Introduction and Contextual Review

Last time the text set out the diagnosis. The Corinthians were brethren, in Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit, yet the Apostle could not speak to them as to spiritual men. The reason was not unconfessed sin or a closed channel. They were still fleshly: they examined the things of God by the measure of man, and the proof was jealousy and strife expressed in the ranking of God's servants. Fleshly is not a third class of Christian. It describes believers walking according to man.

The last lesson closed with a direction: reach past the milk, a little at a time. That direction is in the text itself, and it is the subject of this lesson.

> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:1–4)

The passage names two stages of the same believer: the infant and the mature. Three matters are taken up from it: what milk and solid food are, why the Corinthians had not moved from one to the other, and how a believer grows from milk to solid food.

Exposition

Verse 2: "I Gave You Milk to Drink, Not Solid Food"

The verb is ποτίζω potizō, to give to drink. The sentence keeps the picture of an infant at the beginning stages, and the solid food is simply set beside it as what the infant could not yet take.

The same verb returns three verses later: "I planted, Apollos watered" (3:6). The servants of God are pictured first as those who feed, then as those who water. In both pictures the servant supplies what is needed and the believer receives it.

The nouns are plain. γάλα gala is milk, and βρῶμα brōma is food, the ordinary word for what is eaten. No technical vocabulary hides in either word. Milk is what an infant can take, and solid food is what a grown man eats. They are served from the same table.

"For You Were Not Yet Able"

The NASB reads "not yet able *to receive it*," with the last three words in italics because they are supplied. The Greek says only, "you were not yet able." The verb is δύναμαι dunamai, the same verb of ability used of the natural man in 2:14.

The same verb is used of both men, but the text gives each its own reason why. The natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit because he rejects the standard by which they are examined

(2:14). The infant in Christ is not yet able because his ability to take in the things of God has not yet been developed. One has refused the food. The other has received basic doctrine but is still not able to handle the depths of God.

The word οὔπω oupō, "not yet," expects that the ability will come. The tense looks back to Paul's first months in Corinth, when "he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11). At that time milk was exactly right. No rebuke is attached to it. A newborn believer is fed milk because milk is what he can take, and they were fed basic doctrines through the previously revealed and newly revealed Word of God.

Every believer begins here. There is no shame in milk.

"Indeed, Even Now You Are Not Yet Able"

The tense changes to the present, and the word νῦν nun, "now," marks the change. Several years had passed since the Apostle's first visit, and they were still where they began. The rebuke lies entirely in the time. Being an infant was never the fault; remaining one was.

The text gives the reason in the next clause: "for you are still fleshly." The last lesson dealt with this phrase in full. The point to carry forward is what it does not say. They had not been denied food, and the channel had not been closed. Apollos had watered them, and this letter was still teaching them. What stalled their growth was the standard they kept using. They took in the things of God and measured them by the wisdom of the age, the same measure by which Corinth ranked its orators. A believer who examines the Word by man's measure will find even the milk hard to digest, and he will not move on from it.

The remedy, then, is not a different message. It is growth in the same message, examined by the right standard.

Milk and Solid Food: One Message at Different Depths

A question stands in the text. In 2:2, the Apostle "determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." In 2:6, he writes, "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature." That can sound like two curricula: a simple message for beginners and an advanced one for the select. The Corinthians would have welcomed that reading, because it turns content into rank. We previously raised this question and left it for this passage, where the letter itself takes it up. Three distinctions settle it.

Access. Nothing is permanently withheld from any believer. The things of God have been revealed (2:10) and "freely given to us by God" (2:12). Deuteronomy 29:29 draws the line where Scripture draws it:

> The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law. (Deuteronomy 29:29)

What God has revealed belongs to every one of His people. Solid food is not a secret syllabus.

Order. Some truth is foundational, and other truth is built upon it. Christ crucified is the foundation (3:11). The wisdom of 2:6–13, the glory prepared, the depths of God, the things freely given, is built on that foundation and drawn out of it. Milk and solid food are the same Christ, taken in at different depths.

