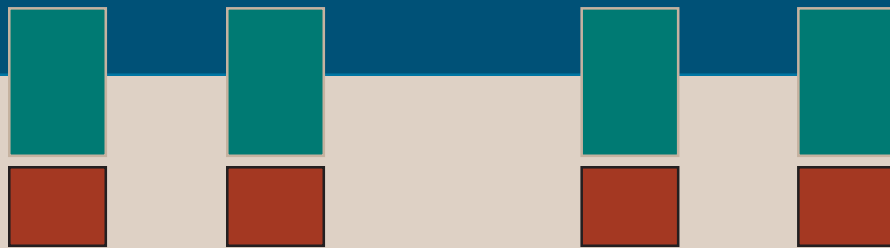


Progress



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Progress

Our English word “progress” comes from the Latin word “progressus” which means “to move forward.” It means “a journey, a forward course of action, of events, or of time.” And another definition is “proceeding to a further or higher stage, or through such stages successfully.”

In other words, progress as to do with advancement, growth, development, continuous improvement.

Let’s learn some things from history and talk about medical science and progress.

History tells us that in the 1840s, a man named Ignaz Semelweis found that women in labor were less likely to contract and die of childbed fever if their doctors washed their hands. It sounds simple to us today, but let me tell you what happened when this simple truth was introduced in that time: the doctors of the day thought that was silly and ignored what we know today to be absolute truth.

In the 1840s, the common practice for doctors was this: they would work on and learn from cadavers in the dissecting room, and then go directly from the dead bodies to the operating room to deliver women in childbirth. Needless to say, many people died from infections in that age. And here’s the incredible thing: hand washing worked in Vienna (death rates were down), but Semelweis couldn’t get people to listen elsewhere, even though he had proof!

Women used to go to hospitals only as a last resort, and then kicking and begging and crying, because they knew that women who had their babies in the hospital, many times, didn’t survive the hospital stay.

Twenty years later, Louis Pasteur and his germ theory showed that Semelweis was right, but even then the physicians of the day would not accept the findings. History tells us that hand washing and aseptic technique was not accepted until the 1880s!

Doctors today know the importance and significance of “scrubbing in.” They do it before every surgery and between every patient’s examination. They not only scrub their hands very particularly and in accordance to very specific instructions, but they wear gloves. It’s so integral today to the practice of medicine, that we’ve forgotten they’ve only done it for about 125 years.

See how much progress has been made in the medical world in the last 125 years?

Let’s see what we can learn from it. It seems to me that **progress means change, not for the sake of change, but for a higher purpose.** Progress should be for the purpose of growth, improvement or advancement.

Well, here’s another thing I learn: folks who are instinctively resistant to change many times inhibit progress. Educated people can resist progress. Intelligent people can resist progress. I learn from this historical time period that men who are considered leaders and healers in society can resist change and progress, and when they do so, they endanger the well-being of the folks in their charge.

It took Louis Pasteur 40 years to get these educated men to wash their hands. But from that simple act, medical science was transformed into a healing, curative, more successful

practice of medicine. I won't belabor the point, but what do you imagine their arguments were?

No doubt the esteemed, intelligent, educated doctors said, "We've never heard of that before. It's silly. We've always done it this way. This way worked for our fathers; it'll work for us. I'm a doctor, for heaven's sake. I know what's good for my patients. I'm an educated man. I'm willing and eager to learn ... why, I just came from the dissecting room!"

You see, here's the sad truth of what really mattered in that day: the doctor's bloody lab coat was a badge of honor and silent symbol of importance. Think about that for a while. The symbol of importance was of more value than the lives of the patients in their care.

The only problem, of course, was that women kept dying in childbirth. Germs were spread from cadavers to living organisms. And all they had to do was allow themselves to be taught to wash their hands. Progress was hindered for 40 years because of arrogance and an unwillingness to accept a simple truth.

But not only was progress hindered, children lost their mothers. Husbands lost their wives. Babies died. And society as a whole was negatively impacted.

But the doctors went home every day, refusing to accept what was a proven fact in the small town of Vienna: all they had to do was wash their hands.

Let's look at progress in the Bible. It didn't look much like progress when Jesus healed ten lepers and only one turned back to thank Him, did it? It didn't look much like progress to the poor widow woman who threw her two mites in the offering box of the temple. That was "all she had," and she gave it to God. Fortunately, Jesus' definition of progress in that day was much different than the Pharisees' understanding of the concept.

