Lesson 1: Clearing the Ground

Method, Positional Completeness, and Reachable Maturity

Anchor Texts: Philippians 3:12-15; Colossians 2:9-10; Hebrews 10:14; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 8-9, 30

> *"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. … Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;" (Philippians 3:12, 15)*

The Question Before Us

Spiritual maturity is one of the most frequently-used phrases in church life and one of the least defined. Believers use the term in conversation, leadership evaluation, and personal self-assessment, yet when pressed to define it from Scripture, most fall back on inherited assumptions rather than conclusions drawn from the text. For some, maturity means outward moral restraint. For others, maturity is measured by years in church, ministry activity, or emotional fervor. Still others treat maturity as an unreachable horizon, insisting that a believer is always maturing and never mature.

Each of those assumptions carries an understandable motive, yet practical usefulness is not the test of truth; Scripture is. Before evaluating any familiar framework within evangelical teaching, the first task is to set aside inherited definitions and let the biblical text establish what spiritual maturity actually is.

This study examines what Scripture teaches spiritual maturity is, how its parts relate to one another, and how the biblical picture measures against common models held within our own ranks.

The thesis tested across these lessons is plain. Scripture uses the language of completeness and adulthood, centered on τέλειος *teleios* and its neighboring word families, to describe a reachable state of functional readiness across three interdependent spheres of the believer's life: how a believer thinks and appraises truth, what a believer knows and holds securely in doctrine, and how a believer exercises volition in tested conduct. Those three spheres are distinct in the contexts where Scripture addresses them, yet they build upon one another so that a believer is equipped to live and serve in alignment with the truth.

Method and Standing Ground

A topical study gathers verses from multiple books written to different audiences for different purposes. Without a disciplined method, that kind of study quickly turns into proof-texting, where verses are lifted out of their paragraphs to confirm a conclusion decided in advance. Three working rules govern this series.

Literal-grammatical-historical reading. Every passage is read in its own setting first: author, original audience, occasion, and stated purpose. The study moves from the text toward conclusions, holding to what the text states rather than what a theological system requires by inference.

Context governs word meaning. Lexicons, including standard works such as BDAG, are valuable tools because they map the general semantic range of a word across Greek literature. Lexicons remain human reference works, however, and a word does not carry its entire dictionary entry into every sentence. Immediate context determines which sense is active in a given verse. Holding tightly to context guards against two fallacies: totality transfer, which loads every lexical sense of a word onto a single passage, and begging the question, which assumes a definition of maturity first and forces every verse to repeat it.

Standing ground. Several foundational truths established in earlier studies stand as settled ground here and will not be re-argued. Salvation is a free gift received by grace through faith at the moment a person hears the gospel and believes it, at which point that believer is sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:13). Eternal security rests entirely on God's faithfulness and preserving work, never on human fidelity, obedience, or perseverance (2 Timothy 2:13). Salvation is taught in two tenses: past deliverance from the penalty of sin, already accomplished at belief, and future glorification at the return of Christ. Finally, neither faith, nor doctrine, nor grace, nor the indwelling Spirit automatically generates godly behavior. Truth informs the mind and supplies the grounds for action, while human volition makes the choice.

With that method and standing ground in place, one biblical boundary must be drawn before anything is said about growth: the boundary between what God has already completed in Christ and what the believer is called to grow into.

Positional Completeness Before Experiential Maturity

Confusion about spiritual maturity begins when positional standing is blurred with experiential growth. When standing before God is treated as a work in progress, growth turns into an effort to earn acceptance or prove that one belongs to Christ. Scripture closes that door at the outset. Across the epistles, the vocabulary of holiness, completeness, and perfection is used first to declare what God has already finished for every believer in Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:2, 8-9, 30. No congregation in the New Testament displayed more disorder than the church at Corinth. Later chapters address factions, lawsuits, immorality, and assembly disorder. Yet the opening of the letter identifies these exact believers by their settled standing before God:

> *"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:" (1 Corinthians 1:2)*

The word translated "have been sanctified" is ἁγιάζω *hagiazō*, standing as a perfect passive participle. The verb means to set apart. In the perfect tense and passive voice, it states a completed past act performed by God with permanent, abiding results. Likewise, "saints" is ἅγιος *hagios*, meaning set-apart ones. Neither term describes Corinthian behavior. Verse 30 locates the entire standing outside the believer:

> *"But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption," (1 Corinthians 1:30)*

By God's doing, every category in which a person might seek to stand before God, wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and liberation, is given as a gift located in Christ. Verses 8 and 9 carry that standing to the end, promising that Christ will confirm these believers "blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," grounded on one fact: "God is faithful." The word "blameless" is ἀνέγκλητος *anenklētos*, meaning beyond legal accusation. Corinthian immaturity did not touch that standing with God.

