

MAKING PROGRESS IN THE LIFE OF FAITH



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Making Progress in the Life of Faith

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Welcome to *Making Progress in the Life of Faith*

Coming to faith in Jesus is not the end of the Christian life. It's just the beginning.

God delivered Israel out of Egypt, and that was just the start of a long process of their laying hold on the promises God had made to their forebears. To realize the fullness of all God had in store for them, Israel would have to make steady progress against considerable odds.

The Christian faith is very much like this. We can learn from Israel's experience how to make steady progress in our salvation, so that we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and bring increasing glory to Him in all things.

This study outlines the broad parameters of what this process involves.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Stay Focused

“For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land...” Deuteronomy 8.7

A matter of progress and growth

Following Jesus Christ is a matter of progress and growth. *Coming* to faith and *waiting for the consummation* of faith in eternal glory are the bookends of the *life* of faith. The *life* of faith entails making steady progress along a clearly demarcated path. Various New Testament metaphors for the life of faith make this clear.

For example, believers are called to *walk* as Jesus did (1 Jn. 2.1-6), to *run our race* (Heb. 12.1, 2) and *compete like an athlete* striving for a prize (1 Cor. 9.24). Beyond metaphors, we are commanded to *grow* in the Lord (2 Pet. 3.18) and chided when we don't (1 Cor. 3.1-3; Heb. 5.12). We're even commanded to *take every thought captive* for obedience to Jesus (2 Cor. 10.3-5).

There's just no getting around the implication that, as followers of Jesus Christ, there's no room for merely standing still.

This is true not only of our individual lives but of all the endeavors in which we engage as Christians. With Jesus we are *building His Church*, so that it grows steadily in unity and maturity (Matt.16.18; Eph. 4.11-16). We are *seeking His Kingdom* and praying daily that it will come on earth as in heaven, increasingly over time (Matt. 6.33, 10). In all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities we are engaged in *supplanting the darkness of sin with the light of grace and truth*, bringing the reconciled newness of Jesus Christ to replace the stale and worn-out best thinking and efforts of men, in every area of life (2 Cor. 5.17-21; 1 Jn. 2.8, 15-17).

Being a Christian means making progress – personally, spiritually, socially, communally, and in all aspects of our lives.

History shows that, where Christians have taken this resolute, focused, and obedient approach to following Jesus, real progress has been achieved in *reviving* the saints, *renewing* churches, and bringing *awakening and restoration* to the world.

But how do we do this? What's involved in consistently making progress in the life of faith?

Look to the promises

In many ways the challenge facing Israel as they waited on the plains of Moab to take up the battle for the promised land is a symbol of and template for the life of faith. In the book of Deuteronomy, written at this time, God spoke through Moses to direct His people in this difficult undertaking, and to assure them that, in due course, they would realize all His promises and blessings if they did not grow weary or stray from His path.

In the same way, God holds out to us precious and very great promises for full and abundant life in Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1.4; Jn. 10.10). But we will only realize these, increasingly, day by day, by working to lay hold on these promises as God has instructed us in His Word.

Making progress in the life of faith begins with a *clear vision of the outcomes you seek*. We need to know not only what our objective is in following Jesus, but why that objective is so desirable and worthy of unremitting effort on our parts.

And that means understanding and embracing the precious and very great promises of God.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God reminded the people of Israel of the good land He was preparing for them, “a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones *are* iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.” (Deut. 8.7-9). How precious this promised land must have seemed to the people of Israel. Here was a vision worth fighting for!

If we are to desire and make progress in the life of faith, we need to know where we’re going, and we must believe that where we are going – the objectives we seek, both in this life and the next – are eminently worth pursuing with all our souls and strength.

A revived people

Every day in the Christian life is a day of revival and restoration, of being clothed anew in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and of knowing the power of His Spirit transforming us daily into the Lord’s own image (Eph. 4.17-24; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). Progress in the life of faith, therefore, begins with a clear understanding of what it means to be *revived*, day by day, in the Spirit and Word of our exalted King.

