

# GROWING

# DOWN

Unlearning *the*  
Patterns of Adulthood  
that Keep Us  
*from* Jesus



# Michael Kelley



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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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## CHAPTER 1



### Puppy

There is a brown and white puppy with a torn-up right ear that lives in my son's bed. His colors aren't as bright as they used to be; they've faded after a hundred spin cycles in the washing machine, thousands of trips in the car, and nine years of various kinds of stains from various kinds of bodily fluids. It was this same stuffed puppy that my older son, Joshua, clung to during the first few years of his life, when he was being treated for leukemia. It was this same puppy that Joshua then handed down to my daughter, Andi, so she wouldn't be scared to sleep in her big-girl bed. And it's this puppy that was regifted to my youngest son, Christian, to help

him say good-bye to his pacifier. That's where the tattered ear comes from—Christian started chewing on the ear at night instead of his pacifier to help him go to sleep.

That puppy's got a lot of baggage on him. Because he does, he's probably more sentimental to my wife and me than to any of our three children at this point. They don't remember all the times Puppy comforted them through pain and heartache and sleeplessness; they don't remember how he was the only thing that would scare the monsters away from under the bed or nurse a sick tummy; they don't remember the heart-exploding sweetness of seeing him passed on from child to child. But we do. And because we do, it's a little sad to know that Puppy's days are numbered in our house.

Our kids are growing up, and as they do, Puppy will eventually go the way of the plastic green army men and dinosaurs. But that's life, right? Like pajamas with characters, Happy Meals, and Disney Junior, Puppy is just another casualty of the reality of the passing years.

Life is about moving from one season to another, and hopefully growing through each one. When you grow, you move past certain things and into other ones. That's true about physical life, but it's also true in a spiritual sense. Both physical life and spiritual life are about growth. In fact, if you're not growing, you're dying.

## Born Again

From the moment a baby is conceived, he grows in all different kinds of ways. Within three days of conception, the fertilized egg is dividing rapidly into many cells. Four weeks later, he is already developing a face and neck, as well as a heart, blood vessels, lungs, stomach, and liver. And that baby is just getting started. Once born, a healthy, full-term baby will typically double his birth weight at six months, triple at one year, and almost quadruple before he turns three. Anyone who's ever had that ear-splitting whine wake them up regularly around two or three a.m. knows the baby is hungry because he's growing, and he's growing fast.

It's not that different spiritually.

Problem is, we have been conditioned to think about life in Christ beginning with bowing your head, closing your eyes, and repeating some lines of a prayer led by the preacher at the front of a church or auditorium. I'm not entirely knocking that; we've got to start somewhere. But if that's the only way we think about becoming a Christian, then we are missing the cataclysmic, soul-transforming change that happens inside the heart of that one with his or her head bowed and eyes closed. When Jesus talked about the beginning of that process—when someone moves from darkness to light and death to life—he likened it to being “born again.”

Kind of weird, right? Nicodemus thought so, too. He was the scared Pharisee that came to Jesus late one night under the cover of darkness because he was afraid someone would see him talking to this upstart rabbi. He was the one who knocked on the door and whispered in hushed tones, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him” (John 3:2). When Jesus responded that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again, Nicodemus was a bit confused.

He was a Pharisee after all. He was a child of Israel, a teacher of the law. He thought he knew all about the kingdom of God. He was educated, committed, and respected for his knowledge: “But how can anyone be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

Fair question. A little disgusting, but fair.

Something far less gross, but no less dramatic, would have to happen for life in Christ to begin. Jesus went on to say that entering the kingdom of God is a second birth, one of the Spirit. Just as the wind blows wherever it wills, so does the Spirit, blowing through the dead hearts of mankind and bringing life. With new life comes new . . . everything. A new family. New desires. New loves. New values. Just as a baby in the womb starts growing from the moment of conception,



we, in our new selves in Christ, start the forward progress of growing up in Christ from the moment of our new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Growing Up

Jesus often used agricultural metaphors in his teaching. A big reason he did so was simply because those were the more relatable terms for his audience; these were people who knew about farming and ranching. They were people of the land, and that's the language Jesus used to communicate to them. In keeping, then, with the teaching methodology of Jesus, is the idea that all living things grow. And as in the case of a tree, a flower, or an animal, if a person isn't spiritually growing, they're dying. Take a look at one of the ways Jesus described life in Christ in John 15:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in

me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.” (vv. 1–5)