Colossians 2:9-10. The letter to the Colossians confronts persuasive arguments, human philosophy, and man-made regulations promising believers a higher fullness (Colossians 2:4, 8). The letter answers that threat by stating what is already true of every believer united to Christ:

> *"For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;" (Colossians 2:9-10)*

In verse 9, all the "fullness" (πλήρωμα *plērōma*) of Deity dwells in Christ bodily. In verse 10, the believer "has been made complete" in Him, using the cognate verb πληρόω *plēroō* in a perfect periphrastic passive construction. The present indicative "you are" paired with the perfect passive participle declares a fixed present status resulting from

a completed act performed by God. The One in whom all the fullness of God dwells has filled the believer completely. Human tradition and merit-based rules add nothing to that completeness.

Hebrews 10:14. The letter to the Hebrews uses the verbal cognate of the main maturity term to declare a finished positional work:

> *"For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Hebrews 10:14)*

The verb is τελειόω *teleioō*, standing in the perfect active indicative. Under the Mosaic Law, repeated sacrifices could never perfect the worshiper's conscience (Hebrews 9:9, 10:1). By one offering, Christ perfected for all time those who are set apart. Earlier in the same letter, Hebrews 5:14 and 6:1 call believers to press on to "experiential" maturity using the same word family. Chapter 10 makes plain that experiential maturity never completes a believer's standing before God; Christ's single offering already did that permanently.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. A final positional anchor guards the future end of the believer's standing:

> *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)*

The adjective "complete" is ὁλόκληρος *holoklēros*, meaning whole and intact in every part. The preservation of the believer complete and without blame at Christ's coming is not conditioned on human performance. Verse 24 places the guarantee solely on God's faithfulness: He who calls will bring it to pass.

Set these four passages side by side and the boundary is settled. Every believer begins the Christian life already sanctified, made complete in Christ, perfected for all time by His one offering, and guaranteed blameless at His return. Experiential maturity adds nothing to that standing, and immaturity subtracts nothing from it. Spiritual growth takes place on top of a finished foundation, never in order to lay one.

The Vocabulary of Maturity in Context

Once positional completeness is set cleanly to the side, the New Testament's language for experiential growth comes into focus. The primary adjective carries the broad lexical sense of attaining an end or purpose, complete, full-grown, or adult. English translations render it as "perfect," "complete," or "mature," depending on the verse. That variation often hides the thread running across the Epistles: the same Greek adjective appears in 1 Corinthians 2:6 ("mature"), Ephesians 4:13 ("mature"), Philippians 3:15 ("perfect"), Hebrews 5:14 ("mature"), and James 1:4 ("perfect").

Testing this term honestly requires accounting for all nineteen of its New Testament occurrences before drawing conclusions. Nine of those occurrences do not describe experiential maturity:

- Describing God or things (six occurrences): the will of God (Romans 12:2), the coming complete state contrasted with the partial (1 Corinthians 13:10), the greater tabernacle (Hebrews 9:11), God's gift from above (James 1:17), the law of liberty (James 1:25), and love (1 John 4:18).
- Addressed to Israel under the Law in the Gospels (three occurrences): the standard of unlimited beneficence in the Sermon on the Mount ("you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Matthew 5:48, twice) and the exchange with the rich young ruler under the Mosaic commandments ("if you wish to be complete," Matthew 19:21).

Setting those nine occurrences in their proper contexts leaves ten occurrences describing believers: 1 Corinthians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 5:14; James 1:4 (2x); and James 3:2. Alongside those ten stand two cognates in the same paragraphs: the verb in Philippians 3:12 and the noun τελειότης *teleiotēs* ("maturity") in Hebrews 6:1.

