

Hebrews

Series 1

Lesson 7

“Hebrews Chapter 6”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God’s people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God’s word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

I am going to begin by translating Hebrews 6:1-2 as the translations that we commonly use weaken what is said here in a manner that I find not helpful. Hebrews 6:1 - **Therefore after leaving behind the basic message of Christ, let us be carried on toward completeness, not setting down the foundation again: repentance from dead works, and faith in God² teaching about baptisms, the laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.** What is written here is a continuation of the admonition that began in the previous chapter. The writer uses a passive hortatory subjunctive verb to convey the idea of something like, “let us be carried on toward completeness.” The “completeness,” or “perfection” that is indicated here is described using a noun related to the verb that was used previously in describing Christ’s being made “perfect” (2:10; 5:9). This verb is also used to describe Christ’s making “perfect,” or “complete” those who are sanctified (10:14). In the context here, the idea is more akin to the idea of “maturity.” It is an idea associated with those who eat solid food rather than the immature that still drink milk (babies). Present, is the awareness of Christ as the high priest, the one who matures His followers. This

maturing is related to the forgiveness granted that then allows access to God, but this is also about a process that has a future dimension: as Christians, in true discipleship, follow Jesus, their leader, into the perfection of God, into true glory (2:10; 6:20).¹

It is interesting to me that many of the things that are described as the baby things of Christian faith are exactly those things that so often have, and still do, divide Christians from each other. We argue over those things described as foundational, the first of which is called “repentance from dead works.” Some have interpreted what the writer is saying here as that we should move to more sophisticated preaching that talks about more in depth things. This is wrong. The call here is not about preaching at all. It is instead about a personal surrender to God’s active influence *within the community of Christ*. In the context here, spiritual maturity implies receptivity and responsiveness to received tradition (5:14) and an earnest concern for the full realization of the hope (6:11) set down in the gospel. This is a call for a deep, unwavering faith and steadfast endurance (6:12).² This is about

¹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 131.

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Volume 47A (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991). pp. 139-140.

practice and not simply about words, or even doctrine. The call is to put into action those things that they have been taught so that then the practice of Christianity will leave those basic, foundational, things and move onto those things that are clearly marks of maturity of faith in Christ. They will look, act, and react more like Jesus in their daily walk.

The call to repentance from dead works here is reviewed more fully at 9:14 from the perspective of the redemptive accomplishment of Jesus. All of this needs to be set in the context of 6:1 where certain teachings are viewed positively as foundational for a firm Christian life. These things are essential elements for starting a good Christian life toward maturity. Without these things there is no sure foundation. We must not forget this, these foundational things are crucial. Then the idea is to build on this firm foundation and to pursue maturity. At 9:14, the “dead works” are described in terms of external regulations associated with the Levitical priesthood in the earthly sanctuary. There is a contrast made there between useless washings on the one hand and the cleansing purification that comes through the blood of Christ on the other hand (9:9-10, 19; 10:22; cf. Everett

Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009). There is also a contrast made between the priests appointed by the imposition of hands according to the Law, which in its imperfection was unable to bring the people of God to perfection/maturity. The contrast then is with Christ who was appointed based on an “oath” from God, and who possesses an indestructible life.³ He was not appointed by man, or even through the laying on of the hands of a man. He was appointed due to the oath, the promise, of God.

As we look at 6:1-2 it is important that we recognize that the author is not asking his audience to discard one aspect of Christian instruction for another what he is asking is for them to build upon that firm foundation that has already been laid for them.⁴ The basic teaching that is to be transcended in the quest for the move to maturity is listed in 6:1-2 in barest form (six items). We have already talked about the “dead works,” but as we move to the concept of “faith in God,” this is not just about some kind of belief that God exists (11:7), but instead is a genuine trust in God and a faithfulness, or fidelity toward God. The final four

³ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, p. 140.

