

THE SEASONS OF A SAINT

I JOHN 2:12-14

My wife is from South Florida and one of her major beefs about living there is missing out on the changing seasons. Fort Lauderdale has four seasons: *almost hot, hot, hotter, and hottest* - it's summer all year.

Georgia also has its hot summers, but the heat doesn't linger forever... Eventually autumn pushes summer aside with its chilly breezes and colored leaves... Autumn is followed by the winter frost and a occasional snow dusting... Winter finally yields to spring with its cool mornings, and budding dogwoods.

People living in Georgia can *savor the seasons*.

And just as there are seasons in the year there are also seasons in life. There's the *spring of childhood*, the *hot summer of adolescence*, the *autumn of adulthood*, and then the *winter of old age*.

Life is not one smooth, unchanging progression. As we live out our days we pass through definite seasons.

I've heard this progression described in a number of humorous ways... "First, there's the **PLASTIC AGE**: bottles, cups, and pants. Then the **RUBBER AGE**: sneakers, footballs, and wide tires. Next the **PAPER AGE**: bills and forms, money and checks.

Finally, there's the **METALLIC AGE**: teeth of gold, hair of silver, and lead in the seat of the pants."

"Human Growth and Development 201," a course I took in college, outlined the seven stages of life as follows: "infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adult, mature adult, old adult, and death."

But I like the abridged version of the seven stages of life: **"spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, and wills."**

No matter how you describe it, there are *stages, echelons, levels of maturity, passages* through which we travel on our journey through life.

And the same is true in our Christian lives.

There are stages of spiritual growth and development - levels of maturity - seasons to savor - passages we travel on our spiritual journey.

And here in **1 John 2:12-14** John describes three stages of spiritual maturity: **1) Little children**, **2) Young men** (or women), and **3) Fathers** (or parents).

I believe a big part of following Jesus is recognizing these various seasons. Knowing where a person is at, helps us understand where they need to be headed.

When a person turns from sin and embraces Jesus they're born again. They became a spiritual infant.

But the idea is not to remain a baby.

There are no playpens, or pacifiers in heaven. God wants us to grow. He wants us to graduate to young adulthood, and eventually on to spiritual parenthood.

If you attended a large *family reunion* (like this one) you'd see a mix of babies - adolescents - parents and

grandparents. And likewise a healthy church has members in all three stages of spiritual growth.

When the family of God meets for our weekly reunion you should find some *spiritual babies*, some *spiritual adolescents*, and some *spiritual parents*.

Last week John gave us a test to determine for ourselves if we know God. It's two-fold: **do we keep His commandments**, and **do we love one another**.

But just *knowing I'm a Christian* doesn't mean *I'm growing as a Christian*. Verses 12-14 are intended to help us measure our growth. In two stanzas John describes the three stages of spiritual maturity. He composes a jingle - probably to help us remember.

In today's text John talks about **the seasons of a saint**. He teaches us how Christians grow and mature.

Let's read our text in its entirety; then we'll study it line by line. Verse 12, "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one.

I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

First, John speaks to **little children** in God's family. And in these two stanzas he lists two characteristics about them. First, **they know their sins are forgiven**, and second, **they know God as their father**.

There are many pleasant feelings in life: *the thrill of being loved - the satisfaction from a job well done - the joy of being remembered by a friend at a special time.*

But of all the possible human emotions nothing compares with *the feeling of forgiveness!*

As a kid when I disobeyed my parents the guilt would grip my body - *my stomach felt nauseous, my throat knotted up, my palms got sweaty.* Though it meant a spanking, I preferred getting caught to end the agony

After punishing me, my dad would always pick me up in his arms and tell me he still loved me. I was forgiven.

Ah, the feeling of being free from guilt.

The anvil I'd been dragging around was gone. I felt light - free - alive again! I had a fresh start.

As adults we still sin and we're haunted by guilt... But where do we go to resolve what we've done?

Modern man in his attempt to eliminate God from his thinking has created an unexpected problem. Now that he's taken God out of the picture to whom does he go to confess his sins? Where can he obtain forgiveness?

Some people pay a shrink \$100 an hour to help excuse they're sin... Others pretend sin doesn't exist...

Still others try to dismiss sin by renaming it...