A revived people can bring *renewal* of worship, discipleship, and mission to their churches, and to all the churches in their community. And renewed churches will call the world to joyful submission to King Jesus, and thus serve as a means to *awakening* and restoration among peoples, nations, and cultures all over the earth.

Revival, renewal, awakening, restoration: These are objectives worth attaining. God promises that we can realize these objectives in Jesus as we follow Him faithfully day by day.

Daily personal revival, ongoing renewal in our churches, and an awakening of spiritual life in our communities and the world: These are what God promises and what He calls us to pursue. And in these, the life of faith, we may expect to make regular progress as we follow Jesus.

For reflection

1. In what ways have you experienced progress in the life of faith in recent years? In what ways would you like to know more progress?
2. As you understand it, what are the keys to making steady progress in the life of faith? What are the great obstacles to overcome?
3. How would you describe the state of revival, renewal, and awakening in yourself, your church, and your community at this time?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about the state of revival, renewal, and awakening in your church and community. Spend some time in prayer together.

2 Understand the Obstacles

“And He will deliver their kings into your hand, and you will destroy their name from under heaven; no one shall be able to stand against you...” Deuteronomy 7.24

No easy task

As the Israelites waited on the plains of Moab for God’s command to enter the land, the Lord was careful to rehearse the vision of the good land that He had prepared for them. Making progress in the life of faith begins with a clear and compelling vision of *revival*, *renewal*, and *awakening*. The Scriptures have much to say about each of these matters, and the Lord commands us to pursue them as our own version of the “promised land.” By getting this vision clearly in focus, and renewing it day by day, we can know the courage and persistence we need to make progress toward our objectives.

As was the case with the people of Israel, formidable obstacles stand in the way of our quest. God reminded the Israelites that they would have to dispossess seven nations, each one stronger and more powerful than Israel, and each one fully invested in holding on to its land, whatever the cost. The struggle to overcome these obstacles would be considerable; but God promised to be with His people and to fight for them all the way. He promised that they would make steady progress toward His promised blessings if they persisted each day in every next step of obedient faith.

Realizing more of the promise of revival, renewal, and awakening will not be an easy row to hoe. We need to be clear about the obstacles that stand in our way, taking the measure of our opponents and facing up to the hurdles that reside in our own souls. We will daily have to fight a good fight on many fronts if we are going to make progress in following Jesus.

Complacency

With respect to *revival* – each of us knowing more of the full and abundant life in Christ, and being filled and led by His Spirit from glory to glory – the obstacles we must surmount lie chiefly within our own souls.

The first is *complacency*. It is very easy for us to become convinced that the life of faith, as we have come to know it, is as good as it gets. When that happens, we settle into our comfortable routines and put growing in the Lord on cruise control. We forget that the power of God within us is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think, and that He is striving to make us willing and able to know and do His good pleasure (Eph. 3.20; Phil. 2.13). Once we have lost sight of this, we don’t care to pursue it any further, so we cruise along rather than press ahead in faith.

Complacency will stall our progress in the Lord and keep us from seeking anything more than the familiar.

The status quo

The great obstacle to *renewal* in our churches is the *status quo*. Having never known renewal, and feeling quite at home in our church as it is, we are reluctant to envision or desire anything more. Besides, we don’t know any other churches where such renewal of worship, discipleship, and mission is occurring, so it must not be something to concern us. And as for finding fellowship, worship, and mission with other churches in our community, well, we conclude, that hasn’t happened before, so it’s probably not going to happen today.

Without *revival* in our souls and *renewal* in our churches we will never realize *awakening* and restoration in our culture and society.

Political default

The great obstacle to *awakening* and the restoration that comes with it is our tendency to believe that major social and cultural changes are the work of politics, rather than of those who are seeking the Kingdom of God. Change, we believe, is an external matter, and only governments can make the kind of laws and policies that bring a society into a better moral and cultural place. Christians have embraced a particular view of politics, which has continually let them down, because it is not up to the task of awakening and restoring.

