

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE FROM BEGINNING TO END

INTRODUCTION

What on earth is God doing in the world?

We've seen that He is carrying out His eternal plan of redemption, bringing forth a people for His own possession, a Bride for His Son.

We've seen that Jesus is building His church on the foundation of His own work as Savior, authority as Lord, and nature as God.

We've seen that the Father is caring for the church as a farmer cares for a vineyard; He regularly removes those who are false believers, and prunes those who are true believers, in order to bring them into perfect conformity with Jesus Christ.

Today we are going to see that the Father has ordered our spiritual lives in distinct stages, which the apostle John helps us to see in First John 2:12-14.

- › [1 John 2:12-14 \(2016 ESV\)](#) — **12** I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. **13** I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. **14** I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Let's ask God's blessing on our time, and then think about these three stages of spiritual life.

LITTLE CHILDREN

- › I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake ... I write to you, children, because you know the Father. ([First John 2:12, 13](#)).

The phrase 'little children' has nothing to do with physical age. John is writing to those who are spiritually 'little children.' Many of them are little children because they have recently come to Christ.

Now, it's true that some are still little children because they are spiritually immature, which is not healthy. Someone can be a 'little child' in Christ at the age of 60, having been a Christian for twenty or thirty years. This might be common, but it's not normal. A lack of growth will inevitably lead to dissatisfaction, disappointment, and resentment. They might feel that they are being treated like second-class Christians, or that others get all the blessings.

But John isn't speaking to those who are willfully immature; he's speaking to those who are still feeling the thrill of their salvation. Unbelievers have no idea of their weight of their guilt before God. In the process of coming to Christ, the reality of sin comes crashing down. With the gift of eternal life comes freedom from those burdens, and it's a beautiful feeling.

John also says that little children **know the Father**. He's not talking about a constant experience of knowing, but rather the reality of adoption. From the moment that a sinner is born again and trusts in Jesus Christ, they are adopted into the family of God. God truly is their Father. In this letter John writes against the heresy of gnosticism, which, like many false religions, created a hierarchy of spiritual life. The best and deepest spiritual life was that of those who had the most personal experience and knowledge. Those who were new barely counted at all. But that's not life in Christ. To be saved at all is to be completely and utterly forgiven, and to be a child of God by adoption in Christ, for all time.

In our culture, childhood education lasts fourteen years – preschool, kindergarten, and then grades one through twelve. These years are spent slowly building up a foundation of basic knowledge. A high school graduate is considered an unskilled worker, and needs either college or trade-school (and trade-schools are very undervalued, in my opinion).

The childhood years in Christ can last a long time, too. You see, it's not a matter of how much you know, but of spiritual maturity, and developing spiritual maturity takes time. There is nothing wrong with being a spiritual child, but we must not stay spiritual children. Spiritual children contribute little to the life of the church; we need spiritual adults.

YOUNG MEN

- › I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one . . . I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the Word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. ([First John 2:13, 14](#)).

In literal terms, the word translated ‘young man’ describes someone between the ages of 20 and 40, what in our time is known as early adulthood. They aren’t teenagers, but adults. They have put aside childish things, and embraced adulthood. In the first century, almost everyone was married, having and raising children, and providing for their families. There was no social security, so as children got older they took greater and great responsibility for their parents as well. Fathers carried bulk of authority in the family, but they also carried the greatest burden in the family. If the father didn’t provide, the family suffered greatly. Good fathers took that responsibility seriously, and ensured the health and welfare of their family.

Spiritually speaking, adults in Christ have overcome the evil one. They are not living as slaves to sin, or burdened under the weight of guilt. They have learned to resist temptation, and more often than not succeed. When they fail, they are quick to confess their sin, rather than suffering under a weight of guilt for a length of time. Experiences of sin don’t cause them to question their salvation or the goodness of God; they learn to rejoice in the victory Jesus has won for them and given them.

[Hebrews 6](#) says this about growing up in Christ:

- › [Hebrews 6:1-3 \(2016 ESV\)](#) — **1** Therefore let us **leave the elementary doctrine** of Christ and **go on to maturity**, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, **2** and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. **3** And this we will do if God permits.

Here maturity refers to being a spiritual adult, being spiritually solid and complete. The elementary doctrine of Christ includes what we see here:

- Repentance from dead works
- Faith toward God

- Instruction about
 - washings
 - the laying on of hands
 - the resurrection of
 - the dead eternal judgment

These are elementary teachings, basic teachings, the first teachings that new Christians should receive. There is absolutely nothing wrong with these doctrines. In fact, growth requires that we be taught these things, and learn them well. But the person who constantly needs reminder of them, instead of growing in depth and breadth as a Christian, is stuck at the ‘little children’ stage of spiritual life. The first words, “let us leave,” makes it clear that we as Christians need to get grounded on these things once and for all, and then grow from there.

