



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: irm@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Arrested Development
By Bill Jacobs
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The title of today's presentation is *Arrested Development*. Isn't there a band or some TV show by that name? That's not what this is about today. It has to do with the things that *block* our spiritual growth – things that arrest our growth. And we're talking about this topic – as we do *all* our topics – to help people grow spiritually, to be spiritually stronger, to build up the church with the hope that strong families and congregations will provide a rich spiritual environment for their children to receive the faith and begin their own faith journey. One of the things that God calls us to account for is the transmission of faith from one generation to another. And we have decided that's what we want to talk about to folks.

When I first began working at public elementary school as a counselor, I met two little boys who were brothers. One was barely five and the other was six. And they were both in kindergarten. The older one had not been sent to school on time, so he was a year late. And the reason he didn't was because both his parents were crack addicts and they were too involved in their addiction to take care of them. It wasn't until their grandparents got custody of them that they were allowed to go to school.

And I learned that, until they went to live with their grandparents, these boys had never slept in a bed. They had never had a pair of pajamas or a winter coat. When they came to school they did *not* know how to eat with utensils or that they should chew with their mouths closed. They didn't know *any* of the things that we take for granted in children who grow up in a loving home.

Their father, for his own entertainment, would make them fight each other. I remember turning the corner one morning, going to school at the beginning of the school year, and there they were wailing away on each other out on the street corner, swinging their backpacks – just going at it.

When they finally did come to school they were obviously *way* behind the other kids in almost every area. Their speech was delayed. Their manual dexterity and coordination was behind. They were socially behind, of course. The only way they knew to get what

they wanted was to steal it or take it. They didn't see anything wrong with either one of those. So there was usually a little firestorm around them for awhile there at school. They seemed to have very little control over their impulses and their emotions. So their physical, social and emotional development had been *arrested*, because they were never loved, cared for, taught or trained like most other children.

You can think about things you've seen in the news, where much, much worse has happened to children. These children that we read about – if the neglect or the maltreatment starts early enough and lasts long enough – they actually suffer the slowing of brain growth. They can do a scan on them and see their brain is way small compared to other kids their age. There's a lot of room inside the skull because the brain is too little. That's because there's not enough stimulation to actually cause the brain to wire itself as it would if the child lived in a healthy environment.

Now there are lots of ways children can be slowed in their physical development – or human development. I met a thirteen-year-old recently whose mother was kind of like a helicopter. She was always hovering over him. She laid out his clothes every morning for him. She'd take his lunch money or his coat to him at school if he forgot it. She intervened with his disputes with his brother, his teachers, his father. She monitored his every social interaction – didn't want him to have any contact with girls. And you know, this kid looked like a thirteen-year-old, but he acted like he was seven. He had the emotional control of a seven-year-old – and an immature seven at that.

Now see, his mother didn't ignore him or neglect him. She just *did* everything for him. She over controlled him. Both ways can block the normal development of a child. Since I've had a chance to meet children at school, and in my private practice, and at the clinic I work at, who are behind in their development, I wondered if since we develop spiritually, as well as physically and emotionally, if it isn't possible to suffer spiritual arrest as well. If that's possible, I wondered what could cause a person to slow down or stop their spiritual growth. And I've also wondered what could be *done* about it to get *unstuck* and begin moving forward.

Well, before we think about these questions, I want to lay a foundation briefly. I want to say that just as humans are designed to mature physically, intellectually and emotionally through stages.... You know, my grandkids...there was the stage where they liked to pick the carpet fuzz – the red fuzz off the carpet – and stick it in their mouth. They don't do that anymore. They're past that stage. They're doing other, much more interesting things now. (Chuckle) It's always long been observed that people develop in stages. I think that it's also true that we mature spiritually in stages as well. And I believe that that is all wired into us – that it is part of being human.

When I was in elementary school – not when I was in high school so much and not when I was three or four, but when I was in elementary school – I was asking my parents a lot of questions about God – mettlesome questions like, “Well, it says in the Bible you're supposed to keep the seventh day of the week and how come we're going to church on the first?” Things like that. I asked questions about God – you know, where He was, and

what He looked like, and all those things. Why was it that was of interest to me at that age? Well, because it's of interest to most kids that age, because they're at that stage of their development where they have enough brain wiring to think about abstract concepts. And our brains are designed to *seek* answers to spiritual questions. At that age we have enough wiring to do that, so as soon as we can, we do, because it's how we're designed to be.