As long as we keep trying to leap over the political wall to smaller government, fiscal responsibility, moral renewal, and whatever else we may seek for our nation, we're going to be disappointed. Politics is not the way to awakening and restoration.

Certainly we must climb this wall and not ignore or neglect our civic duties. But if we do not lead the way into our awakening and restoration with the Gospel of the Kingdom, boldly proclaimed and consistently lived, we will not see our neighbors coming to faith, and we will not be able to accomplish long-term change in the institutions of our culture and society.

Many more obstacles await us as well, but it will be no use identifying these until we first determine to overcome our personal complacency, the ecclesiastical *status quo*, and our belief that politics – rather than divine power – is the way to reform our society and culture. As we focus on the revival, renewal, and awakening God holds out for us, let's prepare each day to address the formidable obstacles that can keep us from making progress in our faith.

For reflection

1. How can you tell when you have become complacent about following Jesus? How can we break out of this complacency?
2. What does a church look like that needs renewal? Is your church trapped in the *status quo*? Explain.
3. What happens when a person is awakened to Jesus? Do truly awakened people have an impact on morality, culture, and society? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: How might you be able to tell when you are becoming complacent about your walk with the Lord? Talk with another Christian friend about this question. How might you help one another keep from stalling in your progress in faith by this obstacle?

3 Don't Be Afraid

"If you should say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?'— you shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt..." Deuteronomy 7.17, 18

Fear

For many Christians what keeps them from making progress in the life of faith is fear. Fear of losing what they really enjoy. Fear of the uncertainty involved in obedience. Fear of man.

God anticipated that His people would experience a certain amount of fear as they went into battle against seven nations stronger than they to gain the land God had promised to them. His command to them was simple: "You shall not be afraid." These words were the consistent counsel of Pope John Paul II to the Christians in Poland and Eastern Europe as they stood up to Marxist oppressors in the last decades of the 20th century. The Pope understood that, unless we're willing to risk everything to make progress in the faith, we will always be slaves to our fears. For if we *risk* everything *and lose it*, we gain the eternal blessing and glory of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it, "For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain" (Phil. 1.21).

God's command to Israel is valid for us as well, as we daily engage the challenge of making progress in the life of faith. The obstacles to personal *revival*, *renewal* in our churches, and *awakening* and restoration in the culture around us are considerable. We must not minimize these obstacles, but work to identify, understand, and consider the best ways of overcoming them all.

And we must not be afraid.

The fear of loss

Fear takes many different guises when it comes to impeding progress in the life of faith. As a powerful affection, fear makes us wary, causes us to cower, and discourages us from advancing our interests against whatever may be the object of our fear.

Three fears in particular can keep us from tackling the obstacles and making progress in the life of faith. The first is the *fear of loss*.

Simply put, we are afraid that, if we really get serious about following Jesus, we might have to give up things that have become dear to us. Chief among these is our time. Following Jesus is a full-time calling, and, if we're completely honest, most of us can probably identify a number of things currently occupying our time which have little to do with being a disciple. Yet we have grown accustomed to them – those evenings lazing in front of the television or surfing the web, that extra 30 minutes of sleep, those Sundays devoted to our own interests rather than God's.

We fear that giving up such things for a more serious involvement in following Jesus won't be worth it.

But this is a function of not seeing clearly what the Lord has in store for us in His precious and very great promises. "He is no fool," Jim Elliott wrote, "who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." If we are clear about the promise of *revival*, *renewal*, and *awakening*, we will not foolishly let these slip away when there is something we might do to attain them.

The fear of uncertainty

The second fear is related to this: the *fear of uncertainty*.

Making Progress in the Life of Faith

None of us can know the future; however, as long as we continue in our settled ways, we can be pretty sure that the future will be a lot like the past, and we're OK with that. When we contemplate seeking the Lord earnestly for *revival*, devoting more time and effort to *renewing* our church, and seeking to bring *awakening* and restoration to our neighbors and our culture, there are just a lot of unknowns out there.

These unknowns can freeze us with fear, the fear of exchanging our settled ways for, well, who knows what?

