Failure to thrive is a condition where a child doesn’t grow and develop properly because he or she is not getting the nutrition they need for one reason or another. The cause can be a disease of some kind that prevents the child from eating or absorbing nutrients as they should. It can also be caused by malnutrition because they are not given enough food, whether out of poverty or neglect.

The lack of nutrition, regardless of the reason, results in a failure to mature, a failure to grow as a child should. Sadly, if it’s not caught early enough the child can die. As awful as this condition can be, the good news is that it’s not a disease in and of itself. It is simply a condition caused by inadequate nutrition. If the factors causing the poor nutrition are solved that child will likely begin to grow and develop as normal.

Our faith works the same way. We speak of our spiritual life in terms of growth, maturity, and development in the same way that we do of children growing up to become adults. As followers of Jesus we need the right diet of things like Scripture, biblical teaching, prayer, and serving others to grow and develop as disciples. If we ignore our spiritual development and just let things be, our faith will begin to atrophy just like a child without the proper nutrition. That process of growing and developing as a follower of Jesus is called discipleship.

Discipleship is the process of learning from someone how to be more like them. As followers and disciples of Jesus our job is to learn from Jesus how to be more like him. There is a Jewish Rabbinical writing called the Mishnah that gives us a pretty good description of what the relationship between a rabbi and his disciple should look like. It describes a disciple as being “covered in the dust of his rabbi”.

In ancient Israel, which was a dusty, arid environment, people walked wherever they went. When you walked, you would kick up dust that would cover your feet. That’s why footwashing was a such big deal during that time. The Mishnah is says that a disciple should follow so closely after his rabbi that he becomes covered in the dust that his feet kicked up as he walked.

In order for that to happen, you would have to be right in step with the person you were following. You would have to watch there every move, so you would know if they were speeding up or slowing down, turning to the right or left. You would have to keep your focus intently on that person and follow them in every step they took so you didn’t end up in a pile on the ground.

The point is that’s how closely we should be following after Jesus. That’s how intently we ought to be focused on learning to be more like him. That’s something that we will never be finished with in this life. It’s a lifelong process for every one of us.

One of the things we have looked at as we’ve gone through the pages of Hebrews is that the author was writing to Jewish Christians who were facing a time of real persecution in the Roman Empire. There was a big temptation here to go back to the Jewish religion that did not offer the same things that Jesus could offer.

That’s why he wanted these Christians to know that Jesus was so much greater, so superior to everything they had known before. He didn’t want them to end up taking a step backward in their faith when they had finally found the one thing that could give them the salvation they needed.

The other danger was that in the face of the persecution they were experiencing, they would simply give up on their faith altogether. For many people, when believing in Jesus gets difficult they let their faith dwindle and eventually die. They stop trying to live as a follower of Jesus.

You may have heard alarming statistics on how many young adults leave the church when they graduate high school and go off to college. Lifeway Research did a study on that very question in 2007, so keep in mind this is 12 year old data. They found that 70% of young adults who attended church during High School will drop out of the church, but that two thirds of those young adults will eventually return, usually when they begin to have kids of their own.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The numbers aren’t as bad as they usually are made to sound. But that still leaves around 23% of kids who will drop out and never come back to church again. These were the three key characteristics in the lives of those who didn’t ever leave the church:

1. They had a home with Christian parents who were committed to each other and to the church.
2. They had other adults investing in their spiritual lives and discipleship before they were 18.
3. And number one on that list was that they began to see biblical teaching as relevant and important to the decisions they made in their life before they were out of high school. In short, these kids were discipled. They were taught how important the Bible is and how to follow after Jesus. Those are the kids that stayed and continued in that process of discipleship.

By the way, that’s why we are bolstering our Children’s program right now so that we can make sure we reach those kids with the Gospel of Jesus before we lose our influence in their lives altogether. If you’re a parent or a grandparent, you may have the same kind of concerns about your own kids or grandkids. This is why it’s so important that we make our students of all ages a priority in our church.