Because sound doctrine does not rest on a single Greek word, neighboring word families must be read alongside it to test whether the New Testament presents a unified picture:

Growth and increase (αὐξάνω *auxanō*). In the Epistles, this verb describes the body growing up into Christ through truth held in love (Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 2:19), believers increasing in the full knowledge of God alongside bearing fruit in good works (Colossians 1:10), longing for the pure milk of the word so as to grow (1 Peter 2:2), growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ to stay steadfast against error (2 Peter 3:18), and God causing spiritual growth through His Word as teachers plant and water the Word (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Mending, fitting together, and equipping (καταρτίζω *katartizō*). This verb means to mend, restore, or put into proper working order, as fishermen mend torn nets (Matthew 4:21). In the Epistles, it describes restoring a brother caught in a trespass (Galatians 6:1), mending divisions so an assembly stands in the same mind and judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10), completing what is lacking in a church's doctrinal faith (1 Thessalonians 3:10), and equipping believers to do God's will (Hebrews 13:21). Its noun form, καταρτισμός *katartismos*, names the equipping of the saints through teaching in Ephesians 4:12. A related pair in 2 Timothy 3:17, ἄρτιος *artios* ("adequate") and ἐξαρτίζω *exartizō* ("equipped"), states that Scripture renders the man of God proficient and fitted for every good work.

Wholeness and its antonyms. In James 1:4, the adjective for "complete in every part" is paired directly with "perfect" to describe functional wholeness under testing. The direct antonyms across the epistles reinforce the same picture: νήπιος *nēpios* (an infant, 1 Corinthians 3:1; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:13), παιδίον *paidion* (a child, 1 Corinthians 14:20), and ἄπειρος *apeiros* (unaccustomed or untried in handling the Word, Hebrews 5:13).

When these ten occurrences and these neighboring word families are examined strictly in their own paragraphs, a clear pattern emerges. Scripture applies the concept of adulthood and functional readiness to three distinct spheres of the believer's life:

- **Thinking and appraisal**: evaluating God's truth by the Spirit's revealed words rather than by the wisdom of this age, with faculties trained by repeated practice (1 Corinthians 2:6; 14:20; Philippians 3:15; Hebrews 5:14).
- **Doctrinal grounding and corporate stability**: arriving through teaching at the unity of the faith and the full knowledge of the Son of God, so that the assembly is no longer tossed about like infants by winds of doctrine (Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28).
- **Volitional execution and tested conduct**: letting endurance finish its work under trial so that believed truth governs speech and action, bringing the believer to functional wholeness (James 1:4, 3:2, with Colossians 4:12 linking full assurance in God's will to standing mature).

Recognizing those three spheres prevents totality transfer. Ephesians 4:13 defines maturity in the sphere of doctrine, where works play no part in establishing doctrinal stability; James 1:4 addresses believers who already hold doctrinal truth and defines maturity in the sphere of volitional endurance. Letting each passage speak in its own context removes any apparent friction between them.

Reachable Now, Distinct from Glorification: Philippians 3:12-15

One question must be settled before examining each sphere in detail. Many faithful teachers within evangelical circles teach that spiritual maturity is an unreachable goal in this life: a believer is always maturing, never mature. That phrasing is offered to guard against pride, complacency, or claims of sinless perfection. The motive is honorable, yet the statement must be tested against the text. Philippians 3:12-16 serves as the decisive control passage because it places two terms from the same Greek root three verses apart and distinguishes them explicitly.

> *"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it*

> *yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." (Philippians 3:12-16)*

The surrounding context of Philippians 3 frames this paragraph clearly. Verses 2 and 3 warn the congregation to watch carefully for those who promote confidence in the flesh, contrasting them with believers who worship in the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Verses 4 through 6 lay out the Apostle's unmatched credentials under the Law: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the church, and blameless as to the righteousness in the Law. Verses 7 and 8 then turn on a verb of deliberate evaluation, ἡγέομαι *hēgeomai* ("counted," "count"), used three times in two verses. Weighing every fleshly credential against the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, all of it is counted as loss and rubbish in order to gain Christ and be found in Him, resting on the righteousness from God on the basis of faith (3:9).