The fear of man

Finally, the *fear of man* can keep us right where we are, complacent in our *status quo* and not seeking the Kingdom as we should.

We have a sense that becoming more serious about following the Lord is not something one can do in a closet. We're going to have to "go public" with our beliefs, convictions, and changed lives. We're going to be talking with others about our faith and calling them to consider Jesus as well. We're going to be standing up for truth at home, at work, in church, and at every opportunity. We'll be saying and doing things that are guaranteed to offend or disturb those who do not share our faith, and what might happen then?

Wouldn't it be easier just to maintain our present level of discipleship and let the world go its own way?

Easier, yes, but not in line with Christ's calling to follow Him. The fear of loss, uncertainty, and man are real fears, but we do not have to give in to them.

Through prayer, a clear and compelling vision, and like-minded friends to help us stay the course, we can overcome our fears and begin to make real and continual progress in following Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. How does fear operate to keep us from following Jesus? What's the best way to overcome fear?
2. Can you see examples in Scripture of how God helped His people overcome their fears? What can you learn from these?
3. How can believers help one another to overcome their fears and continue making progress in the life of faith?

Next steps – Transformation: Are any of these fears – loss, uncertainty, what others might think or do – present in you at this time? Which? How might you begin to overcome them? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

4 Remember the Lord

“...you shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt...”
Deuteronomy 7.18

A faulty view of Scripture

Many Christians are thwarted in making progress in the life of faith because of a faulty understanding of Scripture. It's not that they don't regard the Bible as the Word of God or don't consider that what it teaches is true. The problem lies elsewhere.

Many Christians are of the opinion that the events of Scripture, and the great doctrines these illustrate, occurred in a different space/time continuum than the one in which we live. “That was *then*,” many Christians believe, “but this is *now*.” They seem to think God worked one way throughout the pages of the Bible, but today He works in ways more familiar to us.

I saw this plainly one weekend as I was leading a workshop for a local church and its leaders on the work of shepherding. I explained how God personally selected that model as a guiding motif for church leaders. Then I showed how the Lord Jesus and the apostles understood and practiced the work of shepherding and asked the members of the workshop to consider how this compared with what they were doing in their church.

Not very well, as it turned out.

In churches today we run programs, organize committees, create teams, and hold events. Whatever “shepherding” needs doing is reserved for people who are ill, elderly, hurting, or confused. In the Scriptures, God chose shepherding as the model for making disciples and building His Church. But that was then...

In the workshop, I continued to show that God intends to build His Church through the ministry of shepherds, who follow Jesus, leading and making disciples as He did. At a break, one of the participants pulled me aside and said, “You know, T. M., this is really good stuff. This shepherding was a really good idea for the people in Bible times. But we live in the *real* world...”

I stopped him right there. I said, “No, my friend, we don't live in the real world. We live in a world fallen in sin and groaning to be revived and renewed. And in the Church in that world, the way to revival, renewal, awakening, and restoration is through shepherding. This is what God teaches us in His Word, and it's what faithful generations of our forebears in the faith have practiced with such power and effectiveness.”

The God of all history

The God of Scripture is the God of all history. The things He did in Scripture, and the ways He taught us to do His will and make progress in following His Son, remain the same today.

Throughout Church history faithful men and women have believed that God has not changed, that He is still God Almighty, and that no obstacle is too great for Him to overcome in furthering the progress of His Kingdom. When the people of Israel would feel themselves giving in to fear, all they had to do was remember that the God Who was with them was the same God Who overthrew Pharaoh and all his armies by a mighty deliverance through the Red Sea.

“Remember the Lord!” This advice is just as good today as it was then.

Whenever we feel as though the obstacles to making progress in revival, renewal, awakening and restoration

are just too many, or we are simply too weak and distracted, or the likelihood of success seems remote – at all such times we need to remember the Lord. He is the Lord Who overturned the Roman Empire, saved civilization through the Celtic revival, led His people to build the culture of Christendom, inspired innovations and great advances in the arts, education, and science, sent the First and Second Great Awakenings, and Who today is putting all the enemies of Jesus Christ under His feet for the sake of building His Church.