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, p. 140.

items are “teachings about baptism,” “laying on of hands,” “resurrection of the dead,” and “eternal judgement.” When the author here speaks of baptisms, he is not simply referring to Christian baptisms, but also to the purification rites used in addition to baptism as an initiatory rite, such as purification by the blood of Christ (9:9-10, 19; 10:22).⁵

The “laying on of hands,” was an action that often accompanied baptism, healings, commissionings, and ordinations. “Resurrection of the dead,” and “eternal judgment” are doctrines that the early Christian community understood from their heritage based in the eschatological expectations from the Judaism of that era. Needless to say, there is today a vast debate over the meaning of this list of six items as a whole and the individual items in the list. It is difficult for us today to see these items apart from the filters of our own traditions and bias. As we seek to understand the message of the Letter to the Hebrews it is crucial for us to recognize that for the first decades of the church the Jewish Christians certainly will have continued with their participation in synagogue activities and in the temple-based

⁵ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 131-132.

events in Jerusalem such as prayer, sacrifice, and the annual feasts. Gentile Christians were unable to participate in some of these things such as temple worship, but they too will have adopted many of the liturgical practices of Judaism, including such things as the public reading of Scripture, exhortation and teaching.⁶

For the audience of this letter the author can mention them without further comment, or explanation because they were familiar to his audience. Had the writer actually gone into detail about each of these items he would have become bogged down exactly in that which he desired to put behind his audience and to move onto other things. Had he dwelt on this items he would have himself been guilty of exactly what he was accusing his audience of doing. The way he has laid out his list in a “crisp staccato-style,” listing them simply as foundations aligns with the purposes of the author here.⁷

At verse 3, the author simply states that, “if God allows,” he will seek to teach them the things that lead toward maturity/perfection. In this simple expression the author of Hebrews recognizes the sovereignty of God even in things that we might

⁶ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 132-133.

⁷ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 133-134.

consider mundane and ordinary. This sentence then serves notice that the author is ready to move on in very short order to another part of his message. Verse 4 then begins a difficult and challenging discussion that begins with the statement that **“For it is impossible (Ἀδύνατον) to restore those who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and become partakers of the Holy Spirit....and then have fallen away (παραπεσόντας)....”** In the reasoning of this sentence the “death of Christ” is decisive; it is the only way to access genuine cleansing of conscience and forgiveness of sins. For those who have rejected this foundation there is the inevitable conclusion that they have rejected the necessary presupposition that granted them access to forgiveness; that necessary presupposition was repentance. This means they are incapable of repentance, it is not possible for them.⁸

This statement is intended to be challenging and shocking to the audience. The implication of these verses is that not everyone who has entered the Christian community is going to benefit from their “enlightenment” by receiving eternal life. It is perhaps

⁸ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 136.


impossible to perceive of any way that the author of Hebrews could make it clearer that he believes it is possible for those who have genuinely become Christians to ultimately fall away and be ultimately lost to the saving power of the blood of Christ. The person described here at some point has received spiritual and intellectual enlightenment in a manner that should have resulted in a turning away from this contemptuous action that results in their “crucifying again (ἀνασταυροῦντας) of the Son of God.” There are multiple metaphors used here in order to describe a person who has experienced actual Christian faith. The weakness is not on the part of God, but rests in the actions of those who fail to continue in the way of faith.

The “heavenly gift” (τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) refers to salvation with all that is involved in that terminology. Those who have experienced the “Holy Spirit” are those that have experienced salvation. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the token of the fullness of God, as a promise (Galatians 3:14, the first fruit, Romans 8:23), and as a down payment (2 Corinthians 1:22). This is a gift (the Holy Spirit) that is given to those have heard and responded to the gospel. The final two characteristics given to

insure that we fully understand that the author means to describe those who have experienced salvation are those who (verse 5) **“have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.”** This metaphorical and extended description of salvation is powerful and elaborate. Those described here are guilty of apostasy. At 3:12 the writer had warned of “apostasy” where the Greek word for “apostasy” (ἀποστῆναι) is translated as “turns away” NRSV, or as “forsakes” NET. What is described here as “apostasy” is as definitive as is the once-for-all entry into the Christian life. It is definitive in the sense that those who “fall away” cannot be restored to repentance.⁹

Verse 6 elaborates on the result of their “falling away” (παραπεσόντας from the verb παραπίπτω). This act results not merely in the abandonment of the community of believers, but in the abandonment of God and God’s word. In this rejection of Christ they not only are “crucifying again the Son of God” they are also holding him up to “contempt.” This word for “contempt” (παραδειγματίζοντας) is used in classical and Jewish texts to describe a shameful crucifixion, or a public hanging. This

⁹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 139-140.



issue of apostasy will be picked up once again in this letter at 10:29. The description given here is intended to be repulsive and shocking to the audience. The idea of the author is to indicate that there is truly only one choice. He wants his audience to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12).¹⁰

Many may have heard the phrase “once saved always saved.” This is a central tenet of the reformed doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints.” It certainly does not seem to be something that the author of Hebrews holds to in his letter. In addition, though he likely never encountered it he rejects “Universalism.” He clearly does not believe that all people will ultimately receive salvation. For many this doctrine comes from a misreading of Paul’s letter to the Romans and is certainly not an ancient doctrine of either Judaism, or Early Christianity. This writer firmly is convicted that the danger of apostasy, and therefore condemnation is real, and is a significant danger even to those who have already accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior.

