

At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Usain Bolt stunned everyone with a world record 9.69 in the 100 meter final. Some of you will remember this but watch closely just before he crosses the finish line. If you noticed [in the video](#), with fifteen meters to go in the race, he began to celebrate—waving his arms, pumping his chest, acting like a champion.



Now watch [this video](#) of a cyclist about to cross the finish line.¹

What do both of these competitors have in common? Neither athlete finished strong. Both of them celebrated way too early. One resulted in tragedy and the other—amazingly—still resulted in a world record. But even this success does not justify his actions. Had he not celebrated early, one expert figured out that Usain Bolt could have finished in 9.55.²

The majority of Christians do not finish their lives strong. If you are a believer then by definition, you started well. You know what happens every time a person is converted, don't you? Jesus said, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Every time a sinner repents there is a party in heaven. In this sense, everyone begins their Christian life well. Everyone starts well. Many of new believers grow like weeds. Many make great progress and seem to be on the road to maturity. But far too many—perhaps the majority fail to finish strong.

One of the classic examples in Scripture has to be King Hezekiah. Several years ago, Tony and I attended a district conference in Wausau. The speaker walked us through a sample of the leadership program he had written which was called The Leadership Genius of Hezekiah. This study brought out the very best characteristics of Hezekiah. He led his people to have a near

miraculous trust in the Lord when the Assyrian army was about to annihilate them on the battlefield. In response to his prayer of dependence, the Lord sent the angel of the Lord who killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers.

Soon after this Hezekiah became very sick and was told by a prophet that he would surely die. Hezekiah prayed again and the Lord decided to spare his life. As he was recovering from his sickness, Hezekiah showed the King of Babylon all his stores of treasure and gold and bragged about all of his wealth. Because of his foolish pride...

¹⁶ Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁷ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ¹⁸ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood, that will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

If you were Hezekiah and the Lord had delivered you from an army ten times more powerful than you and had just delivered you from certain death from your illness, how would you have responded to this horrible news? Would you have put on sackcloth and ashes and repented of your pride? Would you have asked the Lord to change his mind again and spare the nation of people whom you love? Listen to how Hezekiah actually did respond to the news.

¹⁹ "The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?"

I am not sure how you can accentuate the leadership genius of Hezekiah when we know how badly his life finished. More than most kings, Hezekiah started well. He trusted the Lord and led his people toward that same dependence on God...but he did not finish well. Perhaps the saddest part of his life came two verses later.

²¹ Hezekiah rested with his fathers. And Manasseh his son succeeded him as king.

If you know Manasseh, you know that he was the most evil and vile king to have ruled in Judah. He was even worse than all of the evil kings of Israel.³ Hezekiah did not finish strong and this had a profound impact on his son.

Far too many believers do not finish strong and this passage in Hebrews will help us understand why this happens and what we can do about it.

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

The context of these four verses comes in the middle of a discussion about Jesus being an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek. Then in verse eleven he writes, “We have much to say about this.” What he means is that he wants to say more about Melchizedek. The author does eventually get back to the topic a chapter and a half later but right here you can feel his frustration. I want to say more about Jesus being in the priesthood of Melchizedek, but it’s hard to explain.

When I got home from the Fait last night the first thing Karen said to me when I walked in the door was, “you got an email from Melchisedec.” And I actually did get an email from Melchisedec, who is a young man I met in Haiti. Anyway, I found myself wondering, “Did I get any emails from Moses? How about an e-card from King David?”

All kidding aside, I do agree that the topic of Melchizedek is hard to understand and hard to explain. It is a topic with many questions and not enough answers, but that’s what he meant, is it? The topic was hard to explain because the readers were “slow to learn.”

The phrase “slow to learn” does not mean that the person cannot learn or that it takes a long time to learn something. I am sure you have seen these signs posted near schools and in subdivisions—Slow Children at Play. Many people realize that this sign can be interpreted in two different ways. SLOW—children at play OR “slow children” at play. By the way, do you know what happens to Slow Children at Play when they grow up? They become Slow Men at Work.

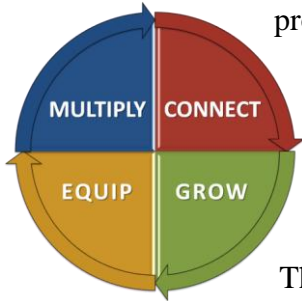


When I was in school, this is what we called students who had learning disabilities. Even then I thought it was not the best way to label a student. Of

course our author does not at all mean that his readers had a learning disability. Well, you could say that they did have a learning disability but not in the sense that it was a genetic or academic deficiency. Their learning disability, if you could call it that, was all their own fault. The ESV accurately translates the phrase as dull of hearing. But this still does not convey the precise meaning because someone could dull of hearing through no fault of their own. A very literal translation would be “slothful in hearing.” Being slow to learn or slothful in hearing is not an intellectual deficiency but rather a moral deficiency. These people are simply lazy Christians. They hear God’s truth but it does not change them. This is true of all of us to one degree or another. When we hear God’s truth it doesn’t immediately and continually change us. We are all slothful in hearing at times, but the question is whether it is occasional or habitual. You can tell by the results which are detailed in verse twelve.

