

Sermon Preparation Notes - Hebrews Chapter 6

The Structure of the Chapter:

- (vv1-3) The elementary things of Christ that the Hebrew Christians need to move on from.
- (vv4-6) The impossibility of bringing back to repentance those who fall away.
- (vv7-8) An agricultural metaphor illustrating the root problem of those who fall away - they receive the blessings of God, but refuse to allow those blessing to bear fruit in their lives.
- (vv9-12) A reassurance that the author does not believe these Hebrew Christians are a 'lost cause', on the basis of their past and present faithfulness.
- (vv13-20) Such confidence is rooted in an understanding of the faithfulness of God, who always fulfils what he has promised. However, faith is always required as a condition of that fulfilment - which implies delay. God's covenant with Abraham was confirmed by an oath. Our covenant is confirmed by Jesus himself, who dwells in the very presence of God as our High Priest.

General Comments:

Although there are some very complicated elements to be considered in this chapter, at root it is a challenge to move on to maturity in the faith. The author warns his readers of the dangers of backsliding, but moves on to encouragement and his belief that they will pull through this difficult time of testing.

He is confident based upon their past faithfulness in resisting persecution and in expressing their love for God in charitable concern for each other. He is confident based upon God's promised faithfulness to them. He is confident based upon Christ's priestly mediation on their behalf in the very presence of God in heaven.

Verse by Verse Analysis:

(vv1-3) Exhortation to progress in the faith.

The author closed chapter 5 with the observation that these Hebrew Christians needed spiritual milk because of their immaturity. We might therefore expect that such 'spiritual milk' is what he would provide now. However, he does not. Rather he states that he is leaving aside these elementary truths and going on to deeper teaching.

The six elementary truths that he lists are listed as three pairs. It is possible that these six elements are a reference to the O.T. teaching about Christ. Nearly all of these aspects would have been part of orthodox Jewish spirituality. Or it may be that he simply lists the foundational elements of Christian teaching. The former is perhaps more attractive, given the context in which Hebrew Christians are being tempted to return to Judaism and to give up their Christian faith. If this is the case then the exhortation is to move on from the O.T. 'foundation' into the fully developed revelation of Christ.

(v1) (A) The Foundation - Repentance from dead works / faith in God.

Here the author lists the fundamental foundational elements of the Christian faith - how one can be saved. That foundation is the person of Christ who opens up the possibility of righteousness, for the first time ever since the Fall. What the Jewish Law could only indicate was necessary, Christ obtains. Repentance and faith being the attitudes that unlock this gift of Christ.

Both John the Baptist and the Apostles preached repentance - a turning away from attitudes, beliefs and behaviour opposed to God.

Dead works (literal translation) and faith in God are the two poles of the change required. Dead works either means sinful acts that ultimately lead to death and destruction, or the ineffective attempts to gain merit with God under the Jewish Law, or even the contrast between pagan sacrifice to idols and Christian worship of the living God.

Given the context it is more likely that the reference is to the failure of the Jewish Law to obtain righteousness before God in contrast to the righteousness obtained by Christians as they respond in faith to the person and work of Christ (c.f. Galatians 2v16). Faith is always more than intellectual belief in Hebrews. It is rather a lived-out response.

(v2) (B) The Instructions - Concerning the Church and the life to come.

Having briefly summarised the basis of Christian salvation, the author now summarises the basics of Christian instruction (catechism). How one can live with Christ in this world - initiation into the Church and service within it; and what one can expect of Christ in the life to come - resurrection and judgement.

(i) Concerning the Church - Baptisms / Laying on of hands

Baptisms - Note the plural. This indicates that the author intends the Christian teaching which explains the difference between Jewish ritual ablutions and lustrations (Mark 7v4), the baptism of John the Baptist for repentance (Acts 19vv1-5), perhaps other similar ceremonies practised within Judaic religious communities i.e. Qumran, or within pagan rituals. Given the many similar looking ceremonies it was vitally important that Christians understood the uniqueness and the meaning of Christian baptism - that which brought one into the Church through the action of the Holy Spirit.

The laying on of hands - Again in the plural as the same action could be performed with the intent of initiating, blessing, healing and commissioning. This act was always linked with receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 8vv17-19) and that is always ultimately for service in the Church (1 Corinthians 12v7). Laying on of hands was done to new converts to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8v17). It was done by local church leaders in order to impart spiritual gifts for specific tasks of ministry (1 Timothy 4v14). Similarly by Apostles to impart spiritual gifts for Christian service (2 Timothy 1v6).

