

HEBREWS 5:11 – 6:20

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- **Third Hortatory Interjection**

1. The present problem with the hearers (5:11-6:3)

¹¹About which the word is much in us, and [it is] hard to explain since you have become sluggish in hearing. ¹²For indeed, though being obligated on account of the time to be teachers, you have need for someone to teach you again the beginning elements of the oracles of God, and you have become [ones] having need of milk, not solid food. ¹³For every man who partakes of milk [is] inexperienced in [the] word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴But solid food is [for the] full-grown, the ones who, because of maturity, have powers of perception that have been trained for distinguishing both good and evil.

6 Therefore, having left the teaching of the elemental [things] of the Christ, let us be moved on toward completeness, not again laying a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ²of teaching of immersions and of [the] laying on of hands, and of [the] resurrection of [the] dead and of eternal judgment. ³And we will do this, if God permits.

1.1. The author confronts the hearers (5:11-14)

1.1.1. The writer has more to say about Christ's high priesthood as a Melchizedekian kind of priesthood, but before continuing with that teaching he challenges his readers to apply themselves by rebuking them for having regressed into a state of spiritual immaturity. He is shaming them to wake them up, to motivate them to come out of, repent of, their infant mindset, that they may absorb the solid food he is giving them.

1.1.2. Rather than being content with and only interested in an infant's diet of the basics of the Christian faith, they need to move beyond those things and allow God to move them toward a fuller, deeper grasp of the faith. The ABCs are absolutely essential, but stopping there deprives one of spiritual resources that are valuable in withstanding the pressures and storms of this life, the kinds of pressures the first readers of this letter were facing.

1.1.3. This is the down side of those calls to reduce Christian teaching to the elementary doctrines about which there is little or no disagreement. We think that if we limit the teaching to the ABCs we can all get along. Even if that were true, which it's not, the deeper truths of God's word cannot be ignored without consequences. As Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." We need to labor, as difficult as it sometimes is, to proclaim the whole counsel of God. The body of Christ needs it, and in my opinion, is hungering for it.

1.1.4. That doesn't mean, of course, that it is not good and healthy to remind Christians of basic truths. That's all over the Bible. It simply means that there is a necessary place for going beyond that. And, of course, the need for reinforcing basic things can vary depending on the extent to which they are being undermined.

1.2. Moving on to maturity (6:1-3)

1.2.1. The writer lists three pairs of teachings that he includes among the basic things, six items that "span the journey of faith from initial repentance to final judgment" (Koester, 311):

1.2.1.1. Repentance of dead works and faith toward God – This refers to the turning away from sinful conduct and turning to God in faith and obedience, which they would understand involves trusting in Christ. It is the personal and internal aspect of conversion.

1.2.1.2. Instruction about immersions and laying on of hands – This probably refers to baptism and the laying on of hands that is associated with it. It is the corporate and external aspect of conversion.

1.2.1.2.1. The word I've translated "immersions" is often translated here as baptisms or washings or ablutions. It's the word *baptismós*, and the Hebrew writer uses it again in 9:10 in reference to Jewish ceremonial washings (see also, Mk. 7:4). The usual word for "baptism" is *báptisma*, though *baptismós* refers to Christian baptism in Col. 2:12. The noun is plural here probably because the instruction about baptism distinguished Christian baptism from the various other cleansing rites of the ancient world, particularly those of Judaism.

1.2.1.2.2. Laying on of hands is associated in the N. T. with prayers for God's protection or blessing (Mk. 10:13-16), healings (Mk. 5:23, 6:5; Acts 28:8), appointments to certain tasks (Acts 6:6, 13:3), appointments to church office (1 Tim. 5:22), and bestowal of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-24, 19:1-7). As Everett Ferguson points out in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999) 670, what unites these various occasions is that they all involve the bestowal of a blessing.

1.2.1.2.2.1. So it seems that the laying on of hands in this verse is (a) a basic Christian teaching, (b) that involves bestowal of a blessing, and (c) is associated with baptism. That makes me think the early church taught that the gift of the Spirit that is bestowed in baptism is in some way associated with the laying on of hands that is part of that rite.

1.2.1.2.2.1.1. An association between baptism and laying on of hands is perhaps indicated most clearly in Acts 19:1-7. Regardless of whether the coming of the Spirit on those disciples was somehow distinct from the normal gift of the Spirit, his bestowal in that instance is linked both to baptism and Paul's laying of his hands on them, which suggests that baptism involved or included the laying on of hands.