Jesus, as the vine, is the giver of true life and nourishment. No branch has life on its own; it’s only alive to the extent that it is locked in and receiving its life from the vine it’s connected to. When that connection is broken, the branch is just a stick, useful for not much else than kindling for a fire. But when the branch remains connected to the vine, the inevitable result is continued and sustained growth that results in fruit. This is far from an isolated text in the New Testament; the Bible shows us over and over that the life of the Christian must be characterized by growth:

- “The righteous thrive like a palm tree and **grow** like a cedar tree in Lebanon” (Ps. 92:12, emphasis added).
- “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the **growth**” (1 Cor. 3:6, emphasis added).
- “In him the whole building, being put together, **grows** into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21, emphasis added).
- “. . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, **growing** into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Eph. 4:13, emphasis added).

- “But speaking the truth in love, let us **grow** in every way into him who is the head—Christ” (Eph. 4:15, emphasis added).
- “And I pray this: that your love will keep on **growing** in knowledge and every kind of discernment” (Phil. 1:9, emphasis added).
- “. . . so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and **growing** in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10, emphasis added).
- “Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the Word, so that you may **grow** up into your salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2, emphasis added).
- “But **grow** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity” (2 Pet. 3:18, emphasis added).

In other words, all of us who are in Christ are on the move. We are changing. We are growing. But what is it we are growing into? What does a spiritual adult, in Christ, look like?

### *Pinocchio and The Ugly Duckling*

A couple of children’s stories might help to explain. Just to refresh your memory, the story of *Pinocchio* begins with a carpenter named Geppetto. Out of his

great sadness and loneliness, he constructed a puppet out of wood named Pinocchio (I might have gone to a singles mixer instead). Though it was nice to have the puppet, it just served as a sore reminder of the old man's solitude. So Geppetto wished one night that Pinocchio would not just be a puppet but would come to life, and the Blue Fairy came down and granted his wish. Pinocchio was walking, talking, singing, dancing—the only problem was that he was not a real boy; he was a wooden puppet acting like a real boy. But Pinocchio wanted to be a real boy so badly that he swore he would be the best little boy in the world if the Blue Fairy would turn him from wood to skin. Eventually, Pinocchio gave his own life to save the life of his father, proving that he was worthy to be a real boy, and at last, Pinocchio became what he was always trying to be.

Many of us treat spiritual growth just like that. In our minds, Jesus started something inside of us at that moment we first came into Christ. But in the back of our minds, we are conscious of our own remaining sinfulness and disobedience. It's always there, lurking in the back of our hearts; and over the course of time, we've developed some feelings of guilt, like we should have come much further than we have. We secretly believe that God feels the same way. We know that Jesus made us alive, and like Pinocchio, we can walk, talk, sing, and dance. But we can't fend off our feelings



of inadequacy, of despair at our slow progress, of doubt that we'll ever be a "real boy." Our spiritual growth has morphed into a constant compulsion to validate ourselves that inevitably results in bitterness. Like the son who could never throw enough touchdown passes for his all-state quarterback dad, we are the kind of children who are constantly trying to prove ourselves to our heavenly Father.

We are feverishly trying to live up to his standard, and we long for some day out in the future when we'll at long last hear the words, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." We are trying, like Pinocchio, to act like what we hope God will make us someday.

That is not the gospel.

That attitude minimizes the work of Jesus on the cross and instead places the burden (and the subsequent glory) on ourselves. We are the wooden puppets bent on achieving rather than the treasured children living gratefully for what we have received.

Our story in the gospel is not like that of Pinocchio; it's more like the story of *The Ugly Duckling*.

You remember that story too, right? Born into a family of ducks, the Ugly Duckling wanted nothing more than to be a regular duck. But no matter how hard he tried, his feathers would not become soft, his quack would not sound right, and his neck would not shrink. He was ridiculed in his duckling-hood because

he looked different than the other ducks and was left alone to fend for himself. The real change came one day when the ugly duckling was just about ready to throw in the towel. He gazed morosely into the water and caught a glimpse of his own reflection. His neck wasn't long; it was graceful. His feathers were spread down evenly across his back. He looked almost . . . regal. He realized that he was not a duck, but a swan. Then his actions changed. He flew gracefully. He glided majestically across the water. He was no longer trying to be something else; he had realized who he was all along and then very naturally set on his way to live it out.