Verse 12: what has not yet been reached. "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect." The word "it" is italicized in the NASB because the Greek text supplies no direct object in verses 12 and 13; the object arrives in verse 14 as "the goal" (σκοπός *skopos*, the fixed mark on which one sets the eye) for "the prize" (βραβεῖον *brabeion*, the victor's reward) of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The verb rendered "have already become perfect" is the same verb for bringing a course to completion seen in Hebrews 10:14, here standing in the perfect passive indicative. Because it is negated and passive, it cannot refer to justification or positional sanctification, which are already accomplished. It points to final completion at the end of the race, when the course is finished and the prize is awarded.

A common reading takes verse 12 to mean, "I have not yet achieved full spiritual maturity." Four textual facts rule that reading out:

- Different words: verse 12 uses the verb meaning to finish or bring to completion, whereas verse 15 uses the adjective meaning mature or full-grown.
- Passive voice: verse 12 stands in the passive voice, describing a completion done to the speaker, whereas the other passages on experiential maturity (1 Corinthians 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28, 4:12) never place maturity in the passive.
- Immediate self-inclusion: verse 12 cannot deny present maturity when verse 15, three sentences later, includes the speaker among those who are mature ("let us therefore, as many as are mature").
- Scriptural consistency: no passage in Scripture teaches that maturity is unattainable in this life. 1 Corinthians 2:6 addresses mature believers already present; 1 Corinthians 14:20 commands maturity in thinking; Ephesians 4:13 uses καταντάω *katantaō*, a verb of arriving at a destination rather than endless travel; Hebrews 5:12-14 rebukes believers for not having reached maturity by this time; and James 1:4 presents maturity as the reachable outcome of completed endurance.

Verse 15: what is reachable now. "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude." Here the adjective is plural, limited by the relative pronoun to those in the Philippian assembly who have reached grown-up stability. The verb is φρονέω *phroneō* (to think, to set the mind), standing in the first-person plural present active subjunctive: "let us think in this manner." The speaker counts himself among the mature right now and defines their maturity by a settled manner of thinking: placing no confidence in the flesh, counting Christ as supreme, refusing to let past achievements or failures become distractions, and pressing forward toward the prize.

The clause that follows, "and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you," confirms that mature believers are not omniscient or flawless. Even among mature believers, areas of incomplete clarity can

remain, and God brings light to them through His Word. Present maturity is functional adulthood, not sinless perfection.

Verse 16: continuing by the attained standard. "However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." The verb rendered "keep living by" is στοιχέω *stoicheō*, a term for lining up in order and walking in alignment with a fixed rule. Reaching maturity does not end the Christian life, nor does it invite complacency. An adult does not stop eating, thinking, or working simply because he is no longer an infant. Having attained a settled standard in Christ, the mature believer continues to line up his thinking and conduct by that same standard until the race ends.

Holding verses 12 and 15 together answers the fear behind the "always maturing, never mature" model. Complacency is not prevented by moving the biblical finish line out of reach. Scripture guards against pride by keeping final completion and the prize ahead (verse 12), while calling believers to genuine, reachable adulthood right now (verse 15). Collapsing verse 15 into verse 12 erases the distinction the passage establishes.

Complete in Christ, Called to Adulthood

Two fixed realities stand at the foundation of everything Scripture teaches about spiritual maturity, and neither can be surrendered without distorting the other.

First, every believer's standing before God is already complete in Christ. By God's doing, the one who has heard and believed the gospel is sanctified in Christ Jesus, filled to fullness in the One in whom all the fullness of Deity dwells, perfected for all time by one offering, and preserved blameless by a faithful God for the day of Christ. Growth never adds a millimeter to that standing, and failure never subtracts from it.

Second, standing on that settled floor, Scripture calls believers out of infancy into a reachable, functional adulthood across thinking, doctrine, and conduct. Maturity is not sinless perfection, not a private rank, and not an unreachable horizon reserved for eternity. It is the settled condition of a believer who appraises truth by God's Word, stands immovable in the core doctrines of Christ, and aligns his choices with what he believes, pressing on in that same standard until the course is finished.