1.2.1.2.2.1.2. As James Dunn notes in *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970) 87, "baptism and the laying on of hands [in Acts 19:5ff.] are the *one* ceremony." Indeed, the relevant verses could be translated: they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and, Paul having laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them. Dunn writes, "The laying on of hands is almost parenthetical; the sequence of events is 'baptism (resulting in) . . . Spirit.'" (I suspect Luke highlighted the laying-on-of-hands aspect of baptism in Acts 19 to parallel Paul's role with that of Peter and John in Acts 8.)

1.2.1.2.2.2. Unlike Jewish proselyte baptism (which may have been practiced at this time), in which the person immersed himself, Christian baptism is done to someone by someone else. The person being baptized is laid hold of by a saint, buried in the water, and then raised; it is a rite of human contact. (Beyond that, we hug the baptized person and then pray for him while holding his hand or shoulder.) So though we do not pay much attention today to the human-contact aspect of baptism, I think we nevertheless practice it; it is inherent in the way we understand baptism to be conducted.

1.2.1.3. Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment – Repentance and faith toward God and baptism and the laying on of hands refer to the internal and external, the personal and corporate aspects of the beginning of one's new life with God. Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment are basic Christian teachings that refer to the end of the age.

1.2.1.3.1. When Christ returns to consummate the kingdom he inaugurated at his first coming, the dead will be raised, those who are alive at the time will be transformed, and mankind, in its resurrected state, will be assigned for eternity to glorious life in the new heavens and earth or to horrible punishment in hell.

1.2.1.3.2. Resurrection refers to a new *bodily* life. It does not refer to the mere continuance of existence in some spiritual or noncorporeal state.

1.2.1.3.2.1. The renowned New Testament theologian N. T. Wright has studied extensively the meaning of resurrection in the ancient world. He writes in his 800-page tome *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 82-83:

We cannot stress too strongly that from Homer onwards the language of 'resurrection' was not used to denote 'life after death' in general, or any of the phenomena supposed to occur within such a life. The great majority of ancients believed in life after death; many of them developed, as we have seen, complex and fascinating beliefs about it and practices in relation to it; but, other than within Judaism and Christianity, they did not believe in resurrection. 'Resurrection' denoted a new embodied life which would *follow* whatever 'life after death' there might be. 'Resurrection' was, by definition, not the existence into which someone might (or might not) go immediately upon death; it was not a disembodied 'heavenly' life; it was a future stage, out beyond all that. It was not a redescription of death. It was death's reversal.

He writes in his 2008 book, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper, 2008) 36:

In content, *resurrection* referred specifically to something that happened to the body; hence the later debates about how God would do this – whether he would start with the existing bones or make new ones or whatever. One would have debates like that only if it was quite clear that what you ended up with was something tangible and physical. Everybody knew about ghosts, spirits, visions, hallucinations, and so on. Most people in the ancient world believed in some such things. They were quite clear that that wasn't what they meant by *resurrection*. While Herod reportedly thought Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead, he didn't think he was a ghost. Resurrection meant bodies. We cannot emphasize this too strongly, not least because much modern writing continues, most misleadingly, to use the word *resurrection* as a virtual synonym for *life after death* in the popular sense.

1.2.1.3.2.2. As Christ was raised bodily from the grave, so will we be; he is the firstfruits of the end-time resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). Our resurrection is tied to his, so much so that in 2 Cor. 4:14 Paul says "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also *with Jesus*." We, as part of the Lord's resurrection harvest, likewise will receive glorified and immortal *bodies* in our resurrection (Rom. 8:11, 23, 29; 1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2). His resurrection body is the prototype or model after which our resurrection bodies will be patterned. That is why Jesus said in Jn. 5:28-29 that "an hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good to a resurrection of life, but those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment."

1.2.1.3.2.3. This is basic and fundamental Christian teaching. (See my online paper "The Resurrection of the Body.") Roger Olson, a professor of theology who specializes in the history of Christian thought, writes in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 311, 314:

The bodily resurrection of all people at some time after death has played a prominent role in Christian teaching throughout history. In spite of a pronounced tendency among untutored lay Christians to focus attention on immortality of souls and neglect bodily resurrection, the fathers of the church, medieval Christian thinkers, all the Protestant Reformers and faithful modern biblical scholars and theologians have emphasized the bodily resurrection as the blessed hope of believers in Christ. . . .