Much in the same way, Jesus does not hand us a list of rules and tell us that if we are able to keep them all we will be righteous and therefore suitable for life in the kingdom. Instead, Jesus makes with us a glorious exchange. He takes our sin, and he gives us his own righteousness. And when we choose to accept his offer, the person we once were is uprooted by the Holy Spirit. All our sin is taken away, but we are not left with some gaping hole. Instead, Jesus gives us his righteousness. Suddenly we are not God's enemy; we're his child. We are not criminals, but ambassadors. And he is not our Judge, but our Father. We are changed at the most fundamental of levels, for God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that we could be the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). That's at least part of what Paul

meant when he said in Romans 8:4 that the righteous requirements of the law have been fully met in us.

Growing in Christ is less about achieving something and more about choosing by faith to live in what Jesus has already achieved on our behalf. In this process, the Holy Spirit leads us to the water over and over again and shows us our new reflection. Then he leans down and whispers, “Remember who you are.” As C. S. Lewis put it, “People need to be reminded more than instructed.”<sup>1</sup> That’s what we are growing up into; we are becoming what we have already become. Growth in Christ is about aligning our thoughts, feelings, and actions to the reality of Christ’s finished work in our hearts. But don’t let the children’s stories fool you. Growing up in Christ is serious business.

## Stunted Growth

There is a disease so rare that its mystery extends even into its name. Syndrome X is a condition whereby a child, due to some chromosomal abnormality, simply doesn’t grow. They age, in a technical sense, but their mind and body remain the same. Everything except their hair and fingernails exist in a static position of agelessness. And, because there is no growth, there is also a very limited lifespan for those unfortunate enough to suffer from the disease.

Look back at the words of Jesus in John 15. When we remain in him, we grow. And as we grow, we produce fruit. There's really no other option. In fact, Jesus wants in this teaching to make sure we understand that either/or reality: "If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6).

Grow, or die.

The writer of the book of Hebrews gave us a similar caution. After spending four and a half chapters lifting up the greatness of Jesus, how he is the greater sacrifice and the greater high priest, the writer throws in a rebuke to the audience:

We have a great deal to say about this, and it's difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy to understand. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God's revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil. Therefore, let us have the elementary teaching about Christ, and go on to maturity, not laying



again a foundation of repentance from dead works, faith in God, teaching about ritual washings, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And we will do this if God permits. (Heb. 5:11–6:3)

I don't know about you, but I feel that warning pretty deeply, especially since the list of things he rattles off in this passage aren't what I would consider to be "beginner" type stuff. But that's part of the problem, isn't it? We have an incredible ability to convince ourselves that we are further along in our spiritual journey than we really are. But these verses from Hebrews shine the mirror of truth on the stunted growth that is epidemic among believers today.

Many in the church seem to be suffering from stunted growth. We are, like those suffering from a spiritual version of Syndrome X, stuck in place on our spiritual journey, not moving forward at all. Our faith is just as it was when we started following Christ. And if these passages are true, we stay in that mode at our peril.

It is as if we are standing in quicksand but don't know it; stuck in one place but content to continue to sink lower and lower until there's nothing left of us at all. But why is that? Why, if the danger is so great and if growth is so natural, do we continue to stay just as we are?

It's not for lack of resources. We are connected as never before. Every book is at our fingertips; churches aren't just on every corner but can be tailor created on a playlist or a virtual community. But despite the abundance of opportunity, there seem to be very few of us actually deepening our walk with Jesus. Richard Foster said it right: "Superficiality is the curse of our age."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, despite all our tools, all our metrics, and all our knowledge, there is something we are missing when it comes to spiritual growth. Maybe, in other words, growing up in Christ doesn't look exactly like we think it does. This is where a great irony comes into play. In order to grow up in Christ, we must actually choose to grow down.

## Children of the Kingdom

Picture the scene with me. It's another busy day in the life of Jesus. His reputation has spread; he scarcely has a moment to himself anymore. Everywhere he and his disciples turn, there are people. Sick people. Needy people. Accusing people. Skeptical people. And, on this particular day, there are also a bunch of kids.

It seemed parents in the crowd had started pushing and shoving their way forward with their kiddos in tow. They were coming because it was customary in those days for a great teacher of the law to lay his

hands on children and pray for them in order to bless them. That's just what these parents were doing. They, like Nicodemus, didn't quite know what to make of Jesus, but they had seen and heard enough to know they wanted to get their rug rats some of that blessing he might be handing out.

