far that he does not make some progress each day. So let us never give up. Then we shall move forward daily in the Lord’s way. And let us never despair because of our limited success. Even though it is so much less than we would like, our*

*labour is not wasted when today is better than yesterday.*" (Institutes of the Christian religion.)

### Three threats to growth

I wish we didn't have to talk about the enemy. You know. The weeds that grow in our gardens. The weeds that started growing ever since Adam and Eve were banished from the perfect garden and had to live East of Eden in a place where weeds became a fact of their and our very existence. We must identify these enemies that threaten our plant's welfare. LD52 tells us who and what they are: the Devil, the world and our own flesh.

#### *Threat #1: The Devil*

The Devil, Jesus warns us in Matthew 13, is the sower of all weeds. He is a deceiver, a liar, an accuser, a tempter. He is the one who sows tares in amongst the wheat. He has his own gospel, his own ministers, his own doctrine. He doesn't go around saying: "Good morning, I am the Devil, and I'm here to make your life miserable." No, he **masquerades**, often as the good gardener's assistant. Peter tells us the Devil **secretly** brings in destruction. He's very **subtle**. He's a wolf in sheep's clothing. His goal is to have you cut off and cast into the fire. The Devil would even kill the elect plants, if that were possible.

2 Peter writes that one way the Devil sows weeds is by means of false teaching. Now you may think this will never happen in our Free Reformed Churches, but the very fact the apostle Peter warns about it means we need to pay attention. Listen to what he writes in 2 Peter 2: "*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.*"

How does Satan secretly bring in heresies? **By sending a message of deceit wrapped in a semblance of truth.** His weeds have an outward beauty but are deadly in their spread and effect. In Peter's day the false teachers accomplished this by saying to the churches that since Paul preached salvation by grace alone they didn't need to worry about their works or lack of them. It was a message of deceit wrapped in truth. It's no different today. Satan continues to use deceit that appeals to our old natures and deceit that can even sound somewhat pious. Now, it's easy to identify Satan's heresies in churches that embrace things such as same sex marriage or women in office. But it gets harder when the attacks are subtle and come with a ring of

truth to them, perhaps even brought by members of your very own church, as was the case in Peter's letter. And so we see that the Devil can use others that are sometimes known to us to carry his weed seeds into the garden, people who may be willing weed carriers or may not even realise they have been enlisted by the enemy. That's why we need to have a thorough knowledge of Scripture, and test everything we hear by Scripture, whether it be sermons, introductions at women's club, articles in the Una Sancta, or league day speeches. Everything must be checked for Scriptural authenticity.

But Satan can be even more subtle. He sometimes uses family and friends to plant his weeds. It could be something as simple and innocent as your girlfriend saying to you over coffee: "your husband doesn't let you do that? Wow, what an authoritarian he is. Don't let him push you around like that. Don't you know you are his equal?" Or how about this one: "don't you think you're being too strict on your children? Everyone else lets them do this or that. You shouldn't provoke your children to anger, you know". Or how about if you're single and catching up with your girlfriend and you tell her how you met this nice man at work that's showing an interest in you. She tells you how maybe God is using this man's interest so that you can bring him to Christ. All of these examples show Satan using deceit wrapped in truth and show his dangerous subtleness. His weeds often come disguised and may at times seem very pretty, have nice flowers and don't appear to hamper your growth. Eve, the mother of all living, fell for Satan's tactics. She let the Devil plant his weed in the perfect garden when he sent his message of deceit wrapped in a semblance of truth: "Did God really say?". Make no mistake. Satan is out to destroy you as a plant.