Now, if you're older, have you ever noticed that your focus has changed over the years from what it was when you first came into the church? When I was at Bible college, I used to think that Bible *knowledge* was the most important thing. And that was really important for me to think that at that time. Otherwise I wouldn't have any Bible now. Right? But now that I'm older, I think *applying* is more important. We mature and we learn things as we go through and we kind of do it in stages. You can expect people at one age to be thinking one way, and people that are older – at another age – to be thinking other ways about things. I think that proves that we develop spiritually the same way that we develop physically and emotionally. I think that God intended us to develop various aspects of our spirituality as we grow older. And we have to accept that if we're to believe that the natural progression can be blocked or arrested.

So, let's take a look at that question. Can spiritual growth be blocked? Let's go to Hebrews 5, and verse 12. I just keep mining this scripture. I started thinking about this scripture about eight or nine years ago. And I keep coming back to it. Paul said to the Hebrews:

Heb. 5:12 – *For though by this time you ought to be teachers – I'm reading in the New American Standard, if it doesn't quite match up with your translation. 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. You have come to need milk and not solid food.* You know, “You ought to be teachers, but you're still back in kindergarten spiritually,” he said. Now is that a spiritual arrest? Some growing didn't take place that should have. He's pointing out that that's not natural. *For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice, had their senses trained to discern good from evil.* The reason he said this to them was he wanted to explain to them about Christ as Melchisedec, and he said, “You guys aren't ready to even entertain that yet, because you don't know enough about the Bible to understand what I would say.”

So here's an example of some people whose spiritual growth has been arrested. They were spiritually immature. Paul tells us that they'd been around a long time – long enough that they should have been more mature. So that means that we're behind – just like those kids who came to school not ready because they hadn't been taken care of, loved, and helped out, and trained. So these people were behind. Their spiritual development had been blocked.

Okay, so this scripture that I just quoted in Hebrews showed that we can be blocked in our spiritual development. It also supports the first assertion that I made – that people

grow in stages. He's pretty much saying that too, isn't he? One just goes with the other. "There was a time when you needed milk, but by now you should be eating solid food. You've passed the milk stage – should have – and should be eating solid food now, but you're still back at milk. You're arrested in development."

So what blocks spiritual growth? Well, I've got some things here. I don't think I've got all of them. In fact, I *know* I don't, but I just wanted to talk about these because they were on my mind a lot lately.

The obvious one is that *sin* blocks spiritual growth, of course. Let's go to Psalm 31, and verse 9. Here's David in the Psalms, saying:

Psa. 31:9 – *Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress. My eye was wasted away from grief – my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing. My strength has failed because of my iniquity. And my body has wasted away.* He's not having a lot of fun, is he? He's not flourishing and growing. He's drying up. He's sighing and his strength is failing prematurely. *Because of all my adversaries I've become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances. Those who see me in the street flee from me. I'm forgotten as a dead man – out of mind. I am like a broken vessel.* That's kind of a lonely feeling, isn't it, when your friends, who see you in the street, run from you. Then in verse 3 of the next chapter – Psalm 32:

Psa. 32:3 – *When I kept silent about my sin my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. See, there's that regression. For day and night Your hand was heavy on me and my vitality was drained away with the fever heat of summer. But then I acknowledged my sin, even my iniquity I did not hide. I said, "I will confess my transgression to the LORD," and You did forgive the guilt of my sin.*

And looking back then, in verse 9 of the same song, after he has repented, his advice is:

V-9 – *Do not be as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check – otherwise they will not come near to you.* Don't be like a stubborn mule with God. Go to Him and get it out. Repent. That's the message.

Some people think that sin is sin – that no sin is worse than any other sin. They're all supposed to get us dead, right? But let's say that you were starving to death, and you stole a loaf of bread from the store. Would that be as bad as chaining your kid in the basement for five years and not letting him see anybody else? Which, do you suppose, you'd feel worse about? Some sins create more guilt than others. And those are the ones that arrest our development the most. We don't want anybody to find out we've got them down there. So we alienate ourselves from other people and from God. And we feel less than. So the block has to do with how much guilt we feel.

David said, after he killed Uriah the Hittite so that he could marry his wife, he was drying up inside from guilt. And he was stuck. He was arrested. He was going nowhere. He was dying inside. He was dying spiritually. When he stopped being, finally, like that stubborn mule, and gave up his pride and repented, then his relationship with God was restored. And he wasn't stuck anymore after that.