Many times progress is not measured by immediate success but by baby steps over time. Many times progress is not readily apparent.

As humans, when we're in the middle of doing things for God, we like to see progress as instantaneous and gratifying as the seven days of creation, don't we? We like to picture the scene that says, "My name is the Alpha and Omega and I'm going to create light today."

And we like the simple majesty of the scripture that says, "and there was light."

Now THAT's progress! That's how we like to get things done. Miraculously. Instantaneously. Gloriously. Like when Jesus healed the blind and caused the cripples to walk and brought the dead back to life. We really like that that kind of progress!

But wait. In our quest to learn more how God does things, let's stop for a moment and consider the scene of the crucifixion.

It didn't look like very much was being accomplished when Jesus was agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane, did it? It doesn't look much like progress to me when after 3½ years of walking

and learning about the character of Jesus and His Father, given the opportunity to stand by their Lord, one apostle betrayed him, one apostle denied Him, and the others ran away in the dark. You could say that He taught them divine truth, showed them miracles and wonders, and they showed the divine change in their character by ... being cowards???

Or what about when Jesus was being tried for crimes He didn't commit? Or when He was being whipped and beaten and tortured? Certainly no progress is apparent there.

If you were a disciple at this time, what would you be thinking? Would you be thinking, "Victory is at hand"? "Eternal progress is being made"? "Thank God for the valley I walked through today"? Somehow, I don't think so. Certainly we have no record the apostles were rejoicing in victory at this time.

Let's move on to the hill where He was crucified. Do you think you could have looked at that man hanging on the cross between two thieves and said, "Thank God for progress"?

Or how about when He died, against all of our hopes and dreams, and they took Him down and buried Him? And He's been gone for two and three days now and we're trying to get used to the reality of a world without the man named Jesus, the man we thought was our Messiah. Do you think we would be thanking God for progress?

Nope. To the natural man, this must have appeared like the failure and defeat of all they had believed in. No wonder Peter said, "I'm going fishing." To him, there was nothing else to DO! You know, I might very well have gone with him, had I been there.

Ah, but I gotta tell ya, folks, **God was doing magnificent things** right during this time! At this time in history, at this very time and that very place ... right when Jesus was actually breathing His last breaths ... **incalculable progress was being made!**

Eternal truths were being established. The very laws of nature were being changed. Other than the creation, the direction of mankind's destiny has never displayed such remarkable, miraculous progress!

But it sure didn't much look like progress, did it?

In the middle of that time period, it just looked like someone they loved and believed in died. It looked like defeat and disappointment and shattered dreams. More than that, it looked like the very death of God, and the triumph of every evil force.

But you see, this was God's master plan, and though no discernible steps of progress were being made; though we can't see a ray of light in the darkness; though nothing around me looks like it can help in any way and my enemies rejoice in my defeat - if I keep my faith in God, progress is indeed being made in my life. It's God's master plan, the progress and results of which we may not see right now.

I heard a black man say one time, "What ... you only fight the battles you can win?" And my answer before this time would have been a resounding, "Yes!"

I think you can probably count on the fact that if most folks going to put their hand to the plough, they most assuredly plan to come out victorious. Most folks don't like defeat and probably choose the battles they think they can win.

But what if the very first slave that rebelled against slavery would have only fought the battles he could win? We'd still have slavery today, wouldn't we? NO progress would have been made, because the very first slave, no doubt, died without ever realizing the beginning of a process that would free the slaves of an entire country.

Here's what I learn from that: **the stages of progress are built upon every man standing for the right, regardless of the outcome.** The price of progress is not always predictable, but the result of progress is grateful to many an unsung hero.

Look at the progress of the gospel during the history of the reformation. What was it built on?

Do you think Martin Luther could have predicted the end of the simple action of nailing the 95 Theses to the Door? You see, Luther wanted to reform the church he was IN. I'm sure it didn't look much like progress when he was called into court and later excommunicated from that same church.

One writer wrote: "Luther (and all the other reformers) saw themselves as returning Christianity to its roots, they believed that they were setting the clock back; in reality, their ideas irreparably changed the world and pushed it kicking and screaming, not into some ideal past, but into the modern era."

It's just an undeniable fact: change and progress make folks uncomfortable, don't they? But really, change and progress are essential to spiritual growth. God wants His kingdom to progress and expand. Many scriptures instruct us to "grow in grace."

