

Three Steps to Divine Glory

Prof. Johan Malan

We are commanded to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2 Pet. 3:8), which commits us to develop spiritually from a basic to a more advanced knowledge of God and His Word. The implication is that we should not remain small children in Christ who are tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, but, through various stages, grow up to the mature man or woman in Christ (Eph. 4:13-14). We will look at examples in the Bible of how the principle of growth progressively develops, often in three phases, as it moves to higher levels. That will help us to better understand the dynamics of our spiritual life, as there should never be a point of stagnation but rather a challenge to reach out to higher heights.

In biblical numerology there are different numbers that have a distinct spiritual significance and are often used in the Bible, e.g. 3 which refers to the Person and works of the Triune God, 7 which is the number of fullness and finality, e.g. the 7 days of the week, the seven churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowl judgments of Revelation, the number 12 which alludes to Israel's 12 tribes and to the 12 apostles of the church dispensation, the number 40 which refers to testing, e.g. the 40 years of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, and the 40 days in which Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. In this article we will focus on the spiritual significance of the number 3, which is extensively used in the Bible.

Three levels of our Christian calling

When we are called out of darkness to the Lord's marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9) it is only the first step of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:14). There are clear indications of three steps of development in our spiritual life. They are:

1. Believers

During our salvation we become believers when we have accepted the Lord Jesus in faith as our Saviour. But that is only the beginning of a long process of development towards spiritual maturity. Initially, we are like toddlers who walk with faltering steps, who have little knowledge of the Lord and His Word, and

have not yet fully put off the old nature. Paul calls such believers “carnal” Christians with wrong priorities (1 Cor. 3:1-3). If they fail to put off the old nature to be crucified they will not grow up spiritually and be unable to do anything for the Lord (Gal. 5:17). It may be easy to say that you are a believer, but are you also a disciple of Christ and a member of His bridal congregation?

2. Disciples or saints

After the first purging of our sins all of us are in need of sanctification as a second work of grace. We must get to the point where we so deeply identify with the death of Jesus on the cross that we surrender the old, carnal nature (the flesh) to be crucified in order that we may be cleansed of all its sinful works and inclinations. That is the reason why the Lord Jesus demands of all His disciples the taking up of the cross of self-denial (Luke 9:23; 14:27; Gal. 6:14). When we have done that, the Lord will fill us with the new nature of Christ and make us useful instruments in His hand (cf. Eph. 4:22-24). We will only then have the correct disposition and spiritual power to be disciples of Christ. That is also the reason why the Lord Jesus commanded His saved disciples to tarry in Jerusalem until they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:40; Acts 1:8). Without this endowment with power from on high they would not have been able to be disciples for Christ and to work for Him.

3. Members of the bridal congregation

The Lord Jesus did not only come to make us believers and servants, but also friends who are members of His bridal congregation and co-rulers in His kingdom (John 15:15; 2 Tim. 2:12; 2 Cor. 11:2). It is expected of all His disciples to associate so closely with Him that they will not only maintain a servant-lord-relationship with Him but a sincere friendship and love that it will motivate them to remain faithful to Him and also to have a strong longing for His second coming. As bride of the Lamb we must prepare to appear before the heavenly Bridegroom without spot or wrinkle when He comes for us at the rapture (Eph. 5:25-27; 1 John 3:3; Rev. 19:7-8). His glorified bride will share in all His glory (Col. 3:4) and rule with Him in His kingdom (Rev. 5:9-10).

The Old Testament temple service

The above-mentioned three levels of the Christian life may also be compared with the three forms of the temple service in the Old Testament:

1. The courtyard

All believing Israelites could enter the courtyard of the temple where the sin offerings were brought.

2. The Holy Place

Only the priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place to serve the Lord. The lampstands, the tables for the bread of presence, and the altar of incense had to be served and maintained.

3. The Most Holy Place

Then there was the Most Holy Place behind the veil where only the High Priest could enter into once a year to do atonement for the sins of the nation.

