

Hebrews 5:11-6:20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 5 verse 11 to chapter 6 verse 20. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm, and holding him up to contempt.

For lamb that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop 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 be incursed, and its end is to be burned.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work, and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have 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.

[1 : 5 7] 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 waited, obtained the promise.

For people swear by something 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 guaranteed it with an oath.

So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

It may seem as if the author of Hebrews has been taking us into rich territory of biblical insight, yet he feels keenly the limitations of his hearers. He wants to take them so much further, but he just isn't sure that they are ready for such advanced teaching.

[3 : 0 7] They still don't seem to have grasped many of the basics. He remarks upon the poor progress of his hearers at the end of chapter 5.

One can perhaps imagine the author of Hebrews saying all of this with a slight twinkle in his eye.

Within this, we should also recognize the emphasis that the author of Hebrews, along with the other New Testament authors, places upon advancing Christians in their understanding.

Always pushing them to the next level. The author of Hebrews is concerned that his hearers are at the point where they can understand complicated and challenging teachings about Old Testament symbolism, narrative and typology.

Wisdom involves the knowledge of good and evil, the ability to discern between these things. The wise person has moved beyond the basics of pre-digested food, and they're able to test things for themselves.

[4 : 54] They are active learners, committed to growing in their own knowledge, having learnt some of the skills by which one can discern the difference between truth and error, and feeding themselves consistently.

Having needled his hearers by suggesting that they are not yet prepared to advance in their study of the Christian faith, the author of Hebrews hopes to provoke them to try to prove him wrong.

Verse 1 of chapter 6 presumes that, after such a challenge, the hearers will be eager to progress. Okay then, let's move forward. They should leave the basic classes behind, not having forgotten or abandoned their lessons, but moving on to the more advanced classes, in which the fundamentals are far more developed.

They are moving forward to perfection or maturity, the same thing that Christ attained to through his sufferings, in chapter 2 verse 10 and 5 verse 9. What are the most fundamental teachings, or the elementary doctrine of Christ?

The list might be divided into three pairs, repentance and faith, baptisms and the laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Repentance is repentance from dead works, or from works that lead to death.

[6 : 05] The dead works are almost certainly not works done to attempt to earn salvation, but rather sinful works that have death and judgment as their natural harvest.

Repentance involves turning away from such things, and having turned away from them, we turn towards God in faith. Faith is the counterpart of repentance. Instruction about washings, or literally baptisms, refers to the instruction concerning the meaning of Christian baptism, quite possibly in its relationship to other baptisms, such as the baptisms of the priests in the Old Testament, the baptism of John, and other ritual washings.

The laying on of hands is another ritual action of importance in appointment to office, in blessing and healing, and also in connection with baptism. It is probably on account of its relationship to baptism that it is mentioned here.

The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment are the final foundational teachings that the author of Hebrews lists. These concern the last things. At the end, the dead will be raised and will face final judgment.

The judgment is eternal. Its outcomes, positive or negative, will be both final and enduring. The list of fundamental doctrines that he gives here might be a little surprising.

[7 : 19] They have a more practical weight to them. They concern how we are personally to respond to the message of Christ, how we are initiated into Christian community, and the horizon to which we must live.

The author wants to take his hearers beyond the basics and trust that God will make his teaching effective in this regard. He is deeply concerned for their progress in no small measure because standing still is not an option.

Those who are not progressing are in real danger of falling away. He is exhorting them to continued growth, expecting that they will heed him. However, his exhortation consists not merely of encouragements and promises, but also of very serious and grave warnings.

Although these warnings are framed in a more generic fashion, not addressed to any particular group of or among the hearers of the book, and the author is confident that his hearers will respond appropriately, the warnings are not empty ones.

Indeed, I believe that they refer to a specific group of people especially. The language is the language of Christian experience, but I suspect that he is here referring to the unbelieving Jews of that generation and previous generations who opposed the gospel and rejected Christ.

[8 : 29] He has earlier spoken of people who received the good news, as those who were in the wilderness led by Moses. They had a similar sort of experience, but they did not respond by faith.