Jesus' disciples didn't want any part of it. In fact, the disciples "rebuked" these tiger parents and their disruptive kiddos (Matt. 19:13). That's a strong word—rightly so. There was nothing polite about what the disciples did; it's not as if they pulled Mom and Dad aside and quietly whispered, "Jesus is actually teaching right now, but we're going to have a meet-and-greet later and you are more than welcome to come then." This word is so strong, in fact, that in another form it can be translated, "punished."

I can relate, I suppose. I remember a couple of years ago when Jana and I took our three children (then nine, six, and four years old) to the most magical place on Earth. I remember going through the turnstile and being greeted by plants resembling cartoon dogs and ducks and the familiar refrain of "It's a Small World." We stood for a moment, looking at the gates of the Magic Kingdom at Disney World, and then the terrible reality hit me: *We're here too early.*

That wasn't the plan. I had clocked it out. My goal was to arrive anywhere from two to seven minutes

early because I knew arriving any earlier would result in anarchy. And yet there we stood, forty-two minutes prior to gate opening.

That's forty-two minutes in the unshaded heat. Forty-two minutes with three kids and two iPhones. Forty-two minutes of nowhere to sit except the Floridian concrete. Forty-two minutes of looking at the promise of fun and adventure and not being able to go in. And after about seventeen seconds, the kids let us know:

"When is it going to open?" *Forty-two minutes.*

"Why can't we go in?" *It's not open yet.*

"How come those people are going in?" *Because they are staying at a hotel on site.*

"Our hotel stinks! I want to stay at that hotel!" *Get a job.*

In that moment, I could have done with an entourage of my own disciples bent on protecting me from the kids. That's what the disciples did—they formed a verbal and punitive wall around Jesus, and ironically, they did it to *protect* him.

*Jesus is too busy for that kid. He's too important to spend time like this. He shouldn't have to deal with these trivialities. If you only knew him like we do, you wouldn't be so quick to bring your snotty brats this close.*

Funny how we do that sometimes, isn't it? Try and protect Jesus? We do it in the marketplace and in



debates; we do it in the culture and with the skeptic. We are like Peter, drawing our sword and waving it at any old ear that needs to be cut off, like the Son of God isn't capable of protecting himself.

Jesus, in response to the protection of the disciples, is even more incensed than they were at this intrusion: "When Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me'" (Mark 10:14).

Now, Jesus got frustrated with his disciples a lot. He was disappointed in their level of understanding several times. But this is the only time in the Bible where he is "indignant" with them. Evidently, there was something about this whole scene, chaotic as it undoubtedly was, that made the Son of God really, really angry.

There are a lot of conclusions we can draw about that. We can know, for example, that there is a special place in the heart of Jesus for children. We can also know that Jesus loved the parents, and he knew that denying the children meant casting away Mom and Dad. And we can know that Jesus was angry because no one—not even the smallest baby—is outside of his providential care.

But we can also see from here that Jesus was angry because the disciples had missed something crucial about the nature of the kingdom of God and what it means to receive it: "Don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell

you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:14–15).

It seems that for all the growing in knowledge, understanding, and proximity to Jesus the disciples had done, they really hadn't moved much past square one. In fact, these children were closer to understanding what it means to come to Jesus and embrace his kingdom than the disciples were. The same thing is true for us.

## Childish and Childlike Faith

If we want to grow up in Jesus, then it seems we must grow down and become more like children. But that presents a problem, doesn't it? What I mean is, it seems that the Bible combines faith and children in both a positive and a negative way. In the passage above, it's clearly positive. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is made up of people like the children. And yet Paul seemed to argue just the opposite: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11). It seems like the Bible is speaking out of both sides of its mouth, or at least that Jesus and Paul disagree. Jesus was teaching that entering the kingdom of heaven is about having faith like a child;

Paul seems to say that growing in Christ is about putting away childish ways.

Let's frame it another way—maybe there is a difference between “childlike” faith and “childish” faith. That is to say, a childish faith is a mark of immaturity as a Christ-follower. But childlike faith is a mark of depth. In fact, you could perhaps say that the disciples were marked by childish faith, and what they needed was to become more like the very ones they were so eager to turn away.

If that's true, it begs the question of what it means to come to God over and over again as a child might. But to get to the end of that trail, where we really know what it means to grow up in Christ by growing down, let's see if we can find out what it is about being an adult in the eyes of the world that might keep us from truly embracing and experiencing the fullness of who Jesus is and what it's like to live in his kingdom.