Here's my admonition: always be open to progress. Not change for the sake of change, but certainly for the sake of progress. Personal growth. Advancement. A journey from one stage to another. Don't be afraid to let God lead you into progress. No doubt at times, the change will be scary. But if it's God leading you, follow, knowing of a certainty that He means to lead your spirit into pastures previously unexplored. He means to lead you into a vast, open, plentiful land of milk and honey. I encourage you to take the journey.

And if someone comes along and presents you with a truth as simple washing your hands, don't neglect or reject it because you've never seen or heard of it being done before ... examine it in accordance with rightly divided scripture, with evidence and with an open heart before God.

Never be so arrogant as to assume you need never be taught more truth. Never put a badge or symbol or reputation ahead of the greater good of the people. Purpose to always be willing to learn more of God, more of His ways, more of His character and more from His Word.

There are certainly times in life when we should, as the definition of progress assures us, "proceed to a further or higher stage," and to move though such stages successfully.

Remember that the best way even today to stop the common cold or the flu from spreading, is as simple as washing your hands. And remember that the truth is sometimes just that simple too.

Let me give you some scriptures:

Galatians 5:25, says, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

Walking in the Spirit is a progression. It’s a forward direction. **Progress** in the Spirit. Proceed successfully to a further and higher stage. Jesus said that He will lead us into all truth. It’s a forward course of action that has to do with advancement and continuous improvement.

The church is not a stagnant pond, but a place where the river of life flows. The river of life is a moving river. It brings with it growth, progress, continuous improvement and advancement. Let’s not leave this world like we found it; let’s leave it a better place! Let’s make learning and spiritual growth a continuous advancement.

Psalms 37:23 says, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way.”

The steps of a good man. The progress of a good man. The forward movement, the continuous improvement and advancement of a good man -- these are ordered by the Lord. Maybe you can’t see today where the progress is, because you’re in the valley of crucifixion or trial, but if you keep your steps, your progress, your forward movement as ordered by the Lord, you will see a personal growth in grace towards the mark of the perfect man.

Methinks “the perfect man” is not marked by stagnation, arrogance or a refusal to learn. No, I’m certain that the godly character of such a man is marked by humility and deep spirituality, by a hunger for more of God and a continuous progression of faith.

I daresay it didn’t look like progress to Paul when he was being shipwrecked, or beaten, or imprisoned, or starved.... Was there spiritual progress in all of this? Absolutely. Not only for him, but for those who came after him, and for those whose lives he touched. There was spiritual progress and an increase in the kingdom because of the gospel he preached. We’re still reading it and learning from it!

But when he was wet and cold and hungry and hurting? He might just have wondered at the purpose and progress of it all, mightn’t he?

Ephesians 6:11-18 gives very practical instruction on how to fight the good fight of faith. “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of

the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints...”

There are some causes you stand for, regardless of the outcome. Think again of the first slave who just could not stomach the chains of slavery any longer. Something in him stood for freedom. Regardless of the outcome, he stood for freedom. And this man, maybe even without his knowledge, started a chain of events that resulted in progress. It was worth it to him.

Standing for truth is one of those causes you just stand for, without regard for consequence. You just stand for it. Regardless of what folks say. Regardless of whether or not they accept progress. Regardless of whether the baby steps are observed or whether they are ignored by the leading professors of the land.

Professing your faith in Jesus Christ is another one of those causes. You just never, ever give up your faith in Christ. Not for any reason. Not for any church. Not for any person. Even if you can't see any effects your testimony is having on the community. Whether or not the doctors notice that in your small town the death rate is way down. It doesn't matter. For however long you have to maintain it, you do the right thing. For 40 years or 400 years.

Remember this, many times spiritual progress is not discernible until after we look back over the path we have taken. Many times, God's master plan is being effected and we won't see the results until Resurrection Morning. But that's okay ... because Resurrection Morning IS coming, as certainly as the night followed the crucifixion.

The secret to spiritual progress is, first, a faith in God, a sincere desire to follow truth, and then a perseverance in following it. Never give up that fight.

Hang in there, folks. Progress is being made. One day, keeping the faith, you will be able to say as Paul said in 2 Tim. 4:7: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith....”

I have finished my course. I made a “forward movement” right up until the day I died. I grew. I prospered. I left the world a better place because of my testimony. I learned. I advanced. And in all of that I have “kept” the faith. I watered it. I nurtured it. I saw it grow in my own life and expand to affect the lives of others. I made progress.

And because of that, here's the assurance:

“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness....”

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