

Growing in Maturity by Tom Ascol
[via Ligonier Ministries](#)

One thing most children have in common is a desire to grow up. They look forward to being big and experiencing life from the perspective of someone who has advanced beyond childhood. Whether that involves going to school or getting a driver's license, the privileges and opportunities that attend maturity lead children to aspire to growth.

Adults expect children to grow as well. When they fail to develop and mature, it is abnormal and therefore cause for concern.

Scripture encourages such desires and expectations for believers. Peter writes, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). He commands us to desire that which will enable our spiritual growth ("milk of the word"; NASB) so that by it we mature into the salvation that is ours in Christ. Similarly, you can hear the frustration of unfulfilled expectations in the words of the author of Hebrews as he gently rebukes his readers for their ongoing spiritual immaturity:

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food. (Heb. 5:11–12)

Because the Hebrews have not grown as they should have, they are not in a position to receive further instruction that would otherwise benefit them.

However, the author of Hebrews does not let his readers off the hook because of their spiritual immaturity; rather, he points out their culpability and exhorts them to grow. The main reason he finds it difficult to explain the implications of Christ's high priesthood (about which he has been writing in 4:14–5:10) is due not to the subject matter but rather to their own "dullness of hearing." The word translated "dullness" means lazy or negligent, and it indicates that the condition is self-inflicted. The Hebrews have developed a reluctance to listen to the Word of God.

The letter's recipients, however, are not merely blamed for their spiritually immature condition—they are challenged to leave it behind and to "go on to maturity" (6:1) by building on the foundation that has long been laid in their lives through repentance and faith. Like the Hebrews, every Christian, regardless of age, experience, or circumstance, bears this responsibility to grow spiritually.

The Shape of Spiritual Maturity

The word translated "maturity" in Hebrews 6:1 belongs to a family of words that are translated elsewhere as "complete" or "perfect." It carries the idea of wholeness or full development. To "go on to maturity," then, involves growing into a complete, fully developed disciple of Christ. It means to become increasingly like Christ in our thinking, moral character, and devotion to God.

Ephesians 4:13–15 describes spiritual maturity as being built up...

...to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the

truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Mature Christians are those whose lives are marked by such stability that they are not easily led astray by teachings and practices that are contrary to the Word of God. On the contrary, mature believers are “growing up in every way” into Christ.

The How of Spiritual Maturity

Growth naturally follows birth in one’s spiritual life, just as it does in one’s physical life. That it is normal, however, does not mean that it is automatic. God has provided specific instruments to lead His people to spiritual maturity. The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes this provision:

Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto. (WCF 25.3)

Ordinary means of grace have been provided by God for both the “gathering” (conversion) and “perfecting” (maturing) of His people. The means that God has provided for creating faith in His people are the same means by which He intends for them to grow in faith. When Scripture encourages believers to advance in the Christian life, it never has in mind that we can outgrow our need of these ordinary means. Rather, as we continue to employ these means faithfully, we are empowered to grow deeper and stronger in our relationship with Christ.

The Word

Jesus prayed to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Scripture is God’s Word written, and apart from it we cannot have a saving knowledge of God or grow in our relationship with Him. The Apostle Paul says God gave us the Scriptures to profit us through teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness so “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). To grow in maturity, a Christian must grow in his understanding of and submission to Scripture.

A casual acquaintance with the Bible will not suffice, as Jesus makes clear in the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount when He contrasts a house built on a rock that withstands the storms with one built on sand that is destroyed by them. The latter represents the person who merely hears the Word of Christ without submissively complying with it. His life lacks stability. The former is like the wise man who not only hears the teachings of Jesus but “does them.” His life will be characterized by a maturity that stands firm through the trials of life. God has designed His Word to shape us through reading and hearing (Rom. 10:17; Rev. 1:3), through meditation and memorization (Josh. 1:8; Pss. 1:1–3; 119:11), and especially through faithful preaching (2 Tim. 4:1–5).

Prayer

Through prayer, we have access to the very throne room of God as we approach Him in and through Jesus Christ. We are commanded to pray (1 Thess. 5:17), told that some things simply do not happen without prayer (Mark 9:29), and instructed regarding how to pray (Matt. 6:5–13; Luke 11:1–4). Through prayer, we develop intimacy with God as we pour out our hearts to Him with

reassurances that through Christ our High Priest, He sympathizes with us and will provide help and mercy in our times of need (Heb. 4:14–16).

Prayer helps strengthen our faith not only when we see the Lord fulfilling His Word as we pray but also when we are not granted good things that we ask of Him. It was through the Lord's refusal to grant Paul's request that the Apostle learned to trust in the sufficiency of God's grace that displays God's power in our weakness. As a result, Paul matured to the point of being able to say, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:8–10).

The Sacraments

The sacraments also have been provided to strengthen the faith of God's people. Baptism signifies our fellowship with Christ in His death and resurrection as well as our union with Him through forgiveness of sin (Rom. 6:1–11). The Lord's Supper is designed to strengthen our faith as believers look through the elements to the reality that they represent. Through faith, they "spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death" (Second London Baptist Confession 30.7).

Submitting to these prescribed ordinances causes faith to be strengthened through obedience and keeps the person and work of Jesus regularly before Christians.

Church

It takes a church to raise a Christian, and believers who think they are sufficient in themselves to maintain spiritual health and growth

without submitting to a church are dangerously naive. Christ has given gifts to the church—including pastor-teachers—"to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11–12). There is a corporate dimension to spiritual growth that highlights our interdependence as brothers and sisters who are following Christ together. God has designed individual Christians to function as members of one another in a local body of believers (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12–31). If your goal is spiritual maturity, you simply cannot neglect being united to a well-ordered, biblically faithful church.

Press On

As an experienced Apostle, Paul writes that his goal is to know Christ...

...and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. . . . Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:10–14)

These are the words of a mature believer who is bent on continuing to grow. So, he fittingly adds this exhortation to his testimony: "Let those of us who are mature think this way" (v. 15a).