As one author wrote, "Man calls it an accident; God calls it an abomination. Man calls it a blunder; God calls it blindness. Man calls it a mistake; God calls it madness. Man calls it a weakness; God calls it willfulness. Man calls its sickness; God calls it sin."

But the problem with *defending sin* or *denying sin* or *dismissing sin* is that it doesn't remove the *guilt of sin*.

Simply renaming our sin doesn't eliminate it.

Man without God has no way of ridding himself of his guilt so he ends up carrying an psychological and emotional load his psyche was never designed to bear.

The burden of unresolved sin develops all sorts of neurotic tendencies in human beings. The weight of guilt can eventually cause an emotional breakdown.

The only way to truly rid yourself of sin is to ***confess it!*** As 1 John 1:9 tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Spirit of God cleanses us. He lifts out the grimeiest grime, and the dirtiest dirt.

The Holy Spirit enables us to *feel God's forgiveness*.

Remember the first time you felt that forgiveness?

What a rush! You felt free and clean - shame and guilt vanished. *Waves of acceptance* rolled the burden away, and you sat there marinating in *God's love*.

John says that the spiritual child still relishes that feeling. **He knows his sins are gone forever.**

And perhaps, the most exciting feature about God's forgiveness is *when God forgives he forgets!...*

When the Moravian missionaries took the Gospel to Alaska they discovered the Eskimo vocabulary didn't have a term for forgiveness. A word had to be invented.

They came up with, "*Ishumajiechojunkannerelkmiik*" It means "*Not being able to think about it any more*".

This is God's forgiveness. God told Jeremiah (31:34) "*I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*" If you're a follower of Jesus this is how God treats your sin. He no longer sees it or thinks about it.

It reminds me of a Christian lady who was always talking about how God spoke to her. Her pastor was skeptical. One day he decided to put her to the test.

He said, "*Sister, if God really speaks to you, then ask him to tell you about the sin I committed as a young man. If he tells you, then I'll believe God talks to you...*"

For years the pastor had been tormented by a terrible deed he he'd done in college. He'd hidden the sin for years, and had never confessed it to a soul.

Weeks went by before the pastor bumped into the lady again. When he saw her, he asked, "*Did God tell you my sin?*" She replied, "*No, He didn't.*" The pastor laughed, "*Oh, I knew God really didn't talk to you.*"

She said, "*Oh, but He does. When I asked God if He would tell me about your sin, He said, He'd already forgotten about it.*" Hey, what God forgives He forgets.

John also tells us that little children **know God as their Father.** What an incredible thought that we can call the God of the universe - the God who hung the stars, who spoke the world out of nothing - ***our Father!***

Every time you gaze at *a soothing sunset or a dazzling night sky* you can swell up with pride and praise - and think to yourself, ***"MY Father, made that!"***

Romans 8:15 says the Holy Spirit cries from our hearts **"Abba,"** which means, ***"Daddy or Papa."*** The Spirit places us on intimate terms with God. We can go to God as uninhibitedly as a child runs to his father.

God loves you with a father's love... *He's willing to trust you with the keys to the car. He'll give you the second chance you don't deserve. He's first to celebrate our triumphs, and first to help us recover from our disappointments...* Kids can trust their dad.

He's a protector - a provider. *And God is your dad!*

Once, my elementary aged boys wanted a favor from their parents. My oldest son, Zach, sent his younger brother, Nick, to present the big request.

When Nick returned I was in the adjacent room eavesdropping. Nick told Zack, **"Mom said no."** That's when I overheard Zack rebuke him, **"Nick, I told you to ask dad, not mom."** He knew that dad is a soft touch...

And so is God. He loves to bless His kids!

I have friends who attend a church in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina. They say four or five times in his sermon their pastor will stop and remind them - *in his down-*

home, Southern drawl, “Now don’t you forget it, Daddy loves His little chill’en.” Don’t you forget - you have a Dad in heaven who loves you too!

I love children. I love to have them around. I admire their zeal and enthusiasm - all life is a new discovery.

If you want a new appreciation of God's creation look at it through the eyes of a child - *when they see a mountain for the first time, or take their first steps in the snow, or visit the zoo.* We regain the wonder of things we’ve long taken for granted by seeing them afresh through the eyes of a child. Kids are such a joy!

This is why I also love to watch the children in the family of God. They too have a zeal, and an enthusiasm about the Christian life that's contagious.