In the New Testament there is also a large group of believers who can only testify to the fact that their sins have been forgiven. Further steps of dedication are lacking in their lives. Secondly, there are the disciples who are the New Testament "priests" to proclaim the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9). A priest speaks to the people on behalf of God (proclaiming the Word) and he also speaks to God on behalf of the people (intercession). To be able to do this he needs to be anointed (or filled) with the Holy Spirit and to dedicate himself completely to the Lord. Then there is the Most Holy Place which represents the Lord's throne of grace in the New Testament. The veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom during the crucifixion of Christ, and offers access to the throne of grace to all the children of the Lord (Heb. 10:19-22). We can now enter into a very intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus, which was not possible to Old Testament believers, and become members of His bridal congregation as well as co-rulers (kings) in His kingdom. We do not need human mediators to be able to stand in a specific relationship to the Lord; therefore all believers can enter the Holy Place by this new and living way to receive their full inheritance in Jesus Christ.

Three levels of God's will

There are clearly also three levels of doing God's will: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:1-2).

1. God's good will

To do God's good will demands that, through repentance, we enter into His will from an unsaved life that was led outside His will: "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4). He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). It is God's clearly stated will that you must be saved: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Will you start doing the will of God? "Our Lord Jesus Christ... gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal. 1:3-4). Humanity is divided into only two families – the children of God and the children of the devil. If we do the good will of God, the Lord Jesus calls us His family (Mark 3:31-35) and also sons and daughters of our heavenly Father (2 Cor. 6:17-18). The unsaved people of the world, and those who only have a form of godliness, are children of the devil (John 8:44; Acts 13:10). Do God's will and become a member of His family! This is His request, desire and command to all people.

2. God's acceptable will

A saved person is commanded to live a life that is holy, subservient, and acceptable to God. This is his reasonable service, and the Lord is not satisfied with anything less than that. A marginal Christian life of carnality and a lack of fruit is unreasonable and therefore unacceptable to God. Such people will one day appear before the Lord with empty hands, saved as through fire (1 Cor. 3:1-3,9-17). Do you do God's will with regard to sanctification and service to Him? "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your

bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:1-2). A sanctified life, spirit, soul and body, is needed to have insight into God's will and to live a life which is acceptable to Him. Has your heart been cleansed and do you bear fruit that befits repentance, or do you grieve the Holy Spirit in this regard? Then subject yourself to God's will in this matter: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality... For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 4:3,7-8). Another stumbling-block in the way of a holy, Spirit-filled life is the use of alcoholic liquor: "Do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:17-18). Do not live with these vile habits but forsake them and present your body as a holy and acceptable sacrifice to God in His service: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

3. God's perfect will

A Person who has fully surrendered himself while taking the step of sanctification, and is growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, will obviously be eager to discover the perfect will of God for his/her life. This entails more clarity on the nature of your calling, as well as the best way of practising it. Paul says: "I... beseech you to lead a life worthy of the calling with which you were called" (Eph. 4:1). We shouldn't only now and then please the Lord and only intermittently dedicate ourselves to Him. Neither should we be content with little fruit if we can achieve much more for the Lord. We must endeavour to do the perfect will of God in our lives. Paul's prayer for the Colossians was: "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:9-10). The purpose of this prayer for the Colossians was: "that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12). They were to strive to

know and do God's perfect will – not only His good and acceptable will. Have you discovered God's perfect plan for your life? The Bible says that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you should have enlightened eyes of the mind to be able to understand your spiritual calling and inheritance with the saints (Eph. 1:18). You must also pray to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man that you may be able to fully comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height of the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:16-19). This is an achievable ideal and worthy of pursuing with all our might.

Three levels of bearing fruit

"He who received seed into the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty" (Matt. 13:23). We can only bear fruit that befits repentance after we have been filled with the Holy Spirit as these works are also called the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). This requires that we first become disciples who serve the Lord Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The great challenge to us is to bear fruit for the Kingdom of Heaven. This can be observed in different ways. Some disciples are more dedicated and committed than others, and consequently bear more fruit.

When a person has received the second work of grace (the step of self-denial and infilling of the Holy Spirit) he can in the true sense of the word be regarded as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. He counted the cost for discipleship and presented himself for service. The possibility then exists, depending on the degree of his dedication and wholehearted surrender, to bear:

1. less fruit (thirtyfold);
2. more fruit (sixtyfold); or
3. abundant fruit (hundredfold).

Disciples of Christ should continually strive to be more holy and more productive. This demands a complete cleansing of carnality and worldliness:

"Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit... He who abides in Me and I in him, bears much fruit" (John 15:2,5).