¹⁰ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 140-141.

He challenges his audience to understand his concern and to act in such a manner as to avoid apostasy.

In verses 7 and 8, the author will bring in an illustration from agriculture in order to reinforce his warning against apostasy. **For the ground that has soaked up the rain that frequently falls on it and yields useful vegetation for those who tend it receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is useless and about to be cursed; its fate is to be burned.** (NET). The message from agriculture is clear, the person must tend the soil in order to produce “useful vegetation.” If they do they will be blessed because of it and if not they will be in danger of being “cursed” (κατάρας) and they are in danger of “burning” (καῦσις). This is a word with the meaning of “burning,” cauterization in surgery, “burning heat,” and “smelting.” The idea here is that if the soil does not produce a good crop it will be set to “burning.” The message is that this will be its “end” (τέλος).¹¹

This bleak and chilling perspective for those who would be renegades to the faith is designed to elicit a response from the

¹¹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 141.


readers of this epistle. In 6:9-12 the confident tone is intended also to elicit a certain response from the readers. The setting of these two alternatives alongside one another is a powerful rhetorical technique.¹² Verse 9 sets the tone not only for this section, but also sets in contextual framework the previous section. The shift is remarkably stark as he opens up the vision of the way to salvation. This way is marked by “things that belong to salvation,” and by stating what should have been apparent to all that “God is not unjust.” God sees not only what they do, but also their motivation for doing it. They do it as a result of their love for God. Their love for God has changed who they are, and they serve the saints because of this love for God. This is the motivation for their actions.

However, even in the midst of this great compliment and expectation of a good outcome, there is still exhortation in verses 11 and 12 to continue in “diligence” (σπουδῆν). This word carries with the idea to keep up the same “speed,” “exertion,” “zeal,” and “pursuit.” They are to do this in order that their hope will carry them through to the very end. The idea is that they are not to

¹² Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 141.

become “sluggish” (νωθροὶ), or “lazy” in their pursuit. They are challenged to imitate those who through “faith,” and “patience” “inherit” the “promises.” As throughout this letter the admonition to certain actions out of genuine faith is being called forth. Later in this epistle there will be a group of “heroes of the faith” given in case they could not readily recollect examples of the faith and perseverance being called forth by the author (Hebrews 11). Even in this chapter though the example of Abraham will be brought up as an example of patient endurance as he awaited to obtain the promise from God.

The exposition given in verses 13-20 encourages the readers by presenting the unchangeable character of God’s purpose as a basis for hope. The exposition that is given in this section extends themes that have already been introduced: “blessing” (verse 7), “faith and patience” (verse 12), and “promises” (verse 12). The exposition here also clarifies and develops further the theme of the character of God as the basis for being assured that God will not overlook service to the saints. The emphasis in this section is not upon the justice of God, but upon



the unchangeable purpose of God.¹³ God remains the same and His purpose does not change. Even as sin corrupted the creation that God was able to describe as in the beginning as “very good,” God has not given up. God persists to develop, restore, heal, amputate, and burn in order to bring about his purposes.

This section is intended to bring about and increase confidence in God and bring about an increase in the steadfast endurance in faithfulness on the part of the readers as they realize the nature of God and his commitment to His purpose. God is a sure and steady anchor that cannot prove false and has an unchangeable character where it is safe to take refuge. Toward the end of this section the author returns once again to imagery drawn from the tabernacle/temple and the role of the high priest as entering the most holy place to offer hope for those who had none by interceding with God. The conclusion of this section comes with the prominent and powerful affirmation of Jesus as the forerunner on our behalf as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

¹³ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 151.


The calling here of the author of Hebrews is to insure that his audience understands the nature of their situation fully and the role that Christ plays in their destiny. They are called to walk in faithfulness, because the only other alternative is a path that leads to destruction and devastation. They have begun well, but it is essential not only to begin well, but to end well. They are to run their race with endurance and perseverance, trusting in God, and living life devoted to His service all the way to the end. Verse 18, **We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain,** (NRSV).