I admire the *simplicity of their faith*, their *total dependence on God*, and their *eagerness to obey*.

I recall one new Christian who came to me with a concerned face, “Pastor Sandy, I want to start tith-ing. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve been reading about it, and I want to obey.” He was talking about tithing.

He didn’t know what it was, but he wanted to do it.

We can all learn from the new believers in the family. But spiritual babes are as *vulnerable* as *vivacious*.

They're often ignorant of important truths and they lack spiritual stamina. They're living in a hostile world and they aren't always aware of the dangers.

God doesn’t want any of us to stay a little child.

We need to grow up spiritually. John tells us we need to become young men and young women of faith...

And he mentions two traits of the *young men*: *he's strong and has overcome the wicked one* - and he tells why, *because the Word of God abides in him*.

We face an adversary in the Christian life, the devil or Satan. He is the wicked one, the originator of sin.

And Satan is clever. His wiles are slick and effective and timely. He's been trapping the saints for centuries.

And above all he's persistent. One of the first truths you discover in our spiritual struggle with Satan is that he never takes a break. He never, ever says "**Today, I'll be nice to the folks over at Calvary Chapel.**" Never!

A little child is no match for Satan. It's the *young men or women* who've learned how be victorious over Satan in everyday life. They've gone out into the world. They've been *tested, tried, tempted* - yet stood strong.

The young adults have developed spiritual muscle.

They've even gone on the attack: *sharing their faith, letting their light shine, engaging the enemy in prayer.*

And what is the *secret of their strength*?

John says, "**the Word of God abides in them.**"

They take the Bible seriously. They've made it their priority to study, and meditate, and apply the Scriptures. They *hold it* - and *hide it* in their hearts!

In John Bunyan's allegory of the Christian life, "*Pilgrim's Progress*," Bunyan portrays a conflict between Christian and Satan... "The devil gathered up close to Christian, and wrestling with him gave him a dreadful fall. Christian's sword flew out of his hand.

The devil with hands on his throat was pressing him to death... but as God would have it, Christian nimbly reached out his hand for his sword.

He caught it and quoted Micah 7:8, "*Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy! When I fall I shall arise.*" and with that he gave him a deadly thrust. The devil moved back as one who had received a mortal wound.

Christian quoted Romans 8:37, "*In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.*" This time the devil spread his Dragon's wings and sped away, and Christian saw him no more."

Remember in Matthew 4 when Satan tempted Jesus, the Lord defended Himself with the careful use of the Word of God. Three times Jesus quoted Scripture.

And if our Lord drew the sword of the Spirit in His encounters with Satan, how much more do you and I need to keep that same Sword close to our side?

When Satan tries to drown you in condemnation - **lunge at the enemy with Romans 8:1**, "*There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...*"

When he tries to frighten you – **thrust him through with 2 Timothy 1:7**, "*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*"

When he tries to make you doubt God's presence - **touche' him with Hebrews 13:5**, "(God) himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Young men can handle a blade! They're *the spiritual Zorros!*

How do you know a person is moving into this second stage of spiritual growth? They'll find themselves with an insatiable hunger for the Bible.

You can't get enough. As Jeremiah prayed (15:16): "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart..."

When you're a child you have to be *spoon fed*. Church is your primary source of spiritual nourishment.

But as you grow you begin to read the Word for yourself. Your faith gets stronger, and your spiritual life stabilizes. The ups and downs - highs and lows – level out. The mood swings that beset the child no longer exist. You *sink roots*. There's a more solid foundation.

I once had a Chevy Citation with a special extra, "come and go windshield wipers." When it was dry they worked fine. The only time I had problems of course, was when it rained. The issue was a loose connection.

The wipers weren't properly grounded!

And if you're experiencing intermittent victory in your Christian life - if your faith comes and goes - it could also be due to a loose connection. You're *not properly grounded* in God's Word. The young man or woman is strong because the Word of God abides in them.

There are though some *potential pitfalls* that threaten us as we pass through this spiritual stage. *Spiritual adolescence* can produce a *spiritual arrogance*.