James 4:7 warns: "*Resist the Devil and he will flee from you*". We need to make sure our armour is on and fight this enemy in God's strength. **Are you resisting the Devil and not allowing him to sow the seeds of sin in your garden?** The Puritan John Owen once wrote: "*Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.*"

### ***Threat #2: The world***

1 John 2:16-17 breaks worldliness into three parts: the lust of the flesh (gratifying our senses), the lust of the eyes (materialism), and the pride of life (glorifying ourselves instead of God). These thorny weeds continually choke our plants and at times it seems as if we're being overtaken by them. Entertainment and social media are two easy entry points for worldliness to gain free access to our plots. Once there, they continually entice us to keep

and feed them, rather than pulling them out. James 4:4 rightly tells us that love of the world is enmity with God. Are you vulnerable to “click bait”? Are you addicted to movies? **Don’t allow the weeds from the world to grow happily in your garden.**

### ***Threat #3: Our own flesh***

The flesh is our old nature with its natural tendency to sin. It continues to produce wild growth beneath the graft where we have union with Christ. This wild growth must continually be stripped away. We need to ask the Gardener’s Spirit time and again for strength to get rid of this wild growth and to promote good growth instead. Galatians 5 contrasts the fruit of the flesh (our old nature) with the fruit of the Spirit (our new nature) and tells us that we must do combat using the power of the Spirit. For example, our old nature entices us to immoral behaviour while our new nature fights it by giving us self control. Our old nature arouses our anger easily, while our new nature fights it with patience. Our old nature wants us to hate; our new nature fights it with love. **The goal is to starve your old nature and feed your new nature. A godly woman exhibits godly growth when she sees a progression of this in her life.**

Galatians 6 concludes with these words: *“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”* **Are you busy sowing the weeds of the flesh or are you busy growing the fruit of the Spirit?**

### **Growth spurts**

God’s mercy always triumphs over evil. It’s a recurring victory refrain echoed throughout the Word that will climax when Christ comes to bear His harvest Home. And so, **God in His mercy will do whatever it takes to grow His plants strong and healthy so they produce fruit and are ready for Christ’s return.** When God in His perfect wisdom thinks we need to grow more, He puts a growth spurt on our path. Now we all know that when a child has a growth spurt, it’s painful for them. Growth spurts from God are the same. And so, it’s time for us to take a collective spiritual breath and talk about God’s pruning in the lives of us, His plants.

John 15 reads: *“every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit”*. So, let’s start with the good news. If we’re being pruned it

means we're already bearing fruit. What we read earlier in Isaiah 5 was the alternative – God tells us that Israel was not pruned, but made a wasteland. God cares for you, dear plant, and wants you to bear even more fruit. So He sends you growth spurts. Now, growth spurts do cause pain, but it's *always* pain with a purpose. But I *really* don't want to make light of this pain, or to glamorise it in any way. In fact, if the Gardener came toward any of us this morning with a pruning saw in hand, would we say, "please Lord, pick me to prune?" It would take a brave soul to do that! But really, I suppose the question is irrelevant. God chooses whom He prunes and when and how He does it. **The plant is not in charge.** And it's tough. I look out over all of you beautifully godly women here this morning and I know so many of you have pain. I've talked with some of you who have shared your heart. But don't be ashamed of your pruning. God does it for a reason. He's not a random God. He doesn't randomly inflict pain. He prunes us so that we bear more fruit for the harvest, fruit for His glory. **God's glory** is what we need to ponder on in our pain. That's why we are plants in His garden remember? Not so that we have an easy life. But that we bring our Gardener glory as we are being made ready to be transplanted into the eternal garden.

But don't worry, **God is a careful and loving Gardener.** In His love, He turns things to our good. What's more, He won't prune us so much that we will shrivel up and die. Puritan Willem Teellinck writes: "*the cup of suffering that God mixes for our good will never be stronger than the godly are able to drink*". Yes, we may wonder why God's brought this pain into our life. We maybe don't think we need pruning. But remember, it is pain that allows us to grow in holiness, pain that allows us to glorify Him more. Amazing, perhaps you're thinking, but why does suffering have to be the means God uses to achieve this? We don't know the answer to that question. But we need to trust that God's ways are higher than ours, and that He is all-wise.

