

Hebrews 5 & 6

Introduction

Have you ever known someone who was a Christian but has fallen away? Can you think of someone you knew, perhaps someone who even who shared that pew with you in the past, who has rejected God's wonderful gift after accepting it. I can think of several. It is one of the most heartbreaking and difficult things about being a Christian: watching someone turn their back on God after they came to know him.

There are questions that are raised at a time like that. Can it even happen? What are we to do? How are we to treat those who have been Christians but are not anymore?

Today's passage helps us to make sense of all this. So let's get right to it.

Jesus, the Great High Priest

Last week, David helpfully spoke to us about God's rest and how we ought to strive to enter that rest. At the end of Chapter 4 we read:

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:14-16 RSV

Jesus, we read, is the High Priest. And our reading today continues from that point, outlining what the High Priest did and showing that Jesus was one, even if he did it a bit differently. There are some things that are similar and some that are different but the point that the writer to the Hebrews is trying to make is that Jesus is the High Priest.

Now, at this point we may be thinking one of two things: I reckon it's either "So what if Jesus was High Priest?" or "Wait, I thought Jesus was a carpenter and then a preacher. When did he become a priest?"

Jesus was a chippie, with his adopted dad and probably with some of his brothers and then left and became a preacher. The Bible never talks about him formally becoming a priest, going through the training and so on but it does make the point that Jesus is a high priest.

So what? Why does it matter that Jesus was the High Priest? Well, the author doesn't really want to tell us yet. He doesn't do much more than show that Jesus was the High Priest before he changes the subject.

One of the phrases I hear again and again when I watch television is "...coming up after the break..." or some variation. Network managers and writers figured out a long time ago that it is a good idea to 'tease' the audience with what is going to happen after the commercials to give them a reason to stay rather than change channels. They show you footage from a news story with no context so that you want to find out how that situation came to be, or they give you a small snippet of tension between characters so you want to see how it's resolved, all so you'll sit through the ad's. (Or at least come back after them).

I think the writer to the Hebrews is doing something like that here. We've heard from Peter, our Senior Minister, about how the Letter to the Hebrews is a sermon and contains all kinds of rhetorical flourishes and I think this is another one of them. In verse 10 he teases us with a mysterious character named Melchizedek before moving on to other matters. He simply drops the name in and then changes the subject.

Now, he does come back to Melchizedek, and the theme of Jesus' High Priesthood, in chapter 7 and you'll have to tune in next week, I mean come back next week, to hear about it.

In the meantime, the writer has some things he needs to say first and I promise they are far more important than television commercials.

Us, the Dull of Hearing

Let me read to you from verse 11.

"About this we have much to say which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." Hebrews 5:11-14 RSV

Wow! That's one way to make an audience sit up and pay attention! "You have become dull of hearing", "you need someone to teach you again the basic, or first, principles... you need milk not solid food." And he basically calls them children because they don't understand. I don't think I would be game to try it

It's worth asking at this point who is he talking to here? What kind of audience is he addressing that he feels he needs to say this to them? Judging by the use of many, many Old Testament quotes and allusions throughout the letter, the audience would have been people who knew the Old Testament well. Probably, mostly Jewish converts. And knowing the Old Testament Scriptures before they became Christian seems to warrant the writer's blast of them here. You should know better! You ought to be teachers but you need teaching!

Now, this doesn't have much to do with us does it? After all, this is written to a specific group of Jews and they lived many centuries ago. Perhaps this section is more interesting than directly relevant.

There may be a temptation to separate ourselves away from this. We aren't dull of hearing, at least not in the way he means here! We aren't children in need of milk! But we must listen to the Word of God here. These Christians thought they knew their stuff and this teacher is saying they need to learn again. Perhaps we ought to examine ourselves in humility and listen.

At the very least, the solid food is for the mature and all of us Christians irrespective of our age ought to be moving forward towards maturity in the faith. What is the solid food? It's the teaching of God in the Bible. If they are immature because they are dull of hearing when it comes to the Word of God, then the mature are those who listen to the Word of God and are able to tell good from evil. Let us listen to what God has to say to us, let us go on to maturity as he says from verse 1.

Verse 1 "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead words and of faith towards God, with instructions about ablutions (or washings), the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits." Hebrews 6:1-3 RSV

The writer wants us to grow, to mature, to know God and the things about God more deeply. (Does this part need expansion?) But then he goes on to say something quite remarkable, even unsettling in the next section. Let me show you. From verse 4

Impossible?

"For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.

For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned." Hebrews 6:4-8 RSV

It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have committed apostasy. Other translations say '...have fallen away.' instead of apostasy. The idea being they reject God. These verses can be quite confronting for us. Particularly for those of us who know people who once professed to be Christians, and looked for all the world as though they were, only to have turned away from the faith. What do we do with them? Are we to give up? Is this verse saying there is no hope for them? And is this verse saying we ourselves might fall away? Could we find ourselves in this category?