That was then, it's true; but that is also now as well, wherever faithful believers are willing to remember the Lord and take Him at His Word.

God is able!

God is able, supremely able to fulfill all that He has promised. We must never lose sight of Him. He Who raised Jesus from the dead can surely revive our complacent souls, renew our *status quo* churches, and awaken and restore our decadent world unto the praise of the glory of His grace. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think by the power that is at work within us (Eph. 3.20; Phil. 2.13). He will honor those who shepherd His flock, embrace their calling to be His witnesses, work to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Jesus Christ, and seek the filling and power of His Spirit for their daily walk and work.

The problem is not that the God of the Bible is not the same today as He was then. Or that those Biblical ways which were so powerful and effective then are no longer available to us today.

The problem is that we lack the faith *to take God at His Word as we hear Him speaking in Scripture*, because we have lost sight of the greatness, power, majesty, wisdom, and faithfulness of our God.

If we want to make progress in the life of faith today, we'll need to remember the Lord and follow Him according to all His Word.

For reflection

1. Have you ever heard yourself saying, "Yes, well, that was *then*, but this is *now*, and things have changed..."? Explain.
2. How can we know when we're following the ways of the world rather than the ways of God? What should we do when we discern this?
3. What is one area of your life where you'd like to be more faithful in taking God at His Word? What can you do today to begin making progress in this area?

Next steps – Preparation, Conversation: How can believers help one another to "remember" the Lord whenever they feel they're not making progress in their faith? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

5 Little by Little

“And the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you little by little; you will be unable to destroy them at once...”
Deuteronomy 7.22

What’s the big deal?

As a people Americans are inclined to think in terms of what we might call “the big deal.”

Don’t bother me with the small stuff in life; show me the big deal, the big splash, the blow-me-away bargain, the out-of-this-world program, the superstar, the ginormous scandal, and, well, you get the idea.

Christians are as prone to this kind of thinking as anyone else. We are of the mindset that bigger is better, sooner rather than later, loud clappy worship rather than contemplative silence and individual soul-searching, big programs and events rather than small, everyday steps. I’m not quite sure why we think this way, since everything else in life indicates that real and lasting progress comes incrementally – slowly and gradually, over time, and with patient persistence. Little by little, not one big blast after another.

Think of the coming of spring, the growth of a baby, acquiring an education, learning a trade, mastering a language, and much more. As Israel prepared to take up the conquest of Canaan, God told His people to gear-up for the long haul, since it would take a considerable amount of time for them to realize the objective of obtaining and settling the land of promise.

Making progress in faith is not so much a matter of the occasional “big deal” as of the everyday steps of obedience. If we’re always seeking the next big thing, we’ll neglect the daily little steps, and this will cause our faith to stall.

Little by little

We know, in fact, that the conquest of Canaan, which began right after the book of Deuteronomy, occurred as a series of military campaigns. The Israelites engaged in many battles over some years, and, even when Joshua’s days came to an end, there was still much to conquer.

Little by little, day by day: that’s the Lord’s way of making progress. Like the slow trickles of water from the leaves of mountain trees, as they combine to fill rivulets, streams, creeks, and the small rivers that drain into such mighty concourses as Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi, such is the way we make progress in the life of faith.

The key to making such progress is threefold: vision, contentment, and perseverance.

Three keys

We will not be content with small steps as we take up the work of seeking revival, renewal, awakening and restoration unless we are able to keep *the larger vision and objective* in mind. Without an eye to the far horizon, and the light of glory that beckons just beyond the final ridge, we will weary of small steps, thinking them inconsequential and going nowhere. We will envy the “big step” guys and their widely touted ministries or achievements, and we’ll regard our every next step as of no consequence in the Lord’s grand plan.

But it is precisely in the little-by-little, every next step that we make progress in the life of faith.