But even knowing all this, we still tend to want to avoid suffering. The Bible may tell us that those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy (Ps 126) but we don't really want to sow in tears. Naturally we want to avoid our suffering and we need to realise that that's our old nature, our wild growth. We want the best life in this garden right here, right now. We forget about the garden that's still coming. Peter too was afraid of suffering for Jesus which is why he lied about knowing Him to the servant girl in the courtyard of the High Priest (Mark 14:68). But Peter grew from that point on, grew to a place where he confessed Jesus Christ (John 21) and did everything he could

to spread the gospel. Grew to a place where he could write about the importance of growth. And ultimately Peter grew to a place where he embraced his very own suffering, considering it joy to be able to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Yes, joy. John Calvin once wrote: "*You must submit to supreme suffering in order to discover the completion of joy.*"

It's a joy, dear plants, that doesn't lie in the pain and the suffering, but in the results the pain brings: the joy lies in your growth, in growth that brings God the glory.

## The Harvest

We are living in the days before the final harvest, dear sisters. As plants we don't need to be fearful of the day. In fact, the converse is true: we can be joyfully expectant of it. Why? Because of our confidence in our Gardener, because of the assurance He gives His plants in Philippians 1(:6): "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*". You see, **God is not going to start with our restoration on the final day. He's going to complete it, because we are His treasure** (Deuteronomy 7:6). He is coming to harvest us and take us home to His eternal garden, a perfect garden that will be weed-free forever.

But in the meantime, while we live in this temporal garden, we need to encourage one another to grow (1 Thessalonians 5:11) and so be ready for the great day of harvest, the day where our perishable seed will be raised imperishable (1 Cor 15:42). We won't live forever in this imperfect garden and so we need to **number our days** here. God will water, God will give His Son for us to abide in, God will prune, God will give the growth. **He will do everything for us but not without us.** And He uses us as fellow tenderers to the plants around us. We are all our plants' keepers. And whether we are harvested before others, or whether we are part of the Great Harvest when the Gardener returns, we all need to be ready.

Although the fruit on our branches will always be tainted with sin and fall short of God's standards, the incredible truth is that our fruit will still be acceptable and pleasing in the sight of God! Article 24 of the Belgic Confession puts it so beautifully: "*These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace*". **If you bear fruit as a result of being attached to the**

vine of Christ, you are bearing fruit that will last. Fruit that will be harvested. Fruit that brings God glory.

And what an amazing thing it is that we can glorify God, that He delights in us, imperfect plants that we are! But you know what's really amazing? That the more you do grow in godliness, the more you begin to see how much more you actually still need to grow because an **increase in godliness brings an increase in recognising your sinfulness**. Because the more fruit you bear, the more fruit you see you need to bear. These realisations keep us humble as we await the harvest, and so, when we do bear fruit we boast about our Gardener and what He has done in our life.

Revelation 14:13 reads: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on His head, and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe”.*

## Conclusion

And so that brings us back to the question we started with: **are you growing in godliness?** If you are engaged in tending the garden of your heart, dear sisters, continue on in growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. If after today you find you are feeling somewhat despondent, realising that you perhaps haven't tended the garden of your heart as you should and aren't growing as you should, don't despair. Your heart is still beating, and there's still time to grow and bear fruit that will last. God is patient, not wishing that any should perish and so would love to answer your prayer for nourishment and strength through the Spirit. Could it be that you don't have growth because you haven't asked? And finally, to those plants who find themselves in the midst of a growth spurt at the moment. Do take heart. This light and momentary affliction is preparing for you an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17).

You know, the other day I took out some photographs of when we lived in the country. I looked at a photo of our orange orchard as it was when we first moved in – they were all such tiny, little sapling plants that were just starting

out on their growth journey. Then I looked at another photo, one taken just before we moved to the city, some 12 years after the first photo. I stood amazed! The tending and care my husband had given had grown those saplings into strong, mature trees, bearing incredible fruit in season. **Fruit in abundance.**

Now imagine for a moment if someone were to take a number of spiritual photographs of your life at various intervals. What would these photos show about your spiritual growth, your spiritual maturity, your spiritual fruit?

The goal of your existence in this earthly garden is to grow strong and mature in godliness, **bearing fruit that brings God the glory.** And so, my dear fellow plants abiding in Christ: go from here back to the patch where God has planted you with renewed commitment to grow in your covenant relationship with your Gardener, with renewed zeal to bear fruit for the harvest. Fruit that delights your Gardener and brings Him the glory. Fruit that lasts. So go. **Go and grow.** Thank you.