Fleshly Christians who are not controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit are not endued for discipleship. They will not bear the fruit that befits repentance because their lives are dominated by the flesh, thereby allowing thorns and thistles to choke them and render them unfruitful in the service of the Lord.

Are you able to bear testimony to sanctification and commitment in your service to the Lord in His Kingdom? If so, how plentiful is the fruit in your life? Are you satisfied with little or are you striving for more?

Three degrees of reward

There will clearly also be different forms of reward before the judgment seat of Christ. "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ... So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:10,12). "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). These rewards are not based upon salvation, but upon the works (the fruit of the Spirit) in our lives after salvation. Paul says:

"...each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:8-15).

Every Christian should take heed how he conducts his life in Christ on the foundation of repentance. Not all Christians do works that have eternal value since not all of them are living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But all of

their works will be tested at the judgment seat of Christ and rewards of grace awarded accordingly. In Luke 19:11-27 the enabling power of the Holy Spirit is represented as a mina which is given to every Christian. That is a divine ability to work which can be used by committed Christians or neglected by those who are half-hearted. It can also be used more extensively or less extensively. From the parable in Luke 19 it is obvious that the very first matter attended to at the second coming of the Lord Jesus will be the rewarding of His servants. The three levels of reward before the judgements seat are described as follows:

1. More reward:

“And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants to whom he had given the money, to be called to him that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, Master, your mina has earned ten minas. And he said to him, Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:15-17). This person dedicated his whole life to his lord, laboured maximally, and remained faithful to the end.

2. Less reward:

“And the second came, saying, Master, your mina has earned five minas. Likewise he said to him, You also be over five cities” (Luke 19:18-19). This servant was also actively dedicated to the service of his lord and has achieved a lot. But he did not bear fruit to his full potential. Possibly he did not lay aside all burdens that impeded him (Heb. 12:1). Burdens are secular things that are not necessarily sins but they demand a lot of time, money and attention, thereby keeping a person from greater dedication to the cause of the Lord.

3. No reward:

According to Luke 19:20-26 the third person put away his mina and did not use it at all. He was certainly one of his master’s servants but appeared before him empty-handed. A doubtful future awaits such failed disciples. They occupied themselves with perishable things (wood, hay and straw) and even built with such things on the foundation Jesus Christ. They wrongly entertain the idea that these secular things which have no value for eternity will be accepted by the

Lord as good works and rewarded by Him. That will not happen as our best works that are done without the Holy Spirit are like filthy rags to the Lord (Isa. 64:6).

Three levels of spiritual decline

There is a distinct way of backsliding which is followed when people yield to temptations. Three stages can also be identified in this process. James says, "Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (Jas. 1:14-15).

1. Temptation.

All sins begin with thoughts, so temptations are sinful thoughts that arise in people's hearts and minds. These thoughts may emerge from fleshly lusts, or evil suggestions that come from the devil. He aims fiery darts at people, by which vile thoughts and evil intentions are planted in their minds (Eph. 6:16). If we wish to avert the way of spiritual backsliding due to sin, we have to resist sinful thoughts. Every thought must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). If we neglect to do this, we compromise by justifying the suggested sin, and start looking for ways to doing it. In this case we will have been successfully tempted, and will therefore soon move to the second step of actively sinning.

2. The committing of sin.

After a person has been drawn away by his desires, they soon bear sin. He gives expression to his wrong desires and lusts and then commits the evil deed.

3. Slavery to sin.

It is a general characteristic of sin that it gets a firm grip on its victim, forcing him to commit the sin over and over. He thus becomes a slave of sin. In course of time other sins are added, binding him faster in a web of iniquity. If this person is not delivered from his sin before he dies, he will open his eyes in hell, as "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Other examples of the pattern of three

The following 15 are further examples of the pattern of three which is reflected in God's creation and works – also in the kingdom of darkness:

The Triune God. The God of the Bible revealed Himself as one God consisting of three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit: "For there are three who bear witness in heaven: The Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one" (1 John 5:7; John 1:1,14; Rev. 19:13).