Capacity. What limited the Apostle in Corinth was the condition of the hearers, not a gate on the content. He gave them what they could take.

Put together, solid food is not a badge, and the mature are not a higher class. The difference between milk and solid food is the depth at which one body of revealed truth is understood, and the depth grows as understanding is built on understanding (precept upon precept).

Hebrews 5:11–6:1: How the Infant Grows

1 Corinthians names the stages. Hebrews describes how a believer moves from one to the other. Previously, we read this passage for its use of τέλειος teleios, the word for "mature" in 2:6. Here, it is read for the growth it describes.

> Concerning him 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 have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:11–14)

"You have become dull of hearing." The writer had reached Melchizedek (5:10) and stopped, because his readers could not yet take it in. The word νωθρός nōthros is sluggish, slow. The verb is in the perfect tense: they *have become* dull. They were not always this way. Dullness was a condition they came into, and what is acquired can be reversed.

"By this time you ought to be teachers." The rebuke is the same as "even now" in Corinth. Time had passed. The measure of maturity given here is practical: a mature believer can pass the word on to someone else.

"Not accustomed to the word of righteousness." The word ἄπειρος apeiros means without experience, untried. The infant is not described as lacking access to the word. He has heard it. He lacks experience in handling it.

"Because of practice." The word ἕξις hexis occurs only here in the New Testament. It describes a settled condition formed by repeated use, the way a skill becomes second nature to one who has done it many times.

"Their senses." The word αἰσθητήριον aisthētērion, also found only here, refers to the faculties of perception. The word is drawn from the body: the senses by which a man tastes, sees, and tells one thing from another.

"Trained." The verb is γυμνάζω gumnazō, the word behind "gymnasium." It stands as a perfect participle: faculties in a trained condition as the result of exercise. A muscle is not strong because a man was born with it strong. It is strong because it has been worked.

"To discern good and evil." The noun is διάκρισις diakrisis, discernment, telling one thing from another. This is the work 2:15 assigned to the spiritual one: he "appraises all things." That examining is a trained skill. It grows with use. Good and evil in this text is not morality but good and evil doctrine. The context is taking in information able to handle concepts about God and doctrines concerning Him.

"For the mature." The word is τέλειος teleios, the same word as 1 Corinthians 2:6, and the next verse builds on it: "let us press on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1). The noun there, τελειότης teleiotēs, is built on the same root.

The passage answers how growth happens. Solid food is not handed to the mature as a reward for some other achievement. The mature are those whose faculties have been trained by practice in the word. The believer takes in what he can, works it through, returns to it, and handles it again, and by that repeated use he becomes able to take in more. This is not automatic. Hebrews describes believers who had the word and had become dull. Practice is a choice the believer makes, again and again.

1 Peter 2:2 uses the same image to a different end: "like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow." There, milk is the prescription, with no rebuke attached. That verse and these do not conflict, but they should not be collapsed into one another. In 1 Corinthians and Hebrews, the concern is believers who stayed on milk too long.

The Witness of the Rest of Scripture

Maturity is located in thinking. This letter states it plainly later: "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). "Be infants" is νηπιάζω nēpiazō, the verb built on the νήπιος nēpios of 1 Corinthians 3:1, and "mature" is again τέλειος teleios. The letter that called them infants in Christ calls them to maturity, and it puts that maturity in the mind.

God has provided teaching for growth. Ephesians 4:11–14 names the gifts Christ gave, including pastors and teachers, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The goal is the mature man, and the opposite is the infant, the νήπιος nēpios of verse 14, "carried about by every wind of doctrine." The means is teaching. We hold that the Spirit does not supply understanding automatically; if He did, teachers would be superfluous. The infant grows as he is taught the word and works with what he is taught.