(ii) Concerning the life to come - Resurrection of the dead / Eternal judgement

The resurrection of the dead - This belief only became part of Judaism in the Maccabean period, and was a distinguishing conviction of the Pharisees as opposed to the Saducees (Mark 12v18). However it was, from the first, a fundamental of Christian belief (Luke 20vv34-36). It had also been the experience of many believers in Christ at the time of his crucifixion (prophesied by Christ in John 5vv28-29 and the fulfilment recorded by Matthew 27vv51-53). In view of the context of persecution and difficulty it was vital that Christians kept in sight their future hope and glory in order to stand firm.

Eternal Judgement - Within the teaching of late Judaism there was a belief that one day all men must answer to God for their lives on earth:

And the Most High shall be revealed upon the seat of judgement, and compassion shall pass away, and patience shall be withdrawn; but only judgement shall remain, truth shall stand, and faithfulness shall grow strong. And recompense shall follow, and the reward shall be manifested; righteous deeds shall awake, and unrighteous deeds shall not sleep. (2 Esdras 7vv33-35 - Apocrypha)

For Christians it is also a powerful motivation for discipleship, knowing that we have a responsibility before God for how we live and for how we respond to his gracious revelation and activity in our lives.

(v3) We will do so - God willing.

The author expresses his firm intent to leave behind these elementary aspects of the Christian faith and to move on to deeper teaching - teaching more appropriate for those who should be mature.

However he is conscious of his total reliance upon God for success. Amazingly the phrase 'God willing' never appears in the O.T. Rather it is from pagan Greek origins that this phrase found its way into Christian usage (1 Corinthians 4v19, James 4v15, Acts 18v21).

The phrase "unless God shows up we are all wasting our time" is a deep truth of Christian ministry and deserves daily meditation.

(vv4-6) No second beginning - The seriousness of apostasy and the seriousness of stagnation.

In the Christian life you advance or you retreat. Standing still is not an option. For those church members who subsequently turn their back on Christ serious consequences ensue - they cannot be brought back to repentance. Note that he speaks not of faults and errors, but of a deliberate choice to turn one's back on Christ.

This section poses some serious questions concerning Christian theology and there are three possible views of what the author describes:

1. He is referring to those people, who came into the Church but who never really were converted. Thus it is perseverance which reveals the validity of a response to Christ. The very fact of falling into apostasy shows that the person never was truly 'of Christ'.
2. He refers to people who really were Christians but who through their turning away from Christ either lose their salvation, or lose the right to belong to the Church.
3. He is describing a hypothetical situation in order to warn the Hebrew Christians who are wobbling in their faith.

The first possibility has perhaps the most to commend it. There are biblical examples of people who seem to be in this category (Acts 8v1, 18-25). The second causes problems in how we reconcile it with the scriptures which speak of the perseverance of the saints and of God's protection of those who have turned to him (John 6v37, 10vv27-29). The third seems illogical in that we must ask why the author would use a situation, which he knows could never occur, in order to serve as a warning?

Nevertheless, however we choose to understand this section, the bottom line is that spiritual failure of those within the local church is a real possibility. This is a sober warning to all of us not to neglect the spiritual disciplines which will feed our souls and promote our growth in Christ.

(vv4-5) The author describes the elements of Christian initiation.

Enlightened - Christian baptism was often linked with the imagery of light (Ephesians 5v14, 1 Peter 2v9).

Tasted the heavenly gift - This could be a reference to the Eucharist, or to the forgiveness of sins which baptism accomplishes / signifies, or more generally to the experience of life lived with Christ in the Church.

Shared in the Holy Spirit - The laying on of hands following baptism conferred the Holy Spirit, so again this could be an allusion to what occurs in the initiation of converts into the Church.

Tasted the goodness of the word of God - Again an element of Christian initiation was catechism, where the Christian faith was explained and the word of God taught.

Tasted ... the powers of the coming age - Not only had these people experienced the word of God they had also experienced the demonstration of the power of God active in the Church - the signs and wonders that form part of the divine witness to the truth of the Christian message.

(v6) The author shows why such apostates cannot be brought back to repentance.

There are two possibilities in view here. Either the author is saying that these people are forever lost and outside of Christ, or he is merely saying that they cannot be brought back into the fellowship of the Church. Again any view on this will be influenced by who we think the author has in mind, and by the nature of our theological convictions about salvation.