It would be impossible to discover any single point of greater agreement in the history of Christian thought than this one: *the future bodily resurrection of the dead is the blessed hope of all who are in Christ Jesus by faith*. Over two millennia the church's leaders and faithful theologians have unanimously taught this above the immortality of souls and as more important than some ethereal intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection when Christ returns. And yet, as we lamented earlier, it seems that the vast majority of Christians do not know this and neglect belief in bodily resurrection in favor of belief in immediate post-mortem heavenly, spiritual existence as ghost-like beings (or even angels!) "forever with the Lord in heaven."

1.2.1.4. The readers may have camped on these particular basic teachings because they were similar to Jewish teachings. By downplaying the distinctively Christian aspects of these things, the readers could highlight similarities of Christianity and Judaism in the hope of easing the conflict. That, however, is speculation.

1.2.2. It is the writer's hope and intention, subject to God's will, that they will indeed move toward completeness, will awaken to absorb the meatier things he will share with them.

2. THIRD WARNING: The danger of falling away from the Christian faith (6:4-8)

⁴For [it is] impossible to restore again to repentance the ones who have once been enlightened, who have both tasted of the heavenly gift and become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and who have tasted [the] good word of God and the powers of [the] coming age ⁶and have [then] fallen away, since [they are] crucifying the Son of God to themselves and holding [him] up to contempt. ⁷For ground that

**drinks the rain often coming upon it and produces vegetation suitable for those for whom it is also cultivated, receives a blessing from God.
⁸But if it yields thorns and thistles, [it is] worthless and near [to being] a cursed thing, the end of which is a burning.**

2.1. The "For" with which v. 4 begins connects this section logically with what he has just said. (The word is omitted in the NIV and TNIV.) It is important for converts to move beyond the basics of Christian doctrine because failing to do so increases the danger not only that they will fall into sin and be alienated from God but that they will fall from God beyond the point of no return.

2.2. Churches need to hear this. The notion that we can downplay doctrine or dumb down our teaching to make the church more marketable to the lost without deleterious consequences on the body of Christ is wrong.

2.2.1. Indeed, the Willow Creek church in South Barrington, Illinois, which for decades was one of the primary promoters of what is called "seeker-sensitive services," acknowledged recently that its "theology-lite" approach was a failure. It essentially starved the people theologically.

2.2.2. One of the ironies of this entire marketing approach is that it was based on surveys of those who didn't go to church instead of on surveys of those who didn't use to go to church but now do. When you ask this latter group what drew them into the church, their answers are much different from the conventional wisdom of the church-growth, seeker-sensitive movement. Referring to Thomas Rainer's recent book, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), David Wells writes in *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 54-55:

What were these people looking for in a church? If we believe all the church-marketing hype, we would have to conclude that potential customers wanted, above all else, not to hear issues of truth and belief. These should be avoided like the plague. These are matters, the prevailing wisdom says, that should be hidden from seekers because they are so dreadfully off-putting.

Not so! In fact, 90 percent of those in Rainer's studies said that preaching was important to them, and not just any preaching. Almost the same percentage, 88 percent, said that what they came to hear was *doctrine*. The beliefs of the church were important to 91 percent. They wanted to know what the church believed. They wanted to have this laid out for them – with conviction. This was their preeminent concern. The next issue of importance, the friendliness of the people, was far down the list – only 49 percent cited it. Should we really be so amazed that people would like to know what Christians think and whether, in this age of

jaded, faded, transient beliefs, there actually is something that can be believed for all time?

2.3. Those who may fall beyond the point of no return are described as:

2.3.1. Ones who have once been enlightened – They at some point in the past had accepted the light of God's revelation in the gospel (see 10:32). This quite possibly is a more specific allusion to the moment of their baptism (e.g., Johnson, 162; Bruce, 120).

2.3.2. Ones who have tasted of the heavenly gift – They have experienced the blessings of God associated with salvation.

2.3.3. Ones who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit – They have shared in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

2.3.4. Ones who have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the coming age – They have experienced God's precious promises and the endowment of various spiritual gifts and fruit of the Spirit that accompany the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the breaking into this reality of the age to come.

2.4. Those who cannot be restored again to repentance are described as those who have "fallen away," but the fact they are beyond repentance makes clear the writer means by that something more than simply falling out of fellowship with God, as terrible as that is.