So that's a pretty easy one to think about, isn't it? I think we all know that that's one of the effects of sin. It separates us from God. Without God, we can't have growth.

What other things can cause us to arrest spiritually? Well, we just read in Hebrews, where Paul wanted to talk to the Jewish church – or the Jewish part of the church – about Christ's priesthood and Melchisedic, but he couldn't because they didn't know enough about the word of God to even understand it. So they didn't have enough *Bible knowledge* to grow. And he cited that as one of the reasons that they were spiritually immature or arrested in their development.

I was talking to a woman some time ago. And I don't want you to think that I disrespect this woman. I don't. I have great regard for her. But I was talking to a lady some time ago, and she told me that she didn't know what to do to be closer to God. And I asked her if she was baptized? She said, "Yes." And I said, "Do you know what it meant?" She said, "I didn't when I was baptized, and I still don't. I was baptized when I was thirteen in one of the big mega churches in town, because all the other kids were getting baptized and I wanted to be with the group." And I said, "So, I'm guessing that you never read the Bible then." And she said, "I never have." She asked me what to do. She knew she was stuck. Okay? I'm not just blasting this out at her. But I was asked to help, so that's what I'm doing. I said, "You need to get a Bible – a modern translation that's easier to read than the King James Bible – you need to put it by your bed, and every night you need to read three chapters before you go to sleep. Skip the genealogies and the parts about the temple construction for now. Remember that it's a story – the history of God's dealing with humankind. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. The end hasn't happened yet." She's nodding her head while I'm talking. It's going in. She's getting it. And she said, "If I did that, I wouldn't have to take everyone's word for what it says." And I said, "That's exactly why, too. God wants you to have your own, personal relationship directly with Him, without anybody else in between you and Him. So you need to know what He says."

Remember that I told you that when I began my walk, I thought Bible knowledge was the most important thing? And now I think other things are more important? That's only because I already know a lot of the Bible, and I can go on to other things – like *living* it. But she doesn't even know what to live. So how can she progress spiritually? She's blocked. She's standing in front of concrete, block wall and she can't go anywhere until she knows where to go.

Okay. So that's also pretty easy, isn't it, to understand how that works. Let's look at a third one.

I knew a man once, who could not say the word *love*. He called it the L word when he talked about it to me. This man was in his late sixties, or early seventies. He'd been baptized for many, many, many years – had a long history in the Church of God. But as I got to know him, I learned that he had been abusive to all of his children and to his wife for many years – who I had seen with bruises on her. This man had a horrible temper. And it would even erupt out of him at church occasionally. Well, as I got to know him better, I found out that he came from an abusive family. *He* was abused. And that abuse made him very fearful. And his way of dealing with that fear was to control everything around him to feel safe – and that included his kids. When they acted the slightest bit imperfect – or outside of what he wanted them to do – he would explode in a rage, which was really fear, based on his childhood.

Lots of people have things like that happen to them, but this man had never found a way to resolve all of that. He had never been able to let go of it. So he raised a family of fearful children, who became fearful, controlling, angry adults. And his spiritual growth is blocked. He never got to where he needed, really, to start, I don't think. And he suffers incredible guilt and fear. Couldn't be close to God. Couldn't live without anger. And he was afraid that God was going to kill him. That's what he thought.

So *unresolved personal issues* block spiritual growth. We deal with this in psychology and in counseling all the time. And we think about emotional growth and human development and all that, but it's not just that that it affects. It affects our *spiritual* growth, too. It affects our relationship with God. It can't do anything but that.

What is it that you're afraid of? What are the hurts that are there from your past that keep leaking out into your present life?

You know, I have been having a lot of fun teaching people how to do small-group, interactive Bible studies. And you know what everybody's worried about when I go and teach them how to do this? There are a couple of things that come up every time. There are those people who want to go on and on and on about the abuse they suffered in the church years ago. It doesn't matter what topic you cover. It always winds up on how angry they are with that no-good-for-nothing-dirty-rotten-low-down minister they had back in whatever. That's an example. They cannot be a productive part of the church because they're *stuck* on that. Unresolved personal issues cause spiritual arrest and they are a huge impediment to our service to God's people, because we impose them on others. We just can't help it.