The author shows the enormity of apostasy by explaining that, in turning away from Christ, we align ourselves with those who crucified him. The rejection of the gift that his death won is shown to be equivalent to participation in his state execution. Apostasizers stand with the world mocking Christ, spitting on his agonised body, railing against his message. Apostasy is so devastating because of the greatness of the gift it rejects and the cost to Christ in giving it.

If people can turn their back on such a gift, a gift obtained at such enormous cost, how can they possibly be brought back into the Church? How can people who have experienced such a powerful experience of Christian transformation and then turned away from it, possibly be turned back?

This passage is particularly a challenge to modern Christians. For us forgiveness seems rather an easy thing and sin therefore seems much less serious an issue. Modern Christians (particularly Protestant ones) have a hard time imagining a context where forgiveness might be difficult or even withheld.

This has not been the case throughout the majority of Christian history. Throughout the history of the Christian Church public confession and penance have usually been seen as essential pre-requirements before forgiveness could be granted. Those fallen into sin were excluded from participation in the life of the Church and hence in danger of their souls for the life to come. They were required to show the genuineness of their repentance over an extended period of time before the Church would grant them forgiveness and restore them to fellowship. For certain sins (post-baptismal) forgiveness was not even deemed possible - e.g. murder, apostasy.

It is important to see, as in this passage, that there is much biblical support for the traditional Christian view of the seriousness of sin, in stark contrast to our much more flippant view. A sobering thought and a challenge to contemporary church leaders and church members.

(vv7-8) An agricultural metaphor.

To illustrate his point the author chooses an example from the natural world. He describes the case of two fields which have identical potential for fruitfulness. Both fields are blessed by God with rain. In the case of one field this rain releases its fruitfulness and brings forth a useful crop. The other field does not produce a useful crop, but neither does it remain barren. Instead it brings forth a useless crop of thorns and thistles.

A reference can be seen here to creation under the curse of God (Genesis 3vv17ff, Deuteronomy 28vv36-40), in comparison with creation under the blessing of God (Genesis 1v31, Deuteronomy 30vv1, 9).

The fate of such a field is to be burned, we can see here a reference to Sheol, Gehenna etc.

The spiritual lesson to be derived from this picture is very clear. All those who experience the blessings of God in their lives will produce a crop. Growth is either constructive or destructive, but it is constant.

God expects them to produce a useful crop of spiritual fruit. Failure to bring forth such fruit is evidence of a spiritual rebellion against God and places a person in a very dangerous position. They stand under the judgement of God for their failure to bring forth the fruit that God demands of them and which God enables them to bear.

Fruit is always for others. A Christian's life should therefore produce a fruitful crop of blessing for others. Those who refuse to do this will not remain barren, but worse, will produce a crop that is detrimental to those around them.

In a real sense it is selfishness that is the root cause of the problem. These people want the blessings of God merely as a personal thing. Something to make them feel good, to make their lives better. They have refused to see their obligation to live lives of love - for God, evidenced in service to others - something about to be touched upon in the next verses.

(vv9-12) An exhortation to perseverance.

The previous section has made clear the stark reality of Christian experience. A Christian either moves on to maturity bearing good spiritual fruit in his/her life, or moves backwards towards potential disaster in refusing to allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate good fruit in his/her life. There is no middle option. There is no standing still. There is no neutral gear.

(v9) Beloved ... we are confident ... better things.

The author indicates that his previous warning has been about the potential danger of apostasy, rather than being a judgement about people that he already believed were apostate. They may be slow to move on to maturity but they are not yet apostate.

He calls them '*beloved*'. A term of endearment, to reassure them of his love for them in the light of his previous severe warning.

He expresses his '*confident*' conviction that they are not yet apostate. Their faith is wobbling, but they have not yet fallen. He will go on to state the grounds for his confidence in the following verses.

'Better things that accompany salvation' authentic conversion is always accompanied by a changed life. Genuine faith is always expressed in changed attitudes, priorities, actions.

(v10) The evidence of their faith - work and love.

The first basis of the author's confidence about their faith is their testimony. Their lives have not produced thorns and thistles but rather good fruit. They have shown the reality of their love for God in their service of his people, their fellow Christians. This is probably a reference to mutual economic support - the sharing of their goods and possessions. This is something they have done in the past, that they are still doing now and the author will encourage them to continue to do so in the future (Hebrews 13vv1-17).