¹² *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*

The principle is clear—if you are not habitually slothful in hearing you will eventually progress from a learner to a teacher. Not that you ever stop learning but eventually you will also teach while you continue to learn. How much time does it take to make this transition? The author doesn't say exactly how long this should take but his point was that more than enough time had passed. No doubt that many, many years had passed and these Christians were still not maturing in their faith.



They had had plenty of time to have progressed to the point of being able to teach others. If we use our discipleship circle we might say that you have grown to the point where you are now teaching others—you are equipping them so that they can move beyond milk on to solid food.

But they had not progressed and were still only able to take in milk. *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.* Do you know why babies cannot eat solid food? Here are a few of the reasons.

- They instinctively thrust their tongue and push away the food. In other words, they spit it out.
- They could choke on the solid food
- Their bodies cannot digest solid food. In other words, they will throw it up.

All of these things are true of spiritual babies who are given solid spiritual food. They spit out the food. They choke on the food. If they ingest the food they throw it up. Not a pretty sight but this is the kind of picture our author wants us to get.

Imagine if our church was over half babies this morning. Of course that is a wonderful thought! We have several babies in our church as it is—and nothing could be more beautiful. But all of these babies have parents. All of these babies are supposed to be babies. No one is yelling at these babies saying, “What’s wrong with you? You do nothing but lie around all day and moan and cry. You are not contributing anything to society.” They are babies for goodness sake. They are supposed to drink milk and cry. A church full of babies is a beautiful sight.

But a congregation full of spiritual babies is not a pretty sight at all. Picture a grown man lying back in his pew chair wearing nothing but a diaper and holding an oversized baby bottle between their feet and sucking down warm milk to their little heart’s content. Picture grown women wearing very large yellow and pink footsie pajamas drinking milk like the big men babies.

That’s a harsh description, wouldn’t you agree? But I would guess that 97% of you are sitting there thinking, “Well he’s certainly not talking about me. The apostle Paul uses this exact same analogy in 1 Corinthians three. You might be surprised to see how he defines a spiritual baby. *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ.* ² *I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.* ³ *You are still worldly (Carnal). For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?* (1 Co 3:1-3)

Rich, are you saying that being jealous and quarreling with other Christians makes you worldly and carnal? No, I am not saying that at all—God is saying this. Obviously conflict among believers is inevitable but are you able to resolve the conflict? Does conflict and quarreling seem to typify your personality and many of your relationships? If so, then you are a carnal Christian. You are a slothful learner. Slothful learners do not finish strong. Slothful learners cannot finish strong.

It's not like there are only two categories—slothful and not slothful. If we could graph everyone in this room we would all sit on a continuum somewhere between occasionally slothful and habitually slothful, but in a general sense you can place most Christians into one of these two categories. So far verses 11-13 have served as a diagnosis. By now you should be able to determine if you are an occasional slothful learner or a habitual slothful learner and if you are not sure, ask your husband. Ask your wife. If that is too painful of a proposition, ask a trusted friend. “What do you think—am I more occasionally slothful or habitually slothful?” And make sure you ask a trusted friend not just someone who will tell you what you want to know. As you do, keep Proverbs 27:6 in mind. *Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.* Ask someone who you can trust to would you rather than someone who will merely kiss your ego.

Once the diagnosis has been made verse fourteen offers the solution. For this verse I strongly prefer the ESV translation. *But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* This verse makes one thing very clear—spiritual maturity is not just about what you know but what you do. If you want to move from milk to solid food, you have to put into practice what you learn. Notice especially the phrase “constant practice.” One becomes slothful in hearing primarily because the person has become slothful in doing. If you hear a truth and then don't put it into action, you may as well have never heard the truth in the first place. James said the same thing. *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like* (James 1:23). This is slothful hearing because it was never acted upon.

You probably heard about the horrific plane crash at the air show in Nevada this past Friday. If you had been seated in the grandstand and someone warned you to take cover because the plane was about to crash, don't you think you would have listened to him? Don't you think you would have looked up to verify this information and the immediately taken cover? You would have considered the truth and put it into action. Your quick actions could not have been described as slothful. How many times have you walked out of church on a Sunday morning convicted about some truth and promising to put it into action but it never happens? If we don't act on the truth we have been taught it shows that don't really believe it. We say we believe it but our actions say otherwise.