Those who are adults in Christ have done this. In fact, they are now the ones who are able to teach ‘little children’ these doctrines and help to ground them in Christ. The spiritual family of God parallels their own families. Paul – a father in Christ, in John’s terms – writes this to Timothy – a young man in Christ:

- › **1 Timothy 5:1-2 (2016 ESV) – 1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a **father**, younger men as **brothers**, 2 older women as **mothers**, younger women as **sisters**, in all purity.**

Spiritual adults treat older men and women in the church with honor, as fathers and mothers, and encourage them respectfully and kindly. Younger men are to be treated as brothers, and younger women as sisters, with purity. That makes spiritual adults a son or daughter to older believers and a good big brother or sister to younger believers.

As adults in Christ grow and continue to mature they move into the final state of spiritual maturity.

FATHERS

- › I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who is from the beginning . . . I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

The sense of fathers is not dads who are in early adulthood, but of spiritual elders, seasoned citizens in the church, those who possess the wisdom and maturity of a long, well-lived life in Christ. As with spiritual children and spiritual adults, this is not matter of physical age, but of spiritual maturity.

Being a spiritual elder is the final stage of spiritual life on earth. At this point the foundational lessons of spiritual childhood have become almost automatic. It's true that as long as we are in this flesh, we will need reminders of the basics.

Sometimes spiritual children are bothered by these reminders, because they still aren't sure about. Spiritual children can also be offended by these reminders; it's the spiritual version of a child saying, "I know, I know!" Their pride leads them to think that they don't need any more lessons. Spiritual children think that maturity means you no longer need to be taught anything. Maturity actually means knowing that you DO need to be taught, and being glad for the opportunity.

Spiritual adults learn to welcome these reminders, because with maturity comes a humble recognition of how easy it is to lose focus and begin to slowly drift off the main course. I suppose some are lazy, but most are busy. It's the tyranny of the urgent; pressing matters take priority over more important things.

But for spiritual elders, much of the busyness of earlier life has settled down. Sermons and Bible study are no longer about learning new lessons, but of being reminded of what they have known. Those memories are firmly fixed and rooted in their hearts and minds, and they love to think about them, not because they might forget, but because of the sweetness and richness of those truths. For spiritual elders, sermons and studies and books are like looking through photo albums, remembering the lessons of the past, rejoicing in what God has done. They are in a position to gently love and encourage younger believers, and give a strong testimony to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ over decades of life on earth. They haven't stopped living and serving and giving here. But they are also waiting with patience and contentment for the Father to bring them home in glory.

By the time John wrote his Gospel, and the three epistles, and the Revelation of Jesus Christ, he had reached a strong, broad level of maturity. He wasn't perfect, and neither was His faith and devotion, but it was sound and mature, with deep roots in the Word and proven by years of actual experience with Christ. Rather than giving up as suffering continued, John grew more and more content with Christ in spite of his suffering.

BRINGING IT HOME

Charles Spurgeon spoke about going climbing in the Alps with a friend. The friend looked at a nearby peak, and said that he could reach it in 30 minutes. Spurgeon told him it would take all day. Spurgeon had been there before, and knew that once his friend reached the top of the first ridge, he would have to climb down into a valley deeper than the one they started from. He could well have said, "The closer you get, the further you have to go." The thing was, there wasn't any great trick to getting to the top of the peak he wanted to climb. He just had to start climbing, putting one foot in front of the other, and keep going until he got to his destination. No one starts at base camp and simply steps onto the peak; that's impossible.

The Christian life is very much like that. We often see the goal in the distance – being like Jesus – and think that it won't take long to get there. We learn over time that the closer we get, the further we have to go. There is no trick to spiritual growth and maturity. We must simply put one spiritual foot in front of the other: Word, prayer, fellowship, ministry, Word, prayer, fellowship, ministry.

Spiritual maturity is not learning how to study the Word, or pray, or be in Christian fellowship, or serve in God's Kingdom. Spiritual maturity is the result of a lifetime of studying and applying the Word, a lifetime of prayer, a lifetime of fellowship, a lifetime of service.

Christians can get discouraged by the time it takes – I know that I've been discouraged a number of times that I haven't made more progress. That discouragement doesn't arise because it's taking too long; it arises because, for some reason, we assumed that it WOULDN'T or SHOULDN'T take long.

It's not my job to tell anyone where they are in terms of spiritual maturity.

If you are still a ‘little child’ in Christ, constantly needing a foundation laid for your own salvation, needing regular assurance of God’s love and faithfulness, then decide today to move on from the elementary things [Hebrews 6:1-2](#) describe. Don’t just be a hearer of the Word; be a doer of the Word ([James 1:22](#)). Don’t just pray for God’s blessing; be a blessing to others. Get out of base camp, and start climbing the mountain. Learn to not merely voice faith in God’s love and faithfulness; trust in them, rest in them.

If you are an ‘early adult’ in Christ, you’ve already been doing as well as hearing, and acting as well as praying. Keep putting one spiritual foot in front of the other. Don’t be afraid to ask for help – both physical and spiritual ‘early adults’ have a tendency to value self-sufficiency so highly that they try to tough it out in situations where they should lean on someone else. Keep serving others in Christ; encourage them when they get discouraged, and urge them onward when they get complacent.

And if you are an elder in Christ, settled in the Word and the truth, certain about your service to others, living in the peace of God and the righteousness of Christ and the joy of the Spirit, keep feasting on the Word, remain in prayer, and share your patience and wisdom with those who are younger than you are.

Let’s pray.