This practical concern for their fellow believers is an expression of their love for God (1 John 4vv20-21). It demonstrates, or gives proof of, their love for the Lord.

Love and work always go together in the Christian life. One without the other is an incomplete response to the gospel message.

(v10) God is not unjust ... He will not forget.

The second basis for the author's confidence about their faith is in the faithfulness of God. God will not fail to respond positively to the good fruit evidenced in their lives and within their fellowship. The Scriptures speak often of the fact that our actions of love towards our fellow man will have influence on how God acts towards us (Matthew 25vv24-36).

Whilst Protestant theology has generally rejected the idea of merit being earned through loving acts, it is nonetheless clear that there is some way in which God responds positively to these acts and that they do, in some real sense, have influence on the nature of our existence in eternity and maybe even on our experience on earth.

(v11) Eagerness to the end.

What the author desires of these Hebrew Christians is that they keep on to the end. That their zeal and perseverance will bring them to the fulfilment of what they hope for.

(v12) Don't be sluggards, be imitators of the inheritors.

He exhorts them not to be like the lazy who make no progress in the faith, who give up in the face of difficulty, who turn back when the going gets hard. Rather imitate those who succeed, those who obtain the promises, those who persevere to the end.

Note that they are required to 'imitate', not just to 'follow' their glorious predecessors. It is an active verb, they are 'to live in the same way' as these good examples.

To inherit the promise two things are required, the equation for success in the Christian life is given by;

FAITH + PERSEVERANCE = INHERITANCE

Perseverance is long-suffering, being undismayed in the face of difficulty. The very nature of a promise implies a delay in its fulfilment. You do not promise what you are about to do immediately. A promise is an indication of a firm commitment to accomplish a future action. Thus all promises entail faith and perseverance in order to be fulfilled. The author will go on in the next section to illustrate this point forcefully from the life of Abraham.

In this section the author has specifically mentioned love (v10), hope (v11) and faith (v12). These three cardinal Christian virtues (faith, hope and charity) are constantly highlighted in the N.T. as essential elements of the Christian faith (Romans 5vv2-5, 1 Corinthians 13v13, Galatians 5vv5-6, Colossians 1vv4-5, 1 Thessalonians 1vv3, 5-8, Hebrews 10vv22-24, 1 Peter 1vv21-22).

Contemporary Christians might agree with faith and love, but perhaps have a harder time seeing hope as an essential element in the Christian faith. This may be due to the fact that persecution and

suffering are less a part of our lives than for our religious forebears. Hope implies a disagreeable present and a longing for better. Either our experience of life on earth is too comfortable, or our sensitivity to the sin and suffering in, around and within us is too dull.

Perhaps we see little need for hope for the life to come because the focus of our faith is too 'this-worldly'. Our eschatology is over-actualised, we have forgotten that the Kingdom is both now and not yet.

Whatever the problem, it is clear that in the Christian faith hope is an essential aspect. We must not be satisfied with life as we experience it. This world is not our home, we have been made for better.

(vv13-20) God's promise is sure.

To remind the Hebrew Christians that faith and perseverance have always been necessary to those who would walk with God, the author reminds them of the example of Abraham. He has already talked of Moses, Aaron and Melchizadek, now he brings out another of the 'greats' of the Judaic heritage.

(v13-15) Faith obtains the promise.

God's promise to Abraham was threefold - that he would become a great nation, that he would inherit the land and that he would become a source of blessing for others. Abraham had to wait 25 years before the promise of God saw the first step towards its fulfilment in Isaac.

Abraham then had to wait another 35 years before his first grand-children were born. He died with the promise still nowhere near fulfilment. However from the viewpoint of history the Hebrew Christians could affirm that God did keep his promise to Abraham. He became a great nation, he inherited the land, he was a source of blessing for all nations through his descendant, Jesus.

Abraham is a great example because he believed God and persevered in his faith, even though he never saw the fulfilment of what was promised.

(v15) After waiting patiently.

Only after waiting patiently did Abraham receive what God had promised him, and then only as first-fruits. As stated previously a promise always implies delay, so anytime God promises to do something we can be certain it will require faith on our part. This is why without faith it is impossible to please God.

(vv16-17) The function of oaths.