The apostle Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 1-4. The purpose of such a way of speaking is to get Christians to recognize the similarities between them and the children of Israel who were led by Moses into the wilderness.

He had already been doing this in chapters 3 and 4. Once they recognize the similarities, they will be warned about any presumption that they might have, appreciating that such great gifts can be forfeited by those who respond to God's immense goodness with unbelief.

The children of Israel were once enlightened. They had the fire of God's presence in their midst. They were led through the waters and declared to be God's own people. God lighted their way both physically and spiritually.

They tasted the heavenly gift. As Paul puts it, they ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. They participated in Christ himself. They shared in the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 54] Isaiah chapter 63 verse 11 speaks of the Lord placing his Holy Spirit in the midst of the people of Israel when he brought them out of Egypt. There are similar claims in Israel's national confession of sin in Nehemiah chapter 9.

For instance, in verses 19 to 20, You in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go.

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manner from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst. They tasted the goodness of the word of God, having actual first-hand experience of God's good provision.

They had tasted the powers of the age to come. They had experienced his might over creation, in judgment and healing, in the plagues of Egypt, and in the miraculous provision of the wilderness.

However, even after first-hand experience of all of these things, an experience also shared by many non-believing Jews with first-hand experience of the ministry of Christ, they still rejected the word of the Lord and fell in the wilderness.

[11 : 03] At such a point, after they had experienced so much, yet determinedly hardened their hearts, and what is more rejected such a great salvation so decisively, there was no remaining hope for them.

They were condemned to destruction, and they perished, their bodies falling in the wilderness. Christ was once crucified, made an open shame before others. For the author of Hebrews, it is as if those who reject the gospel are inflicting a sort of a second crucifixion upon Christ, if that were indeed possible, holding him up for shame to the world, and cutting him off from themselves.

However, they are the ones who will lose out. They are doing this to their harm. The author of Hebrews describes such a situation by contrasting land that is well watered and responds with fruitfulness in a good crop to that land if it bears thorns or thistles.

It is the same land, but two different potential responses. It seems to me that he is here referring to the poor response of Israel to the many blessings of God over the centuries, and to the fact that the judgment of God is about to fall upon it.

Behind this might lie Old Testament passages such as Isaiah chapter 5 and its Song of the Vineyard. The point of this is that the recipients of the book ought to see a cautionary resemblance between themselves and the people of Moses who failed in the wilderness.

[12 : 23] If they are careless, they could fail too. Beyond this, however, they faced the temptation of falling back into the unbelieving Judaism that they left behind. However, that unbelieving Judaism was doomed on account of its unbelief.

It had experienced all of these blessings, yet persisted in its unbelief. There was no hope of salvation to be found there. However, the author does not believe that the judgment awaiting the unbelieving Jews awaits those to whom he is writing.

All of the signs in their case point in a far more promising direction. To this point, they have manifested commitment and fruitfulness in their faith and love, and they continue to do so.

Yet they should beware of complacency or presumption at this point. They must earnestly press forward, grasping hold ever more firmly of the promised reality that they await. The more sure their grip upon that, the more prepared that they will be to persevere, inheriting the promises in the end.

Perseverance, for the author of Hebrews, is related to our grasping hold of God's promises, and people can be strengthened in their perseverance as they are assured of the strength and the surety of God's promises.

[13 : 34] He ends this chapter by directing their attention to the power of God's promise. Not only did God make a promise, which he would not lie about or renege upon, he also accompanied the promise with a vow, swearing by himself, to give us two things of certainty that we can rest upon.

For the author of Hebrews, the sure and the certain promise of God is like an anchor, which through Jesus has been placed in heaven itself. We are able to cling on to a promise that is attached to God's very throne.

Christ's high priestly status assures us in all of this. He is the high priest who has gone ahead of us into God's holy presence, into the heavenly realm that corresponds to the Holy of Holies.

A question to consider. What lessons about Christian growth might we learn from this passage?