Small steps – like the time we spend in prayer and meditation, working at relationships, serving in your church, speaking up at a school board meeting, helping a colleague on the job, getting to know your

neighbors, working your Personal Mission Field, and the like – will seem pointless unless we see them against the backdrop of where we’re seeking to go. We seek the Kingdom, righteousness, and glory of God, and we will only get there a little at a time.

Then, we must learn to *be content with small steps*, faithfully taken, *every day of our lives*. Rejoice to be praying more, to have begun a new friendship or started a conversation that can lead to the Gospel, helped a new believer learn the importance of daily Bible reading, written a letter to the editor, made a change in your workplace, learned the name of a sales clerk or postman, made a gesture or spoken a word of grace to a perfect stranger, and so forth.

Then come back the next day and do it again.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, asked in the 1970s what it would take to bring down the Soviet Empire and restore freedom to Russia, answered, “All it will take is for every Russian to take a moral step within his own power.” This is precisely what happened in the Velvet Revolution in Romania in 1989, as people gathered with candles in the public square, calling out their neighbors to truth and freedom. The fall of the Soviet Empire was the ultimate result.

Small steps of faith, taken day by day, become a path of righteousness leading to revival, renewal, awakening, and restoration. Don’t despise them, but seek them out, and walk them faithfully each day.

Don’t weary of the small stuff!

And finally, *don’t weary of the small stuff*. Stay the course. Persevere. Stop thinking that you’ll never amount to anything for the Kingdom of God unless you start some big ministry, run a powerful program, or otherwise make some notable splash. Stay the course of small, daily steps of faith and glory. Don’t get weary of doing good (Gal. 6.9, 10), and don’t fail to see that all the little good things you do each day represent real progress in the Kingdom of God.

God has promised that we will overcome all the obstacles before us and realize His promises if we stay on task, little by little, in everyday situations and roles, every day of our lives.

God is the God of little by little. If we accept His strategy for bringing about revival, renewal, awakening and restoration, we’ll seek out the small steps we can take, every day of our lives, that will bring us just that much closer to the far horizon toward which He is slowly but surely leading us.

For reflection

1. What are some examples of little-by-little in your life? What small steps are available to you? What can prevent you from seeing these small steps as significant vehicles for the Lord’s grace and truth?
2. Meditate on Hebrews 10.24. Whom can you encourage in their every next step today?
3. Mediate on Psalm 90.12, 16, 17. Try praying this every day for the next week. Do you think this will help you to be more mindful of the importance of your every next step? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Psalm 90.12 encourages us to “number” our days – make a daily plan for our walk with and work for the Lord. What would such a daily plan include? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

6 Sow a Little Confusion

“But the LORD your God will give them over to you and will surely throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed.”
Deuteronomy 7.23 (my translation)

To save, not destroy

In the violent days of the Old Testament, before the Gospel of grace was proclaimed, the world was shrouded in darkness and wickedness; and wicked people were likely to stay that way. Before Israel entered the promised land, the people of Canaan had accumulated a long history of attacking, pillaging, and savaging the nations around them. Israel’s only hope for claiming her rightful heritage was to fight fire with fire. God promised to throw the enemies of His people into utter confusion before they fell in defeat.

But in these days of grace, when the Sword of the Spirit is more powerful than any army or nation (cf. Ps. 149), the mission of God’s people is of a different cast. Our calling is to destroy the work of the devil in the souls of lost sinners (1 Jn. 3.7, 8), so that they might be delivered from darkness and wickedness into the realm of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit (Col. 1.12, 13).

Like Jesus, we are sent into the world to seek the lost, so that some of them might be saved (Lk. 19.10; Jn. 20.21; 1 Cor. 9.19-23). We make progress in the life of faith as we work to fulfill this aspect of our discipleship, each of us in our own place and calling. As part of this calling, we will encounter unbelieving worldviews, and we must be prepared to deal with these. Think of Jesus saying again and again, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” Or of how often people said of Him, “We never saw or heard it like this before.” Recall the first Christians, whose message and transformed lives threatened the *status quo* of Roman pluralism and pragmatism (Acts 17.1-9). Or Paul, flatly rejecting the false worldviews of the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17.22ff).