Three offices. The Bible mentions three offices of Christ, i.e. Prophet, Priest, and King. Although these offices have always applied to Him, they are chronologically fulfilled in His earthly ministry. During His first coming He was a Prophet who proclaimed the mysteries of God's kingdom and also offered Himself as a ransom for our sins. After His ascension He acts as High Priest who ever lives to intercede for us at the Father's throne. When He comes again He will come as King of kings to rule on earth during His millennial reign of peace.

Three days in the grave. Christ was in the grave for three days and nights, or parts thereof. That was between His death on the cross and His resurrection. These facts are core aspects of our Christian confession of faith.

Three millennia. The ministry of the Lord Jesus spans three days of a thousand years each (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8). These three millennia are the 2000 years of the church dispensation and the thousand-year reign of peace when Christ will rule as King (Luke 13:32). During two of these "three days" Israel was in the Diaspora, and on the third day they will be spiritually revived to live in the sight of the Messiah (Hos. 6:1-2).

Three worlds. The Bible refers to the pre-Adamic world "that then existed" and perished being flooded with water, the world which "now exists" and will be destroyed by fire in day of judgement, and the "new heavens and a new earth" which are yet to be created (2 Pet. 3:5-7,12-13).

Three heavens. There are three heavens, i.e. the atmospheric heaven (Matt. 6:26), the starry heaven (Ps. 8:4), and the third or highest heaven where God is (Luke 2:14). Paul was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

Three stages of human life. These are the old man who is spiritually dead because of sin and trespasses (Eph. 2:1), the born again, regenerated man (Eph. 2:5; 1 Cor. 15:22), and the glorified man who will be endued with an immortal resurrection body when Christ comes (1 Cor. 15:51-53; 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Three human attributes. A human being is composed of a spirit, a soul and a body (1 Thess. 5:23).

Three groups of people. There are three broad ethnic branches in the human family that descended from Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Three spiritual groups. From a spiritual point of view humanity may be divided into Israel, the church, and the Gentiles.

Three levels of spiritual denial and restoration. Peter denied the Lord three times (Luke 22:61). Afterwards, he solemnly promised three times that he would serve the Lord and tend His flock (John 21:15-17).

Three revelations of Elijah's power. There are three revelations of Elijah's spirit and power. The first was during the ministry of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. The second was in the life of John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), and the third one will be a special witness of the Lord who will also act in the spirit and power of Elijah during the first half of the tribulation period (Mal. 4:5; Rev. 11:3-6).

The satanic triumvirate. Satan, the Antichrist and the false prophet will act as an evil triumvirate during the coming tribulation to rule the world and launch the greatest assault in history against the kingdom of God (Rev. 13:1-18; 19:19-20; 20:1-2).

Three groups of judgments. There will be three groups of divine judgments in the tribulation period, i.e. the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowl judgments.

Three groups of people in the millennium. The following three groups of people will occupy the millennial earth: Firstly, the resurrected and glorified believers of all time who will be like angels and rule with Christ in His kingdom (Matt. 22:30; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; Rev. 5:9-10; 20:6); secondly, the people of Israel who will still have mortal bodies, but all of them will be saved and have the special commission to evangelise the world community during the millennium (Jer. 31:33-34; Isa. 27:6; Zech. 8:23); thirdly, the nations who will still be mortal people, and whose children will be born with a sinful nature and consequently have to be evangelised. Because the devil will be bound during that time, the nations will live in peace and they will serve the Lord, but not always with all their heart (Rev. 20:1-3; Isa. 2:2-4; Jer. 3:17; Zech. 14:16-17). At the end of the millennium, when the devil will be released for a short time, the nations will be intensively deceived by him to rise up against God and the city of the saints (Jerusalem) and make war against them (Rev. 20:7-10).

From all these examples of the use of the number three in the Bible, it is evident that there is a complex pattern in the spiritual sphere of which we certainly have to take note. There is not only a basic distinction between light and darkness, but degrees of glory and also degrees of spiritual darkness. The Christian is always challenged to rise to higher heights, to bear more fruit, to become more holy, and to draw closer to the Lord Jesus. There are also a plurality of phenomena in the kingdoms of God and Satan of which we should be aware. If we take these facts into account, we will not be victims of deception and simplistic presentations of spiritual realities. We must always ensure that we understand the full extent of a matter and know exactly what the nature is of our relationship with the Triune God. We must also fully realise our obligations, then we will be complete as people of God, "thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).