2.4.1. We know that Christians can alienate themselves from God by sinning and yet still be able to return through repentance. For example, the disfellowshipped are not in fellowship with God, but the act of disfellowshipping is intended to move them to repentance and thus back into fellowship with God and his people (see Mat. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 1 Tim. 1:18-20).

2.4.2. The writer is here referring to a step beyond that, a state in which the person is beyond being restored to repentance. He's giving a worst-case scenario to stress the importance of moving toward maturity.

2.5. These people cannot be brought to repentance because by "falling away" in the sense he means they are crucifying the Son of God to themselves. In other words, they are ending permanently their relationship with him. In our vernacular, they are in effect declaring "Jesus is dead to me" and meaning it. In that act they also are holding Christ up to contempt, which is a further indication of their hardness toward God.

2.6. The writer reinforces the point of 6:4-6 with an illustration. Just as land that produces desired fruit is blessed by God and land that produces only thorns and thistles is burned, so those who remain faithful (and thus produce the fruit of faith) will be blessed by God and those who abandon the faith will be condemned.

3. Mitigation: The author's confidence in and desire for the hearer's (6:9-12)

⁹But we are confident of the better [things] concerning you, beloved, [things] that accompany salvation, even though we speak this way. ¹⁰For God [is] not unjust as to forget your work and the love that you showed toward his name, in having served the saints and in [still] serving [them]. ¹¹And we desire each of you to show the same diligence regarding the full assurance of the hope until [the] end, ¹²so that you not become sluggish but imitators of the ones who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

3.1. Despite the grave state into which failing to move toward maturity can lead, the worst-case scenario he has just painted, the writer is confident they will receive the blessings of salvation. For they have been and continue to be living in faith. God will not ignore their faithfulness and reject them simply because they're struggling or being tempted.

3.2. His desire is that each of them be diligent to the end regarding their assurance of hope, that they not become lazy but be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. His message to these wavering brothers and sisters is that they keep the faith till the end. His desire for these readers brings to mind Paul's statement at the end of his life in 2 Tim. 4:7: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

4. God's promise our basis of hope (6:13-20)

¹³For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by [whom] to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." ¹⁵And so [Abraham], having waited patiently, obtained the promise. ¹⁶For men swear by the greater [person], and with them, the oath [given] for confirmation is an end of every dispute. ¹⁷In the same way, God, wanting to show even more [clearly] to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of his purpose, guaranteed [it] with an oath, ¹⁸so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled [for refuge] may have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. ¹⁹This [hope] we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, [one] that enters into the inside of the curtain, ²⁰where Jesus, a forerunner, entered on our behalf, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

4.1. The example of Abraham (6:13-15)

4.1.1. For God's promise to Abraham is beyond certain, being guaranteed with an oath, and thus without doubt will be received through patient faithfulness as it was in the case of Abraham himself.

4.1.2. God's promise to Abraham, which he confirmed with an oath in Genesis 22, was that he would bless him, multiply and bless his offspring, and bless all the nations through his offspring. Abraham trusted in that promise against all appearances and lived to see the beginning of its fulfillment in the birth and preservation of Isaac and in Isaac's marriage to Rebekah. As Jesus said in Jn. 8:56, Abraham saw Jesus' day and was glad.

4.1.3. Of course, there is a fuller sense of God's promise that is wrapped up in his blessing of all nations through Abraham's offspring, an aspect of that promise that Abraham and the other heroes of faith died having not yet received (Heb. 11:13, 39). It is only together with the saints of the new covenant that they will arrive at God's ultimate goal.

4.2. The finality of oaths (6:16-18) – God guaranteed his promise to Abraham with an oath sworn by his own name because he wanted to make it crystal clear to the heirs of that promise – that's us, Abraham's offspring by faith – that his intention would not change. The salvation God has planned for the descendants of Abraham was "written in stone," so to speak, given by both promise and oath, that we might have every reason to hold fast that hope that is set before us.

4.3. The encouragement of a firm hope (6:19-20)

4.3.1. This hope, this confident expectation based on God's immutable intention to bless the faithful, serves to anchor one in the faith, to keep one from drifting. It is a hope that enters into the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, meaning it is a hope that "involves our free access into the very presence of God" (Hagner, 98).

4.3.2. That unrestricted access to God's presence is made possible by Jesus, who has gone there before us on our behalf as a special high priest, one on the order of Melchizedek. With that statement, the writer has brought the sermon back to the subject of 5:10-11a, back to where he was when he began this hortatory interjection. He said he had more to say about Melchizedek, and he now is getting to that task.