There was a quote in the article that said, “If your student ministry is a four-year holding tank with pizza, don’t expect young adults to stick around.” The same thing is true for adults. This message of discipleship is not just for kids. This is for each person in this building right now. It’s even for Rod and I as ministers and every one our elders.

If a church just becomes a social club, or a place to do community service, or, God forbid, a place to catch up on the latest gossip, don’t expect anything significant to happen there. When a church is no longer a place where disciples are being made and people are learning to follow Jesus more closely, it has become a church in name only.

In Hebrews 5 the author of had just finished talking about how Jesus is a better high priest than any human being ever could be. Then he launches into our text for today, which serves as a pretty serious warning.

**Hebrews 5:11–6:3 ESV — 11** About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. **12** 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, **13** for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

You can almost hear the author’s frustration with the people he’s writing to. The author of Hebrews is writing to people who should have known what they needed to do. They should have been much further along in their development as disciples than they were at this point. In fact, the author tells them they ought to be able to teach others by now, but somehow they are still in the beginning stages of faith themselves.

The author uses two words here to talk about the basics of Christianity. The first is στοιχείον (stoi-chei-on) which means a basic component of something or the basic ideas of something. This was a word used to talk about an alphabet at times. That’s how basic the components are that we’re talking about here. The word oracles might be translated “God’s word” in your translation of the Bible, and that’s a pretty good translation.

The author of Hebrews is frustrated because the folks he’s writing to ought to be able to tell people the very basics of what their faith is about, the basic components of what God has said. He’s not frustrated because these folks can’t teach a master’s level theology class. These are people who can’t even explain the basics of what they believe or why.

Some of my first experiences teaching were in my Boy Scout troop. I was one of the charter members of our troop, so I was one of the older, more experienced guys of our group. That meant that the guys who were my age became the teachers. We would teach things like first aid, how to safely use knives, axes, and saws, how to tie knots, how to use a map and compass. I did great with all of those things and could usually teach them without any kind of preparation.

The one subject I could never get into my head was plant identification. I have a friend that was in our troop who could tell you almost anything you could ever want to know about plants. He has now gone on to get his doctorate in Horticulture if that tells you anything. He was our teacher every time we did plant identification and for some reason I was always the one helping him out. The problem was that he had to take about a half an hour every single time to teach me the lesson first before we could teach the other guys.

I had been taught those lessons over and over again, but it never stuck. I had to be taught the basic principles again and again. I’m not sure why that particular subject never stuck in my head. To this day I could teach any of those other subjects without hesitation, but I’m almost lost when it comes to identifying plants.

That’s exactly what the Hebrew Christians were like but with something far more important than identifying some plants. What wouldn’t stick in their heads were the basic principles of their faith in Jesus. They were unable to go any deeper in their faith. If someone asked them to explain their faith or why they believed what they did, they wouldn’t have an answer.

This is exactly the kind of thing that Peter tells us to be prepared for in **1 Peter 3:15 ESV — 15** …always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

He’s calling us to be prepared to have an answer when people ask us about our faith. He wants us to be prepared to teach people the basic principles of God’s Word. At the very least we ought to be able to tell them what we believe and why.

It seems the folks that received this letter weren’t able to do either one. He tells them that not only are they not able to teach, but they are so immature they are essentially still babies in their faith. He tells them they need milk, not solid food, just like a baby can only have milk for the first several months of their life.

Think about a child who is ready to begin eating solid food for the first time. If you continue to give him only milk, he’s not going to grow and develop as he should. If he’s anything like my children, you’ll hear just unhappy he is when he doesn’t get the solid food he wants.

If a child doesn’t receive the solid food they need, they will stop growing the way they should. Their muscles will begin to atrophy. They will begin to show symptoms of malnutrition. If that kind of a situation goes on long enough the results can be deadly.

In John 4 when Jesus met the Samaritan woman by the well, he told her that he would give her living water. She was excited about that prospect before she ever knew what he was really offering. To her that meant water that was kept fresh by a constant flowing of water down a stream or river. That would have been a welcome change from the well she drew her water from every day that sat still and undisturbed.