I have a true, sad story to tell that was told to me by a friend of mine named Luke who used to be a pastor. Luke has a friend named Bill who has been part of his Bible study for many years. Bill is a very mature and Godly Christian but Bill's brother had left the faith twenty years ago. Like Bill, his brother Craig was raised in a solid Christian home had attended a well known Christian college. Soon after college Craig turned his back on the Lord and has not returned since.

To make matters worse, Craig was now going through some horrific personal issues. At a time when he most needed the Lord, this man seemed so far away from God. As so often happens in Bible studies, Luke and the others have regularly and fervently prayed for Bill's brother over the years. Luke told me that there must have been ten thousand prayers raised up to the throne of grace on behalf of Craig. They prayed that Craig's heart would soften to the gospel. They prayed that the Lord would remove the blinders from his eyes. They prayed that whatever turned Craig away from the Lord in college could be resolved and he would find his way back to Jesus.

Luke did share some good news in this sad story. It turns out that there is an evangelical free church in the city where Craig lives. One day when Bill and his wife visited Craig and his kids and to the great surprise and delight of Bill, Craig actually decided to attend church with him. As we do every Sunday, everyone got up early enough to get showers and eat breakfast together. There were too many for one car so they followed each other and drove to church. One can only imagine what was going through Bill's mind at this point. Bill must have been praying like crazy to think that his prodigal brother may be returning to the Lord. Bill prayed that it would be a friendly church and that Craig would be warmly welcomed. Bill prayed that the pastor would preach a solid message from the word of God that the Spirit could use to move Craig's cold heart. As any new visitor does, they wandered into church and found a few seats close to one another. They sang along with the worship team while Bill wondered if Craig would know any of the songs.

After the service the whole crew exited into the lobby and helped themselves to a cup of coffee at the coffee bar. They stood around for a little while waiting for someone to approach them and talk with them so that they could introduce Craig to some folks in this new church. They waited for a while and not a single person introduced themselves to these visitors or even said hello. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, they all headed for the exit. Finally, one person who was standing by the door said hello and chatted for a minute.

Bill's wife left that church in tears. All of their hopes and prayers for Craig seemed to dash to the ground in pieces. Bill and his wife were devastated by the visit and they wondered if Craig would ever attend another church service again.

As Luke told me the whole story I could tell he was really saddened by what happened to his good friend who had been faithfully praying for his brother for twenty years. Luke was especially sad because it was not just some random church somewhere in the U.S.—it was a church in our Wisconsin district. But the worst part of this story is that it happened right here in our church.

We all missed an opportunity to minister to Craig. By itself, this one incident does not prove that we are all spiritually immature, but it does point out a weakness that we have as a church. Some of you truly are spiritual infants who are slothful in your hearing. My job is not to point fingers but to allow the Holy Spirit to do that. Others might be running along like the spiritual equivalent of Usain Bolt. You might be the head of the pack but you are resting on your past achievements. You are satisfied with good enough and even though you will probably finish your life well, will you finish as strong as you could—or are you holding back?

Whether you are the fastest or the slowest in the bunch, we all have at least one application from this morning. We need to be more friendly to visitors. I know how it goes. You see an unfamiliar face and maybe you are too shy to walk right up and greet that person. Maybe you are afraid that you met the person once before and you don't want to embarrass yourself by introducing yourself to them again. Maybe you would much rather stay within the safety of the people you know. But let none of us be slothful in hearing in regard to reaching out to others. Could this be the turning point in the history of our church where we can look back and say never again? Never again will we miss an opportunity to reach out like we did with Craig.

Churches are made up of individuals who each are at a different place in their spiritual lives, but churches as a whole can also have a type of spiritual maturity. A local church takes on its own identity and has its own culture. Our church has its own collective spiritual maturity and today we have been given a chance to repent and change our ways. Will you join me in this?

Rich Maurer
September 18, 2011

¹ This cyclist celebrated too early by raising both arms in the air and as a result fell over and lost the race by a few feet.

² Eriksen, H. K.; Kristiansen, J. R.; Langangen, Ø.; Wehus, I. K. (2009). "How fast could Usain Bolt have run? A dynamical study". [*American Journal of Physics*](#) **77** (3): 224–228.

³ In an ironic twist, Manasseh started and lived his life in full rebellion against the Lord but in contrast to his father Hezekiah, actually did finish strong by repenting of all of his evil deeds and turning to the Lord (see 2 Chronicles 33:10-20).