Get a little knowledge under your belt, chalk up a few spiritual victories, and you can get the bighead. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "**knowledge puffs up.**"

Understand, laboratory findings reveal **teenagers are notorious know it alls.** *I've learned this firsthand!*

One parent hung a poster on his teenager's bedroom door, it read, "**TEENAGERS! Tired of being hassled by your stupid parents? ACT NOW, move out, get a job, pay your own bills... while you still know everything.**"

I've heard is said, "**Insanity is hereditary, you get it from your teenagers.**"

The typical teenager *talks a lot and listens a little.*

One teenage girl was always on her phone. Every conversation was over an hour. Finally, her dad reprimanded her, "**Limit your calls to 20 minutes!**"

The next night her phone rang and the daughter answered. The dad grabbed his watch, and timed her. He was surprised when she hung up in 20 minutes.

The shocked father asked her "**which of her friends called?**" The teenager girl replied with a surprised look, "**Oh, that wasn't a friend, it was a wrong number!**"

And this is also a problem for the spiritual adolescent. They love to talk. They like to show off what they're *learning about God or doing for God*.

But you try to share a truth with them, or give them a word of advice, and they'll be reluctant to listen.

Another pitfall for the spiritual adolescent is the tendency to be overly-critical. *Have you ever noticed that teenagers will develop a bad attitude toward the rest of the family?* If you've lived with one you know!

It's amazing how little tots believe their parents can do no wrong... Like the 8 year-old boy who said of his father: *"My dad can climb the highest mountain. Swim the biggest ocean. Fly the fastest plane. Fight the strongest tiger. My dad can do anything. But most of the time he just carries out the garbage..."*

You can hear kids on the playground fighting with each other over whose dad is strongest or smartest

But when adolescence hits, a dose of realism sets in.

Children begin to see their parents as people. They become aware of their flaws and shortcomings.

They become critical of their parents.

And it's not that dad suddenly became *a bad guy*. He's *the same guy*, but for the first time the adolescent sees his dad not as *Superman*, but as *a mortal man*.

Hopefully in time, the teenager will learn to accept his father and appreciate him for who and what he is.

Teenagers need to realize that *right or wrong* dad is still his dad. They're family and need to stick together.

When a person first comes to Jesus and becomes part of His church, he's excited. Like a child he's proud of his spiritual family. You'll hear new believers in the parking lot fighting over whose pastor is best.

Everything's great until they reach adolescence.

Suddenly he or she sees their church in a different light. Flaws become glaring. For the first time they realize their church isn't perfect. It's not that the church had gotten worse, or there weren't always problems, it's just that the young man's perspective changed.

Often a spiritual teenager goes through a period of rebellion. Now that he's started feeding himself he starts to question those who've been nurturing him.

He grows judgmental. He accuses his church of carnality, and the pastor of shallowness. He decides that he's the only spiritual person in the church!

He should be the pastor!

For people who have to live with a spiritual teenager this is a very frustrating and difficult stage of life.

It requires tremendous patience, but if you hang in there, eventually the teenager will grow out of it!

He'll mature and develop a new appreciation and love for his church. He'll come to the conclusion that despite the problems we're still family. In Christ we have a common bond

greater than our differences. *And right or wrong we're still committed to each other.*

The final stage of spiritual maturity is that of **fathers or spiritual parents**. And John states just one characteristic, but he says it twice for emphasis: *they have known Him who is from the beginning.*

As little children we knew God as Father and were drawn to Him because He met our needs. We learned we could lean on Him, and trust Him with problems.

Even as *a spiritual parent* we can still run to our Dad when we have a need. But along with that simple faith the person who reaches this stage of growth has cultivated *deeper desires*. Their *motivations* have *matured*. No longer are they drawn to God just for *what He does for them* - now they seek Him for *who he is!*

A spiritual parent has a wonder, an awe of **the God who is from the beginning...** *They've spent time in His presence... They learned of His eternal nature and infinite beauty... They've felt the healing of His embrace... They've been overshadowed by His majesty...*

They've sensed God's glory and are overwhelmed by His grace... For the spiritual parent even if they got nothing more out of serving God, they'd still serve Him because they realize He's worthy to be served!

The spiritual parent still depends on God, and fights battles for God - but he's not as *interested* in what he can get out of it

- nor is he as *impressed* with *HIS* victories. He realizes the victory belongs to the Lord.

All he wants is a deeper knowledge of God.

Three decades after Rabbi Paul's conversion to Christianity he reveals to the Philippians his goal in life (3:10) "That I may know (Christ), and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings..."