People are not likely to embrace a *new* worldview until they are confronted with the inadequacy of the one they presently hold. As God confused the violent nations of Canaan, in order to destroy them, so we must sow a little confusion of our own into the hearts and minds of our unbelieving neighbors, to destroy the devil’s grip on them and lead them into the truth of Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? Let me mention three ways.

Speak up!

We can discern the first way from the responses of unbelievers to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2). The people in Jerusalem were thrown into confusion when they heard these humble believers declaring the mighty acts of God and His redeeming work in Jesus Christ. The fact that the believers spoke in languages they had never learned was a source of wonder; but just as significant was *their exuberance and boldness* in declaring the Good News of the Kingdom.

If the followers of Jesus should begin to be aflame with the Spirit for the proclamation of the Gospel, so that we talked about Jesus more readily, naturally, confidently, and urgently, that would cause people to wonder. To encounter people they know, talking boldly and warmly about Jesus, would cause not a few of our friends to question their own views and convictions, and open many of them to believing in Jesus.

Expose the folly

Second, we will sow confusion among our unbelieving friends when we confront their false worldviews and patiently, lovingly, but resolutely *challenge them to consider the folly* of their ways (Prov. 26.4, 5). Unbelief is irrational and unreasonable. Under careful scrutiny, it can’t be made to make sense, because only the Gospel

is true.

Whoever does not believe the Gospel is believing the lie in one form or another (cf. Rom. 1.18-32). Jesus understood this, and He confronted the unbelieving worldviews of His day, asking questions that left those who heard Him baffled, confused, and wondering. We can ask questions, too: “Why do you say this?” “How do you know that?” “What if that’s not the way things really are?” By asking pointed questions, we can lead people to consider their beliefs in a new light; and, as they do, this can create the kind of confusion that opens a fissure for the light of truth.

Persevere in hope

Finally, we will throw our unbelieving generation into confusion as we consistently live the hope of the Gospel, doing good works of love (1 Pet. 3.15). Our skeptical and narcissistic generation needs to see the proof of the Good News, lived out in joyous and selfless acts of love. When they do, they may be provoked to wonder why anyone would live so selflessly, with such concern and love for the people around them. This is not the way of the world, and when worldly people see us living this way, it will throw them into confusion, and they may wish to know a reason for the hope that is within us. Think of Javert’s confusion and desperation at being the recipient of the selfless, loving acts of Jean Valjean (*Les Misérables*).

Confused, questioning, and uncertain about their own preferred way of life, they may, by our good works of love, be prepared to turn to the One Who makes all things new.

We do not seek to destroy our neighbors, but to destroy the bonds and blinders that keep them from the truth, so that they might come to know the joy of the Lord as we do. Making progress in faith entails helping others come to faith as well. But to accomplish this, it may be necessary, little by little, to sow some confusion into their lives.

For reflection

1. We often use the word *conversion* to describe someone’s coming to faith in Jesus. What does that word mean? From what are people being *converted*?
2. Read Haggai 1. Only when the prophet challenged the people to consider their ways did they turn from their self-centeredness to the Lord and His work. How does this instruct us concerning our own work for the Lord?
3. What are some good questions you might use to help others consider their ways?

Next steps – Preparation: Review the three strategies for sowing confusion into an unbeliever’s life. Which one will you employ today? How? Share your thoughts about this with a Christian friend and challenge your friend to join you in this effort.

7 Stay the Course of Holiness

“Nor shall you bring an abomination into your house, lest you be doomed to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest it and utterly abhor it, for it is an accursed thing.” Deuteronomy 7.26

Just the beginning

The Christian life begins when, confused and uncertain about what we’ve always believed, and convicted of our need for redemption, we turn in faith to Jesus Christ and receive Him as Savior, Lord, and King.

The enemies of God today – among whose ranks we were before we believed (Rom. 5.10) – are being subdued (Ps. 110.1), not by the political sword, but by the power of the Sword of the Spirit (Ps. 149), as *revived* believers and *renewed* churches live and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God unto *awakening* and restoration in the world, and lost people come to their sense and join us in believing the Gospel.

