

“A Terrifying Text”
Hebrews 5:11-6:8
July 11, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage is a difficult one that has troubled many people, because it appears at first glance to say that a person can lose their salvation. It is also one of the more terrifying passages we encounter in Hebrews. It is a warning against apostasy, against falling away from faith in Christ. Apparently, those being addressed had not yet fallen away, but were clearly on their way toward doing so. This passage, then, serves as a warning to all who might be on the path toward apostasy.

How should we receive warnings? Parents will often warn their children of dangers, such as the dangers arising from cars, from strangers with malevolent intentions, or from the poor choice of friends. As parents, we want our children to believe our warnings. We want them to receive our warnings and maybe even feel a little of the danger. We don’t want that because we delight in seeing them afraid, but because we delight in seeing them safe. We warn them because we love them and want to protect them. We need to receive God’s warning similarly, with an appropriate level of fear and of trust in his heart of love for us as his motive for the warning.

I. Early Warning Signs of Apostasy

The pronouns used in our text make it clear that the readers being addressed had not yet fallen away but were in a place of danger. They were walking toward the edge of the cliff of apostasy but hadn’t yet fallen over that edge. The second person pronoun is used beginning in 5:11: *You* have become dull of hearing; *you* ought to be teachers, and *you* need milk. Then he changes to the first person plural in the first three verses of chapter 6: Let *us* go on to maturity. Another change of pronoun occurs in verse 4 when he switches to the third person pronoun to talk about those who are guilty of apostasy. So it is clear that this audience was on a dangerous path toward apostasy but hadn’t yet fallen into that state. They were like the man I heard about several weeks ago who was driving on a remote path in the mountains out west when a thick fog descended. It was so thick that he couldn’t see more than a couple feet in front of him, and he wisely decided that the prudent thing to do was to stop and wait for the fog to lift. It turned out to be a good decision, because when the fog did lift he saw that not only had he wandered off the road, but he had stopped just a few feet from the edge of a cliff.

Our author sees several warning signs that his readers were on a path leading toward apostasy. Let's note a few of them. The first early warning sign of apostasy is dullness of hearing. **"About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing"** (5:11). He wanted to tell them more about Jesus as their great high priest, but was unable to do so. The problem wasn't with the author's limited abilities as a teacher but with the readers' limited abilities as listeners. They didn't have a desire to hear about all they had in Jesus as their great high priest. Apparently, they viewed all such teaching as irrelevant to their real needs. It is an easy thing to sit in judgment of a preacher and his sermon. But before judging a sermon to be inferior, we ought to make sure that the problem doesn't lie with the listener's dull hearing. We don't want to be like that man who was convinced that his wife was hard of hearing. He conducted a test by standing across the room from her while she was seated with her back to him. He asked, "Can you hear me?" After hearing no reply, he moved closer and asked in a louder voice, "Can you hear me now?" Again hearing no reply he moved right up behind her and asked in a very loud voice, "Now can you hear me?" She turned around, and in an exasperated voice replied, "Yes, for the third time, I can hear you just fine." What is your tolerance level for sermons and Bible teaching? If it's low, you may be in a bad place.

The second early warning sign of apostasy is arrested development. **"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food"** (5:12). They were still babies in the faith, though they had been followers of Christ for a sufficiently long period of time to be more mature. There's nothing wrong with a baby on an exclusive milk diet. But if a 12-year-old is on such a diet, you can be sure that things have gone horribly wrong. That was the case with these readers. They had stopped growing and were stuck at an early stage of the Christian life.

The author's description of a baby Christian is one who is "unskilled in the word of righteousness" (5:13). We learn what he means by that in the next verse in which he describes mature Christians as **"those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."** He's talking about what we refer to as the application of God's word to life. Baby Christians are unskilled in that, while mature Christians have acquired the skill of application so that they are able to distinguish good from evil. The word for "constant practice" is a word used for athletic training. Application of God's word is a skill that comes only with that kind of practice. To say this differently, baby Christians read God's word for information only, while mature Christians have learned that God's word applies to life in ways that are often surprisingly relevant. This suggests that if we want to avoid the danger of apostasy, we need to read and hear God's word not just for information, but also for application. We are to ask for God's help to see how the living word of God applies to our daily lives.

The third early warning sign is a lack of usefulness to others in the church. At a time when they ought to have been teachers, they were in need of others to teach them. They were takers and not givers. We understand that baby Christians need a significant investment of effort from mature Christians if they are to grow and mature. But the expectation is that in time maturity will happen, and the formerly baby Christian will be able to teach others. Such a normal course hasn't happened in this case. This church had an abundance of baby Christians and an inadequate number of those able to disciple newer Christians. So the application question to ask yourself is this: have you been following Christ long enough so that you should be able to help other less mature Christians but are not doing so?

The final early warning sign is found in the first verses of chapter six and is very similar to the one about arrested development. These Christians were unwilling to progress beyond the elementary doctrines of the faith. Those doctrines are described as foundational, and six of them are listed, beginning with repentance and faith. The third and fourth of these likely refer to baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit, while the final pair, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, describe the Christian's hopes and expectations for the future. To use theological terms, these six foundational doctrines are listed in pairs that can be summarized as justification by faith, sanctification and glorification. These are crucial, foundational doctrines. When the author commands that his readers leave these doctrines, he is not telling them to abandon such teachings, but to advance beyond them. Apparently, these readers had concluded that they had pretty much learned all they needed to know. That explains why they would be "dull of hearing" (5:11), since those who think they know it all have little incentive to listen.