Throughout our Christian history there have been various attempts to understand how these verses are to be understood. Calvin, in his *Commentaries*, was keen to preserve God's preservation of the elect, of Christians. He suggested that perhaps the way the writer speaks of 'tasting' leaves room to say that it was only a partial experience. It wasn't full Christianity that the person had. They may have come in and been a part of things, had a taste, but they weren't a real Christian. That would be good but I don't think the text allows us to say that.

I think we *are* talking about someone who was a Christian and has fallen away. But we need to pay close attention to a couple of things. Firstly, verse 9 says

"Though we speak this, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation." Hebrews 6:9 RSV

That is to say, the writer is not writing this to them because he thinks that any of them are in this position but to warn them. It's a hypothetical situation for them, but a real warning.

I think secondly, that the focus on these verses is on the human part of the equation. He's saying that if this were to happen, you can't restore them again to repentance. If there is someone who knows the wonders of being a Christians but then turns their back once more in contempt, there is nothing you can do to bring them to repentance. You can't make them turn back to God.

However, the Lord Jesus himself says, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." God can and will restore those who repent. But as long as someone treats the Lord with contempt, especially after tasting what is good, there is nothing we can do to bring them to repentance.

What we have is a strong and serious warning; do not despise God, you who are Christians. The warning is real, the threat sincere. The end is to be burned. So, please, brothers and sisters, do not depart from our Lord. Cling to him and never let go.

What then are we to do with folk we thought were Christians but then turned away from the faith? I believe we ought to treat them as unbelievers and pray for them. For just as an unbelievers' heart and mind are darkened so as not to be able to turn back to God without his help, so too these people. We must pray that God would show mercy and change their hearts and enable them to repent, to turn back to God and accept that which we offers. We can't make them repent, but God can change hearts. Pray that God would bring our friends back into the fold and let's do everything we can to help them. For us, it's impossible. But not for God.

So, having gravely warned his congregation to never depart from God, what is it that he thinks will help?

God, the Reason for Our Hope

- Many of us are working hard to please God in all sorts of ways.
- But the author wants us to have assurance
- How can we? Because God promises
- So be assured.

From verse 9 again:

“Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realising the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Hebrews 6:9-12 RSV

What is their desire? That we realise the full assurance of hope until the end. We can be assured of our salvation. We can trust that God will get us to the end. But notice who inherit the promises, those who have faith, or trust, and patience. Those who patiently trust in God, those who have faith in him are the ones who inherit the promises. Those are the one to imitate.

And did you notice how gentle he is with them at this point? They are working extremely hard, doing all sorts of wonderful work. And he says, God sees. God knows. He won't overlook your work and the love you have for the saints, for the other Christians. You are earnest in loving each other and that is wonderful. But we want you to show the same earnest in realising the full assurance of hope, the wonderful privilege of knowing beyond doubt that God will get you home. What a gift!

I think the audience, being Jewish Christians, were well used to doing a lot of things for God. They knew they were to love one another and were very zealous at it. But they weren't definite about whether or not they were saved. Perhaps that was what drove them to be so enthusiastic in their service.

Maybe that's you. You're a Christian, of course, maybe you've been one a long, long time but there's a part of you that still isn't sure. Maybe God is still making up his mind. So you gotta work hard. Are you trying to impress God with all the stuff you do? I love our church. There are wonderful people here who love Jesus and want others to love Jesus. We do a lot of things and they are wonderful. But if we are busy doing all this stuff but aren't sure if we are saved then we have it all mixed up.

“God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end.”

On the 5th of February, 2011, nearly 5 years ago I made a promise. I promised that I would love the beautiful Liz Boxwell, that I would take her as my wife, that I would be devoted only to her in this way until we were parted by death. I made

promises before God and before the congregation present. That's how I made my promise.

But that's not how God promises. Listen to how he does it.

Verse 13 "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Men indeed swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us." Hebrews 6:13-18 RSV

How do we know that we can be assured if we are Christians? God. Has. Promised. He has guaranteed it. It will never be broken. He promised Abraham and that came through. He's delivered on every promise he's made so far. He's not missed one.

Trust in him. Don't try to make it under your own power, don't think you can please him, no matter how much good stuff you do. We can be assured. We have hope.

And our hope is not like a wish. It's not something we're unsure will happen but want to happen. It's rock solid; it's a certain future. God will never let it be taken away.

So trust this God, be assured that the God who has done everything will surely take you home.

So then, what are we to do with all this? Live as Christians with hope! Proper hope. Hope that doesn't disappoint. We have the most tremendous freedom to love and serve people because we don't have to earn our salvation. We're already in, our place is secure, we **will** be with God for all eternity. God has promised and has never failed.

So keep on serving and loving each other and our neighbours, but do it because we're free to do so. We know God has already done all that needs to be done to get us to heaven.

There is nothing left to be done, we're there.

Hallelujah, what a God!