But believing in Jesus is not the end of faith; it is, rather, the beginning of the adventure of following Him. The pursuit of holiness now becomes the calling and journey of every true believer, as Paul says, “let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7.1).

That is, if we profess to *believe* in Jesus and to *belong* to Him, we must *walk the path* He did, the path of obedience to God and His holy and righteous and good Law (1 Jn. 2.1-6; Rom. 7.12). Only as we stay that course can we expect to prove that we have been saved, are being daily revived, and are making progress in our faith as the people of God (Rom. 2.13; Heb. 3.12-14; Rev. 12.17).

Just like Israel

Our calling and challenge is not unlike that which Israel faced. They had to make progress in claiming the promises and blessings of God in the midst of a world of unbelief, idolatry, and abominable sin. God commanded them to be careful lest, as they interacted with pagan cultures, they should be tempted to compromise their calling and embrace some pagan ways.

We face the same challenge. As we encourage one another for revival, and work to renew our churches in order, worship, and mission, we interact with a world of materialism, sensuality, pragmatism, narcissism, and relativism. And, while it may be necessary for us to “learn the language of Canaan” in reaching out to our unsaved neighbors and friends (1 Cor. 9.19-23), we must be careful that we do not allow our interactions with the unbelieving world to draw us off the path of righteousness.

How can we do this? How can we persist in making progress for revival, renewal, awakening and restoration amid an unbelieving generation, and keep ourselves clean and pure from abominable and wicked ways? Let me make four suggestions.

Four suggestions

First, take seriously Paul’s instruction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5.17). He was only echoing the Lord Jesus, Who said we must pray at all times and not grow faint (Lk. 18.1). This is more than just an *attitude* of prayer; Paul and Jesus want us to develop a *readiness to pray* and even a *lifestyle of prayer*, so that, at every moment, we may know the refreshing and renewing communion of the Lord, helping us to overcome obstacles and fear, resist temptation, and stay the course of holiness.

Second, stay in the Word of God. We will not be able to walk the path of righteousness if we do not continually ponder and study the Map which guides our way. All Scripture is inspired by God, and all Scripture is profitable for our walk with Him (2 Tim. 3.15-17). We need disciplines in place to take us

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regularly through all of Scripture, and at ever-increasing depths of understanding and obedience.

Let's make sure we are regularly making progress through all the counsel of God in the Bible, daily reading, meditating, and applying His Word to our lives.

Third, maintain vital connection with the people of the Lord. We set ourselves up for trouble when we are not an active part of a community of God's people. We are part of the Body of Christ, and we need all the other members to support and sustain us. We shall have a difficult time contributing to the renewal of the church if we are not ourselves actively engaged in it.

Finally, find a soul friend or two with whom you can exercise mutual encouragement, edification, and accountability. As you sharpen one another and stimulate one another to love and good works, you'll both make progress in the Lord's will for your lives (Heb. 10.24).

God expects us to make progress in knowing more of the full and abundant life for which He has redeemed us through Jesus Christ. Let's make it our agenda to be as zealous and faithful in this as He is. We can contribute to a movement of people working together for revival, renewal, awakening, and restoration, if we will stay the course of holiness and keep focused on the promises of the Lord.

For reflection

1. What is holiness? What obstacles can keep us from making progress in holiness?
2. How can believers help and encourage one another to stay the course of holiness?
3. Do you have a soul friend? Do you think you would benefit from having one? Explain.

Next steps - Preparation: Where do you need to improve in "bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" in your life? Write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org, and I'll send you additional information on soul friends. Make a copy for yourself and a friend, and challenge your friend to join you in this adventure of mutual encouragement.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What does it mean to make progress in the life of faith? How can we know when we're making progress?
2. What are the most important ingredients for a life of steady progress in the faith? What is the state of each of these ingredients in your own life?
3. Why is Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan a good model for us to follow in pursuing the life of faith?
4. What can believers do to help one another continue making progress in the life of faith?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.