Water that sits for too long without being disturbed and aerated becomes stagnant and putrid. It becomes a perfect breeding ground for bugs and bacteria and it begins to stink. It is the constant disturbing of the water that brings new life and keeps the water fresh. The constant motion, constant moving forward is what makes the water healthy and keeps it renewed. (Pocahontas picture) To quote Pocahontas, “You can’t step in the same river twice. The water’s always changing, always flowing.”

The same thing is true of our spiritual lives. We weren’t meant to be spoon fed with baby food by our ministers and teachers. We weren’t meant to stay at the same level of understanding about our faith. We weren’t meant to remain spiritual infants, not even able to comprehend the very basics of our faith.

We were meant to learn and to grow in our faith as we get closer to Jesus. To continue growing in our faith, we have to be constantly moving, constantly changing, constantly growing in our understanding of our faith and growing in our relationship with Jesus.

Last year when Gary Johnson came and spoke at our Leadership Summit he talked about how healthy things grow. That’s true of anything that is alive: people, plants, animals, and organizations. When something is not growing, it’s an sign that something is wrong.

If a child is healthy, they will be growing. That’s true in regard to their physical body, their emotions, their intellect, and their maturity. Once we reach adulthood we still ought to be growing, hopefully not in the waistline. We may stop growing physically, but we still ought to be growing emotionally, intellectually, and in maturity. Usually the folks that have stopped growing in those areas are pretty easy to spot.

By far, the most important area of our lives to continue to grow in is our spiritual lives. If we want to become closer to who God created us to be, we have to keep growing in our relationship with Christ. Spiritual maturity and discipleship are a part of a lifelong process. Eugene Peterson called it a long obedience in the same direction. I love that description of discipleship because it conveys the reality of following after Jesus. We will slip up sometimes and fall into sin, but our goal is a long obedience, a lifetime of obedience, in the direction of Jesus.

The author of Hebrews recognized the need for that kind of growth, that constant movement forward. He knew that each one of us needed to go beyond the basics at a certain point and learn to grow and mature in our faith.

**Hebrews 5:14–6:3 ESV — 14** But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. **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.

Do you hear the constant nature of this growth he is talking about here? The mature are those who are trained by constant practice. The idea here is not that it happened once and now they are done and can leave it behind them. This is not a degree that you earn once and hang on the wall to show your credentials. This is a continual, constant, every day training.

The same is true when we get to Hebrews 6:1. He says ‘let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity’. That phrase is also a continuing action. Once you learn the basics, you shouldn’t have to learn them again and again. You can now start constantly moving forward, going on toward maturity. Again, it’s that lifelong process that we’ll never fully realize in this life.

Here’s the problem that Hebrews warns us about. It’s a problem that spans the ages. It was happening when this letter was written, and it still happens today. Far too many Christians are content to rest on their laurels and stay at the same level of spiritual maturity they began at. There is no attempt at growth, there is no movement forward. They never move past the basics of the faith and move on toward maturity.

When that happens, our faith becomes stagnant and putrid. Just like a baby who doesn’t get the nutrition it needs, if we aren’t regularly growing, our faith begins to atrophy. Eventually that faith can disappear altogether.

**Hebrews 6:4–6 ESV — 4** For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, **5** and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, **6** and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

These verses give us a somber picture of what can happen if we allow our faith to stagnate and atrophy. This is what can happen if we are not continually growing in our faith and growing in our relationship with Jesus. They are also pretty confusing verses that a lot of people get hung up on. So we’re going to pick them apart to find out exactly what Hebrews tells us about what it means to lose your faith.

There are a lot of people who believe in ‘Once saved always saved’. That’s the idea that once you have given your life to Christ, you can never lose your salvation. Paul says this, **Romans 8:38–39 ESV — 38** For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul makes it clear that no other power can divide us from Jesus once we’ve given our lives to him. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, but we can choose to walk away from him. God gives us the freewill to choose him or not. Hebrews is very clear here that once we have accepted that gift of grace we can fall away if we don’t continually choose to follow after Jesus.