What powerful and beautiful imagery the author leaves us with in this idea of an “anchor for the soul.” This anchor helps us avoid the rocks that we are being driven toward by the storm that assails us and draws us closer and closer to the dangers that lie ahead. The dangers are real, the hope is real, and the challenge is real and ongoing. Will we as the original audience was challenged to do, hold a steady course, and endure in our faith in order to have our hope fulfilled by Christ?

Synopsis

As we begin this section we need to be reminded that this is the continuation of the admonition that has been ongoing throughout this letter. The author challenges us to continue to move toward maturity/perfection leaving behind the basics as our lives are transformed by the calling we are pursuing. So often we focus on the basics to such a degree, and getting them right, that we forget to live them. The walk of Christ was not just about the words of God, but it was a reflection of the action of God. That action meant that He sent His Son to seek and to save that which was lost.

This section brings to us one of the most powerful and perhaps disconcerting warnings in all of Scripture. It warns us of the potential of apostasy and the devastating and final nature of such apostasy. This extremely challenging teaching flies in the face of a great deal of modern theological teaching and yet it is unswerving in its acknowledgment of that possibility even for the one who has clearly tasted of the Christian faith and of the gift of the Holy Spirit in what should have been a transformative manner that would carry such a person into the promised salvation of God.



Those who commit apostasy are blocked from repentance and are therefore guilty of crucifying Christ all over again.

This terrifying prospect is set against the author's hope and indeed confident expectation of something better for his audience. This contrast, while acknowledging that there are two paths, makes it clear that only one is viable. He uses this powerful rhetorical tool to challenge his audience to leave behind any hint of slowing down, or of laziness. He challenges them to fervently endure and to persevere in running the race to the end, trusting in God as Abraham did. He ends on a powerful and provocative note of encouragement in the ability and the desire of God to seek to anchor our souls and to have us enter the place of safety along with our forerunner Jesus.

Questions

1. What is your definition of “perfection?” Why?
2. What would you say are the basic teachings of Christ? Why do you think that?
3. What do you think the author of Hebrews means in using the phrase “eternal judgment?”
4. What is repentance? Why do you think it is important?
5. How is humility related to repentance?
6. Why do you think the author of Hebrews speaks of the danger of “falling away?”
7. What do you think is the main concern of the author of Hebrews in speaking to his audience of “falling away?”
8. How do you think we are to know that we have not already “fallen away?”
9. Does the idea of “holding” the Son of God up to contempt impact on our understanding of who the author is talking about as “falling away?”
10. What do you think it means to be “cursed” by God?
11. What does it mean for something to be “worthless?”
12. In what do you place your confidence of salvation?

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13. How does “love” fit into this section (cf. verse 10)?
 14. What does it mean to become “sluggish,” or “lazy” for the follower of Christ?
 15. How should the unchangeable character of God inspire confidence in us?
 16. When you think of having an “anchor of the soul” what are some images that come to mind?
 17. What should it mean to us that Jesus stands as our high priest forever?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important for us to know the context in which these ideas were originally presented and not to be distracted from that focus in understanding the message intended by the author. Sometimes our preconceived notions and ideas stop us from hearing the message that God has for us in Scripture. In this section, the issue is hotly contested by human ideas and proclamations. Why do you think context is so important in understanding things?

Where is God in these words?

In this section we see portrayed the nature of God as just, as purposeful, enduring, and we also see the graciousness of God powerfully portrayed in the priesthood, the death, and the continued intervention of Christ. We see here a God that is continually planning and striving for a restoration of His “good” creation even to those responsible for its devastation and corruption. How are you able to balance the ideas of the justice of God with the ideas of the mercy of God?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The challenge given in this section of Scripture is one to live a life of maturity that is clearly defined by the sacrificial life of Christ. These are not just words that we are to store in our head and use at church, on Sunday, or at special times. These are words that call us to proactively, energetically, and persistently, live as followers, as disciples of Christ. How does this section challenge how you plan your week?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is challenging us to see this world and its possibilities through the eyes of God and to strive to be a part of the renewal and restoration of this world to the full rule and authority of its creator. The word of God is calling us not to slack in our pursuit of the maturity that we are called to as disciples of Christ. We are called to live like Christ possesses us to the very core of our soul. We are called to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, to sacrifice ourselves as Jesus sacrificed Himself. What difference does being a Christian make to the way you live among your neighbors each day?