The phrase '*an oath puts an end to all argument*' is a legal formula which has its origin in Egyptian culture and whose use became widespread in the ancient world. Oaths had the effect of lending weight and credibility when there was doubt.

An oath invokes some greater power in order to lend weight to a person's words. As nothing is greater than God he swears by himself. Thus God's own character confirms his word.

(v17) To Abraham.

Because of the delay in fulfilling the promise God repeated his promise to Abraham three times. Finally God bound himself with an oath to make clear to Abraham his intention to do what he had promised - to make him into a great nation (Genesis 22vv17-18). This was appropriate since God's own testing of Abraham seemed to place in jeopardy his own promise. Abraham's great credit in God's sight was his faith to believe the promise (Genesis 15v6, John 8v56).

(v17) To the heirs.

To tie this back into the experience of the Hebrew Christians the author reminds them that this oath has been proved true in their own experience. As Hebrews they were physical descendants of Abraham - thus heirs of the promise. As Christians, followers of the promised Messiah who is the fulfilment of Abraham's being a blessing to all nations of earth, they were also spiritual descendants of Abraham and again heirs of the promise.

(vv18-20) The significance of the promise for us.

The consequences of this promise for us are that;

1. We might be greatly encouraged in our own struggle to believe God's word, to remain faithful in the light of persecution, to continue to trust when Christ second coming seems delayed beyond what was expected.
2. We might have this hope as an anchor for the soul.

(v18) We who have fled.

The designation of Christians as 'those who flee' is a reminder of our pilgrim status in the world. Like Abraham we too have no place here that we belong. As he lived as an alien looking forward to the establishment of the Promised Land, so we live as aliens and strangers looking forward to the final coming of the kingdom of God.

Fleeing includes the idea of seeking refuge. We flee situations where we are in danger to try to find a place of security e.g. the cities of refuge in the O.T.

The Hebrew Christians were not sure of their place in the world and longed for stability and security. They were tempted to return to Judaism in order to find it there, but the author is about to remind them that the only real stability and security is to be found not in this life but in the next and that through Christ.

(v18) To take hold of the hope offered us.

The hope offered is the antithesis of the despair that might overtake us as we look at the world. A world where sin reigns, where injustice triumphs, where death overcomes life. The hope offered to us in Christ in the reversal of all that is wrong in the world. A return to the blessed edenic existence. A life restored to harmony with God and the world.

The word translated 'offered' has the sense of an inviting prospect laid out before us.

(v19) Hope as an anchor for the soul.

This is the only N.T. use of an anchor as a metaphor. It is a rich metaphor for an anchor:

1. Gives stability.
2. Avoids the possibility of drifting off-course.
3. Avoids the danger of drifting onto rocks.
4. Connects a ship on the moving sea to the solid earth.
5. Cannot be seen when it is functioning, as it is hidden below the waves.

All of the above can be seen to have spiritual application. In the Christian life it is hope which performs this function. Our hope stabilises us. Prevents us being pulled off-course into apostasy, or making shipwreck of our faith. Hope connects our unstable experience of life to the immovable rock of heaven. Our hope cannot be perceived by sight, but only experienced by faith. Hope is like a grappling hook that passes into the very presence of God and anchors our souls to the unshakeable rock of Christ.

(v19) The inner sanctuary behind the curtain.

The author combines the idea of our hope as an anchor with temple imagery to re-introduce the idea of Christ being our High Priest in heaven.

The inner sanctuary was the most holy place in the temple. Where only once a year the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement. It was considered to be the place where the very presence of God dwelt.

Again to remind these Hebrew Christians of the surpassing greatness of Christ compared to the Jewish faith, he reminds them of the differences between Jesus and the high priests of Judaism.

Whilst the earthly high priests entered once a year into the presence of God, Jesus dwells in that place. The earthly high priest interceded once a year for the forgiveness of the sins of the nation, Jesus intercedes moment by moment on our behalf.

(v20) Went before us ... on our behalf.

Amazingly the author tells us that the reason Jesus is in heaven is for us. As he has stated before Jesus is our forerunner. Therefore where Jesus goes we will follow. Thus not only is hope our anchor into the presence of God, it indicates also our direction of travel. We are going to dwell with Jesus in the very presence of God!

Thus the author cleverly returns to his starting point about Jesus as our High Priest (4v14). Now over the next few chapters he is going to return to the subject of Melchizedek and show how Jesus fulfils this 'type' and the nature of Christ's priesthood.

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