Verse 4 says that it is impossible to restore people who choose to fall away. That word impossible is the word άδύνατος (adynatos). δύνατος (dynatos) means might or power. It’s where we get our word for dynamite in the English language. In this verse, that word is negated, so it means that these people are powerless at this point to be restored. They don’t have the ability to do it while they are making the choice to walk away from Jesus.

This is not about someone who has some doubts or still struggles with sin. That describes every one of us. This was a deliberate choice to walk away from the gift of grace once it has been given. The word used in this idea of falling away is literally means to fall by the side, or to miss the road. It was often used to talk about those who were faithless in God’s covenant with Israel.

The key to understanding what he’s talking about here is in verse 6. For these people who have known salvation, who have made the choice to follow Jesus, then walked away from it, or fallen away, it is impossible, he says **Hebrews 6:6 ESV — 6** … to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

There are two key ideas we need to look at here. The first is to restore or renew someone to repentance. To bring someone back into the fold after they have left. This word is a present active verb, which means that it is a continual action happening right now. This verb is talking about human action. This is not about what God is capable of. These people were powerless to choose repentance because of the other choice they were making.

It’s impossible because they were actively, currently falling away. There are two descriptions here of what these people are doing. The first is crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm. The other is holding him up in contempt. Both of these go together.

Hebrews 10 that we will look at in a few weeks makes it very clear that Jesus died once for all, so what is he talking about here? The idea here is not that Jesus is being physically crucified, but that these people have the same attitude toward Jesus as those who participated in his execution did.

Crucifixion was not just meant to be a horribly painful method of execution. It was also meant to be as humiliating as possible. The victims of crucifixion were stripped naked, flogged publicly, beaten and mocked on their way to the cross, and then hung on the cross naked for everyone to see them exposed and humiliated. They were often crucified right outside the city gates so there would be maximum exposure as people went in and out of the city.

The idea here in Hebrews is that these people were making a mockery of what Jesus did on the cross. They were holding Jesus up in contempt, raising him up to be publicly ridiculed once again, just like he was on the cross. They were making a public disgrace out of what Jesus did for them on the cross by rejecting his gift of grace.

The key here is that both of the verbs here, to crucify, and to hold in contempt, are also present active. These people could not be restored because they were currently and continually rejecting the gift of grace Jesus offered. They could not be renewed because they were constantly disgracing Jesus and his sacrifice. As long as they were actively doing that, it was impossible for them to repent.

Right before we started looking at Hebrews, we looked at what it meant to have the fruit of the Spirit. Those who are actively pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in them and through them will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Those who reject Jesus and his gift of grace will not. In verses 7 and 8 Hebrews gives us a picture of that same idea. Those who produce good fruit will be blessed by God. Those who do not are slated for destruction.

This is a serious, somber warning. Falling away from the faith can cost you your eternity. Go too far down that road and you will kill your faith altogether. But this is not the final word. The author of Hebrews wanted to warn his readers before they got to the point of rejecting their faith.

**Hebrews 6:9–12 ESV — 9** Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. **10** For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. **11** And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, **12** so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Hebrews makes it clear that the folks that got this letter were still actively serving others, which by the way is another present active verb, another continual action. They had become sluggish, and lazy, and they were still stuck on the very basics of their faith. But there was still hope for them. They weren’t to the point of rejecting their faith or Jesus’ gift of grace. They just needed a catalyst, something to get them to take their faith seriously once again.

This year we are going to focus on discipleship here at Agape. We’re starting off with the book of Hebrews to help us understand who it is that we follow as disciples of Jesus. Then we’re going to take a serious look at what it is that disciples of Jesus do. How do we maintain that relationship? How do we make sure that we are continually growing deeper? Maybe you’re at that point that you need a catalyst, a boost to help you take your faith seriously again.

Our prayer is that through our study of discipleship this year that you learn to continually follow after Jesus and stand firm in your faith. We pray with the author of Hebrews that you are earnest in your faith and have the full assurance of hope until the end. Most of all we pray that you learn to go deeper in your relationship with Jesus than you ever have before.

1. https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/may/dropouts-and-disciples-how-many-students-are-really-leaving.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)