There is an important principle involved in this last warning sign, and it is the principle that standing still in the Christian life is impossible. If we stop advancing, we will start sliding back. The command of verse 1, to **"go on to maturity,"** is a command that will apply to us until the day we die. The day we give in to the desire to coast in the Christian life is the day we start sliding toward the edge of the cliff into apostasy. To say this differently, accurate expectations of the Christian life will help guard us against apostasy. If we expect the Christian life to be a life of ease, like floating in an innertube with drink in hand at a water theme park, then we are in a dangerous place spiritually. If, on the other hand, we more accurately expect life to be more like a wild river filled with danger, a life in which we are going to need to trust in God for our very survival, then we are ready to do what this passage urges upon us and "go on to maturity."

II. The Permanence of Apostasy

Now we get to the hard verses beginning in 6:4, which are at the heart of this warning. The author says that apostasy is permanent. That is, once a person falls

off the cliff of apostasy, there is no chance of recovery. Once an apostate, always an apostate. The opening words of verse 4 make this clear: **“For it is impossible...”** The thought is then completed in verse 6. What is impossible in the case of those who have fallen away is **“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”** (6:6).

The big question concerns who is being described here. At first glance, it looks like it is clearly describing a genuine Christian. This person who falls away has “once been enlightened.” He has seen the truth of who God is in Christ. Second, he has “tasted the heavenly gift,” a general reference to salvation. Third, he has “shared in the Holy Spirit.” Fourth, he has tasted the goodness of God’s word and finally, he has experienced the powers of the age to come. The Methodist leader, John Wesley, was confident that these phrases were meant to describe a Christian, with the result that he believed a person could lose their salvation. Wesley wrote, “Must not every unprejudiced person see, the expressions here used are so strong and clear, that they cannot, without gross and palpable wrestling, be understood of any but true believers?”

One of the most important principles of interpreting the Bible is that we need to let the Bible interpret the Bible. That means that we begin with the assumption that since the Bible is the word of God, it cannot contradict itself. So we use the clearer passages of the Bible to help us interpret the less clear. The Bible says clearly and repeatedly that we cannot lose a salvation that is truly possessed. Paul wrote, **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”** (Phil. 1:6). And Jesus said, **“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand”** (John 10:28). And then there’s Paul’s lengthy treatment of this at the end of Romans 8 where he assures us that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

The question, then, is how we should understand Hebrews 6 in light of these clear verses in the rest of the Bible. We can say first that these Hebrews 6 verses cannot be describing a true Christian. What they are describing is the person who has had the benefit of participation in the Church. It is a person who professes the truth faith but does not in fact possess true faith. This is a group that appears frequently in the Bible. Jesus spoke of them in the Sermon on the Mount when he said that not everyone who addresses Jesus as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21-23). Paul mentioned this group among the Israelites, pointing out that **“not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”** (Ro. 9:6). The apostle John spoke of them in his first epistle. **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us”** (2:19).

We can say, then, that apostasy is more than a hypothetical situation. It is actually possible to profess faith in Christ and fall away from him and be

eternally lost. But we can also say that anyone who truly possesses faith in Christ can never fall away. With God's help, he or she will persevere. To say it differently, there is a line a church member can cross into the kind of apostasy that is permanent. But we can also say that we can't know exactly where that line is, so we should continue to pray for any who have wandered away. For example, what was the difference between Peter, who denied the Lord, and Judas, who betrayed him? Both might have seemed to have fallen into apostasy, but Peter clearly had not. But again, there is such a line that we should note and avoid at all costs.

III. The Path Away from Apostasy

I realize that there is a danger from a passage such as this one to send one of God's children into despair and uncertainty about their faith. So I want to mention something about assurance of salvation from the final two verses of our text. These verses use the familiar Scriptural metaphor of fruit-bearing. In his goodness, God sends his rain upon the land. But some land bears only thorns and thistles while other land a useful crop. In this metaphor, the rain corresponds to the good seed of God's word. It is falling today upon everyone hearing this word preached. Will it bear good fruit in your life or thorns and thistles?

What is the good fruit this word should provide? At least two fruits should grow from this word. The first one is a healthy fear of the danger of apostasy. We should all accept God's truth that there is a cliff of apostasy that we need to stay well clear of. We should humbly accept this. Second, it should deepen our dependency upon Christ. It should lead us to cry out, "Help me, Jesus, to stay true to you all the days of my life." As the hymnwriter says, "O make me thine forever; And should I fainting be, Lord, let me never, never Outlive my love for thee."

CONCLUSION:

According to F. R. Webber, in his three-volume *A History of Preaching in Britain and America*, one of the by-products of the 18th century Great Awakening was a sudden interest in shorthand. Webber writes,

Men and women studied shorthand in order that they might take down the sermons that were stirring the English-speaking countries. This had happened once before in Scotland, and it made its appearance once more in all countries where the influence of the Awakening was felt. It was not at all unusual to see men with a portable inkwell strapped about them, and a quill pen thrust over an ear, hastening to join the throng assembling on the village green.

We want the fruit of giving just such attention to God's word.