What else could we think about? Here's another one. *Spiritual constriction* blocks spiritual growth. What is spiritual constriction? If you lock a kid in a closet for five years, why does that hurt them? Well, because they don't have enough stimulation to grow – to develop mentally. A kid needs *room* in which to develop. I'm not just talking about the size of the closet that he's in. I'm talking about that he needs to have contact with other kids. He needs to be able to make decisions. He needs to be able to pick his own clothes, you know, and learn how to do all these things that kids do. And when you're locked in a closet in the dark, and somebody slides a pan of cold food to you every day under the

door, you don't get any of the that. You're constricted. The environment is so limited that they don't get enough stimulation for their brain to develop. They have nobody to talk to. So their language and thinking is inhibited. They don't get to make choices. So they can't learn about cause and effect.

So what does that have to do with spiritual blocking? I know a lady. She ended up in a church that is very – the word I'm going to use is *constricting*, but that would be a euphemism for the way this organization operates. She told me that she loved to listen to our tapes, but she couldn't talk about them to anybody in her church, because she would be disfellowshipped if anybody found out she was listening to anybody other than her minister or the head of their church. I mean, I was having this conversation with her over the phone, and she was very, very distraught about what was going on. People in their church are not allowed to talk to their *relatives* if they don't attend church with them. And one of the questions she asked me was, "Do you think the head of our church is really a prophet? And do you think his books are really inspired like the Bible is?" I just pointed out to her, very respectfully, that Paul said in Hebrews 1 that "God, in times *past*, spoke to us by the prophets, but *now* He speaks to us *through His Son*." And everything *He* said is already written down in the Bible. Later she wrote me an email in which she said, "I feel *so* foolish. Of course, that's so *obviously* right! And how could I have thought otherwise?" The blinders came off. She was being brainwashed by fear and intimidation. She was in a cult. You know, a cult isn't really so much determined by what you believe, but the way in which the cult deals with the people in it.

I have another friend who was suspended from church because he studied the Bible with people when there was no minister present. There is *nowhere* in the Bible that says brethren can't study the Bible together. Yes, it's just the opposite, actually. If you *allow* people to inhibit your interactive study of the Word of God, you *will* be stunted spiritually.

I mentioned earlier about the interactive study approach that we're teaching people, and besides those who want to chew over the past, do you know who everybody worries about? They worry about the people that want to come in there – no matter what topic you're talking about – they want to talk about *their* idea that nobody else agrees with. Do you know why we worry about that? Because we have been arrested spiritually and we've never learned how to have differences of opinion without fighting about them. That has happened because no one was allowed to *express* differences of opinion though we all had them. And because our opinions have been constricted, we don't know *how* to express them, nor how to hear them from other people without getting upset. For some of us, to hear something different than what we believe makes us angry. It makes us afraid. Nor do we have the spiritual maturity to know how to confront somebody who wants to subvert what we believe.

You know, the apostle's really clear about that being a part of what Christians need to know how to do. Paul told Timothy to shun profance and vain babblings and strivings about the law. There are lots of places where they talked about how.... And you know, the letters that the apostles wrote were not to the ministry. They were to the brethren in the

church, weren't they? We all need to know how to do that. You know, "I've been to three studies now with you guys and we've had three really great topics. And yet every time you have tried to turn the group off to the topic on which *you* believe, and which none of us accept. And we politely listen to you, but you refuse to listen to us. So I'm feeling really uncomfortable about this and wondering if anybody else is also." What kind of discussion do you think would ensue from a comment like that? You'd get support. If somebody comes into your study, and they try to hijack you doctrinally, it's okay to talk about what's going on. That's what you have to do to resolve the issue. It's okay to do that.

In group therapy we have this thing that we call *looping back* – time is passing, something is said and so you just loop back on it and grind over what just happened. And that's how people grow. I don't think that I believe exactly the same as all of you on every issue. But I'm not trying to force my differences on you. And I don't think anybody else here is trying to do that either. So we have a good thing going, don't we?

But let me tell you, there are lots of people that get wild-eyed and are running scared because that happens where they live. And that *is* spiritual immaturity – that somebody would do that to a group. And it's also spiritually immature that a group can't deal with that.

What do you think somebody would do if what I just used as an example was said to them? They would either start listening more or they would leave, wouldn't they? They'd have to, because everybody else would want them to do that. So that *is* a way to solve those problems.

