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## HOW A TREE GROWS

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### **Read: Philippians 1:1-7**

An impatient college student went to the president of the school and asked if he could take an accelerated course that would allow him to graduate sooner. “Yes,” the president replied, “but it depends on what you want to be. When God wants to make an oak, he takes a hundred years. But when He wants to make a squash, He takes 6 months.” Like that student, we sometimes get frustrated with the rate of our spiritual growth. We’d like to see ourselves a lot closer to maturity than we are. We’re disappointed that we fall back into childish behavior we thought we had outgrown. We want “school” to be over. But growth takes time, and it often comes in spurts. Trees grow rapidly during a 4 to 6 week period in early summer, when woody fibers appear between the bark and the trunk. During the remainder of the year, these fibers solidify into the sturdy wood from which furniture is built, which will last several lifetimes.

Not growing as fast in your Christian life as you’d like? Perhaps you’re “solidifying.” It’s a vital part of the process that the One who began a good work in you will bring to completion (Phil. 1:6). Be patient. God isn’t finished with you yet.

### **Application:**

1. What are some ways that you need to grow spiritually?

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2. Name one area of spiritual growth that you’ve seen in your life over the last year:

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3. What promise does God give in verse six?

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Author: David C. Enger

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## Beware Of Open Doors

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### **Read: Philippians 1:8-11**

Sometimes Christians follow an “open door” policy. When a door of opportunity opens, they assume that it’s God’s will to go through it. Bestselling author Terri Blackstock knows this is untrue. She never openly rebelled against God, but she found herself far away from Him after walking through open doors of opportunity. “I had allowed myself to believe that God was blessing my career . . . because He had opened all the doors,” she wrote in *Soul Restoration*. Although she got what she wanted—a successful career writing romance novels for Harlequin and Silhouette—she lost what she needed: a close relationship with God.

When she finally admitted that her career was keeping her from God, she turned her back on success and renewed her commitment to the Lord. Since then, her writing career has been revitalized, and she has become an award-winning author of Christian fiction.

Just because the Lord doesn’t stop us from something doesn’t mean He wants us to continue. To discern which opportunities to pursue, we need to “approve the things that are excellent” and to be “filled with the fruits of righteousness . . . to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:10-11).

### **Application:**

1. What are the three things that Paul prays the Philippian believers would do?

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2. Paul says the reason he prays for these things is so that they would be a people “unto the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of God. (v.11)

Written by: Julie Ackerman Link

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## Finding Gain in Loss

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### **Read: Philippians 1:12**

Evil men, not God, threw the apostle Paul into prison, hoping to put an end to his ministry. But their plan backfired, and the gospel spread (Phil. 1:12-13). Paul didn't know why God allowed his imprisonment, but he saw how God used it for good.

When All-Star baseball player Dave Dravecky lost his pitching arm to cancer, he struggled to find the reason for his loss by adding up the positive gains in his life. He eventually realized that he had been confusing the results of his loss with trying to understand God's unknowable purposes. To illustrate the difference, Dave refers to his amputated arm. One result of his radical surgery was that medical researchers had cancerous tissue to study that could advance their knowledge of the disease. This is something good. "It wouldn't be such a good thing, though," Dave writes, "if the purpose for my surgery was to provide an arm so that the pathology department would have a specimen to study." That may be one result, but it doesn't explain God's higher purpose. Instead of trying to discover God's hidden purpose for his cancer, Dave now focuses on a result that he has seen: "I used to depend on myself. Now I depend more on God." That may be his biggest gain of all.

### **Application:**

1. Name something in your life that you looked at as being bad, but eventually, you saw how God brought good out of it?

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2. We often get ourselves in a bigger mess when we try to figure out what God is up to... What are some areas in your life today that you need to trust God's wisdom?

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Author: Joanie Yoder

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## Occupational Hazard

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### **Read: Philippians 1:12-18**

My occupation is words. Whether I am writing or editing, I am using words to convey ideas so that readers can understand. I can usually see what's wrong with someone else's writing (though sometimes not with my own) and figure out how to fix it. As an editor, I am paid for being critical. My job is to see what's wrong with the way words are used. This ability becomes a disability when I carry it over into my personal life and always look for what is wrong. Focusing on what's wrong can cause us to miss everything that's good.

The apostle Paul had reason to focus on what was wrong in the Philippian church. Certain people were preaching the gospel out of selfish ambition to add to Paul's suffering (Phil. 1:16). But instead of concentrating on the negative, he chose to look at the positive and rejoice in it: Jesus Christ was being preached (v.18).

God wants us to be discerning—we need to know good from bad—but He doesn't want us to focus on the bad and become critical or discouraged. Even in circumstances that are less than ideal (Paul was writing from prison), we can find something good because in times of trouble God is still at work.

### **Application:**

1. From the Scripture reading – what were the two primary responses from people when they heard of Paul's imprisonment? (v.15)

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2. From the Scripture reading – why didn't either of these responses bother Paul? (v.18)

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Author: Julie Ackerman Link

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## *One Life Is Enough*

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**Read: Philippians 1:20**

A mature Christian said longingly, “Oh, that I could turn back the clock 20 years and go on ministering for the Lord!” That’s a commendable wish but impossible to fulfill. One life is all we’re given. Within God’s sovereign purposes, one life, whether long or short, is enough.

In Acts 20:22-23 and 21:11, God revealed that tribulations and possible death awaited Paul in Jerusalem. But instead of avoiding Jerusalem, Paul declared, “None of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus” (20:24). Paul’s goal was not to extend his ministry but to complete it.

Our goal, like Paul’s, should be to glorify Christ in our body, “whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20). Then, if necessary, we can afford to lose our liberty and our very lives. We can be sure God will use others to carry on His work and bring it to completion. Paul’s death did not bring his influence to an end. In Acts 20:28, he bequeathed his ministry to the church overseers, and we’re still reaping the benefits of his life today. Life is brief—“a vapor” (Jas. 4:14). With Christ’s help, let’s invest our lives in something that will outlast us.

***Application:***

1. Life is short, what we do now will count for eternity. What are two ways that you can serve the Lord now?

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2. Name someone that has had an influence on your life that is no longer alive. What about their life influenced you?

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