Food and training stand together. 1 Timothy 4:6–7 joins both pictures in one sentence: "constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand,

discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." "Discipline yourself" is γυμνάζω gumnazō, the verb of Hebrews 5:14. Nourishment comes from the words of the faith; worldly fables are the wrong diet; and the believer is told to train himself.

From Milk to Solid Food: Two Examples of Building

Doctrine builds on doctrine. Each truth, once understood, becomes the ground on which the next can be understood. When a step is skipped, the next truth cannot be digested, and it is usually misunderstood rather than simply missed. Two examples show the order.

Example A: From Grace to Rewards

1. Justification by grace through faith alone, apart from works (Romans 4:4–5; Ephesians 2:8–9).
2. The security of the believer: what God gives is not lost, because God keeps it (John 10:28; Romans 8:38–39).
3. The believer's standing in Christ, settled by God's doing (1 Corinthians 1:30).
4. Grace as the basis for living. Grace does not make sin acceptable (Romans 6:1–2); it instructs the believer, and the believer chooses to walk accordingly (Titus 2:11–12).
5. Accountability at the judgment seat of Christ, where the believer's works are evaluated and his salvation is not in question (2 Corinthians 5:10).
6. Rewards and reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12).

Hand a believer the fifth and sixth steps before the first two are settled, and he will hear rewards as wages for getting in and accountability as a threat to his standing. The doctrine of rewards is true, but it will not digest without grace and security beneath it. The objection noted in the last lesson, that eternal security is a license to sin, is a step-four question asked by someone still working on step one. 1 Corinthians will reach the fifth step within a few verses (3:10–15).

Example B: From the Promises to Abraham to the Kingdom

1. God's unconditional promises to Abraham of land, seed, and blessing (Genesis 12:1–3). God alone passed between the pieces, so the covenant rests on Him (Genesis 15:17–18).
2. The promises expanded in Israel's covenants: the land (Deuteronomy 30:1–10), the throne of David (2 Samuel 7:12–16), and the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34). The Mosaic covenant stands apart as the conditional one.
3. Israel set aside nationally for a time: "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25). This is national discipline, not the cancellation of the promises.
4. The Church as the mystery: Jew and Gentile made one body (Ephesians 2:14–16; 3:4–6), a new thing and not a replacement for Israel. Not all references to “mystery” are about the Church.

5. Israel's future restoration: "and so all Israel will be saved," because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:26, 29).
6. The kingdom: Christ on the throne of David, the promises fulfilled as they were given (Luke 1:32–33; Revelation 20:4–6).

From there, Daniel's seventieth week (the Seven Years of Tribulation) and the book of Revelation can be read in order. That is solid food at the end of this path. Begin at Revelation or Romans 9–11 without Abraham, and one of two things follows: Israel's promises are spiritualized and handed to the Church, or the newspaper is read into the text. Both come from taking the solid food before the foundation was laid.

Summary / Application

The Corinthians were infants in Christ, and at the beginning that was right. Milk was what they could take, and the Apostle fed them milk. The fault was not that they began on milk but that years later they were still on it, because they kept examining the things of God by the measure of man. Milk and solid food are not two messages. They are one body of revealed truth, taken in at increasing depth, with each truth laid on the one beneath it. Hebrews shows how the infant grows: by practice, faculties trained, until the believer can discern, and in time teach.

Start where you are. If what you understand is mostly the gospel and the basics about God, that is milk, and there is no shame in it. "Not yet" expects growth.

Feed regularly. Trained senses come from practice, and practice is repeated use. Read, study, sit under teaching, and come back to what you heard. Growth is not found in a single event.

Take the next step, not the last one. Reach for the truth that builds on what you already understand. Take in a little more, work it through, let it settle, and come back for more.

Use the right measure. Examine what you take in by what is written, not by whether it seems practical, fair, or comfortable.

Aim to pass it on. "By this time you ought to be teachers." The mark of maturity is a believer who can take what he has learned and give it to someone else.