Spiritual constriction is a way that we can be *stunted* in our spiritual growth. We are not mature enough, in a lot of cases, to handle these things, because we're not mature because we never have been allowed to study the Bible with other people in a genuine and interactive way where we really get to *know* each other and learn what the others believe in our group – and learn to listen respectfully, while we also retain our *own* beliefs. Of course, you know what happens when you get a group of people talking. Everybody learns. They learn stuff that they didn't know. I was doing a seminar on this topic down in Phoenix and there was this sixteen-year-old girl in our group. We were talking about spiritual maturity, and we were trying to create a Bible study on spiritual maturity. We were coming up with a list of questions to ask in this Bible study that would generate discussion. In my opinion, she asked the best one. She asked the best question. So I've been thinking about this for years, and here's this sixteen-year-old who had something for *me* to learn. So that's just such a great thing, isn't it? Some people are threatened by that. They're *so* stunted they can't accept it.

Who do you suppose were the constrictors of Jesus' time? Oh yeah – the Pharisees, right? They were the ones with all the rules, weren't they? And what did Jesus say about them? Maybe we really need to listen to this. *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him two-fold more the child of hell than yourselves!* So, it's dangerous – it's *dangerous* –

to allow oneself to be constricted. You could be made a twice-fold son of hell – or daughter.

So being in a constricting group arrests spiritual development. There's going to come a time when we all have to stand at Christ's throne. And we're going to find ourselves falling short – some of us – because we allowed ourselves to be constricted by other people. And, you know, we're just not going to be able to blame it on *them*. We're *not*! We will all be held accountable for the choice of where we worship, because we're the ones that make that choice – nobody else. It's up to *us* to find a spiritually healthy place. It's up to *us* to recognize what healthy is – one that promotes growth, instead of inhibiting it.

I know *so* many people who are fast asleep. They are *dulled* almost to the point of spiritual coma. Their main concern is comfort. I just somehow, when I read the Bible, don't get the idea that comfort is really high on God's priority list for us. In fact, I think He wants us *out* of our comfort zones where we can grow.

Okay, so is there anything else that can block our spiritual growth? There's one more I want to talk about. And that is *not using our spiritual gift* that God has given us. We just recently talked about freedom in Jesus Christ. And the main thrust of that message was to point out that God gave us each a spiritual gift, and He expects us to *use* it for the benefit of the church. And if we don't, we're not going to grow as much as we could. Where does it say that? Did I just dream that up? Or is that actually in the Bible? Well, let's go to Ephesians 4:11.

Eph.4:11 – *It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, so they could lord it over people and feel good. No. ...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him, who is the head – that is, Christ.*

Now, do you remember from the beginning of this passage, in verse 11 down to this last statement in verse 15, the connection? The connection is you get spiritual growth as you practice your gift. And the ministry is to help people grow by teaching them how to use the gifts that they have – help them find out what they are and how to start using them. So, from this scripture, it seems clear that unless you know what your gift is, and you're using it, you're in a state of arrest right now! You could be growing more!

Okay. So, sin blocks growth. Lack of Bible knowledge prevents growth. Unresolved personal issues block growth. Allowing ourselves to be spiritually constricted arrests our growth. And not using the gift of the Spirit that God has given to us blocks our growth as well.

So what can be done to kick-start our spiritual growth and get unstuck? What can we do? There isn't an easy way. There just isn't any easy way? I had to give up two jobs to get moving again. I know other people that have had to go on long sieges of fasting and prayer to shake themselves out of the spiritual indolence that they found themselves in. I know somebody else – a friend of mine – who had to move to another country and start serving God *entirely*. She said it was like swimming in the deep end. That's not a fun place to be, if you don't know how to swim, is it? So she had to get completely out of her comfort zone to get reconnected to God. Others I know have had to do some deep soul searching in order to resolve some of their past unresolved fears. And others have had to vomit up deeply entrenched sins and repent bitterly in order to restore themselves to a relationship with God.

So, what do *you* need to do? What do you need to do? Are you suffering spiritual arrest? Are you so far gone that you don't even know it? Is it too late? Are you comfortable in sin? Or abuse? Or inactivity? And afraid to be any other way than the way you are? Have you lost your purpose and your way? Are you doing things that you know you should *not* do? Or are there things you know you *should* be doing, but you are not? What's your gift? Are you using it? Have you allowed other people to inhibit, or dictate, your relationship with God?

You know, there's an answer that comes along with each one of those questions? And the answer is different for each one of us, isn't it?

Let's go to Romans 13:11, to close out today.

Rom. 13:11 – *And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awaken out of sleep. For now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. We learned that Jeff wants it to come sooner than later. So do we all, don't we? We want it to come sooner. "And it is closer than we first believed," Paul said. The night is far spent. The day is at hand – it's almost done. Let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day – not in revelry and drunkenness, not in luteness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts.*