Recall Paul's exploits... After *miles of travel*, and *miracles*, and *church plants*, and *souls saved*, and *new communities reached* - after 30 years of knowing Jesus, his utmost desire was to know Him more!

Jeremiah 9:23-24 reads, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord..." Spiritual parents are no longer impressed with deeds and triumphs. They glory not in *mentality*, or *might*, or *money*... but in *the Lord*.

And the prize for the spiritual parent is no longer God's blessing - it's God Himself. AB Simpson conveys the heart of this parent, "Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord. Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word. Once His gifts I wanted, now the Giver own. Once I sought for power, now Himself alone."

Something beautiful happens to a man or woman who spends time with Jesus... *We become like Him!*

2 Corinthians 3:18 says it best, "but we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being

transformed into the same image from glory to glory... by the Spirit of the Lord..."

The person who sits with Jesus, and basks in His presence - grows kinder, and more compassionate. He develops a desire **to serve rather than be served.**

Understand, a father is a man who lives for others. He slaves daily to carve out a living for his family.

Here's a great definition for a dad, "He's a man who carries his pictures where he once carried his money."

This is what parenthood is all about.

When a baby comes into a man's world his primary concern is no longer himself - it's the kid. Dad begins to pinch pennies - he *scrapes, and saves, and sacrifices* - not for himself, but for the fam.

My dad often jokes, "I use to be "Olin," but I got married, and became "Carol's husband." Then my son came along, and I was "Sandy's dad." After a while I was "Nick's granddad." Now I'm "Colt's great-grandpa!"

But don't let my dad fool you - his family is his greatest joy! He's learned that the secret of happiness is not holding onto your life, but in giving it away.

Listen carefully, here's a truth - little children serve *because they're told to...* **young men** serve *so they can brag about it later...* but **spiritual parents** serve *because they want to be like Jesus!*

The spiritual parents of the church have discovered that by sharing in Jesus' sacrificial spirit they can enter into the deepest level of communion with Him.

Spiritual parents don't wait on church programs to get involved in the lives of others. They sense the needs of younger believers and step in to take action.

You'll find the spiritual father having breakfast with a new believer... Or meeting with a few friends in his home for a Bible Study... Or mentoring a teenager...

You don't have to tell a spiritual parent to care for kids. If he or she is truly a parent it's *natural to nurture*.

Spiritual parents will come to church *not just to be served, but to serve*. They'll want to come alongside the pastor and help him carry out God's vision.

And the spiritual parent doesn't have time to be critical of others. They're too busy serving the Lord themselves to worry about what others do or don't do.

I love this poem. It sums up the life of a spiritual parent, "An old man traveling a lone highway, came at evening cold and grey, to a chasm deep and wide. The old man crossed in twilight dim, for the rushing stream held no fears in him, but he turned when he reached the other side, and built a bridge to span the tide.

'Old man,' cried a fellow pilgrim near, 'You're wasting your strength building here. Your journey will end with the ending day, and never again pass this way. You've crossed this chasm deep and wide, why build a bridge at evening tide?'

'Good friend, on the path I've come,' he said. 'There follows after me today, a youth whose feet will pass this way. This stream, which has been as nothing to me, to that fair-haired boy may a pit fall be. He, too, must cross in the twilight dim; Good friend, I'm building this bridge for him.'" Spiritual fathers take the time, and go out of their way, to build bridges for others to follow!

Little children.. Young adults.. Spiritual parents..

These are the seasons of a saint! And realize, it doesn't really matter where you're at in the process, *as long as you're moving forward!* Spiritual babies need to become young men - adolescents need to be parents.

The Christian life is like walking up a sliding board in your socks! You can do it no problem, as long as you don't stop. The moment you *stop*, you'll *slide down!*

If you're a **child** be thankful for God's forgiveness - keep taking your needs to Dad... But in addition, ask God to place a hunger in your heart for His Word!

If you're a **young adult** study the Word and fight the battles, but realize there's more... You need to slow down long enough to really know God. Seek the Lord not just for **what He'll do**, but for **Who He is!**

And finally, if you're a **spiritual parent** ask the Lord where He wants you to invest your life - then look around, and dig in, and live your life for others!

Such are the seasons of a Christian. May God help us to move forward, and bring our friends with us!