

“The Danger of Stagnation”
Hebrews 5:11-14; 6:1-6
(Preached at Trinity, February 25, 2024)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citation will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. I've pointed out the context and theme of the Book of Hebrews often. The context surrounds a church that is largely comprised of Christians converted out of Judaism. The Jewish community was hostile to these converts. They saw them as blasphemers and heretics who had abandoned the Jewish faith. They were shunned and despised. Many lost their property and their means of providing for their families.
2. In this context of suffering, some within this Hebrew church were abandoning the Christian faith and returning to Judaism. I've been careful to point out, true believers will persevere despite the greatest affliction. But there will always be nominal, counterfeit believers in the church. Lacking the reality and power of God's transforming grace, enduring the hardships of Christianity often proves to be too difficult. Some were turning back.
3. From the beginning of the Book of Hebrews the author has been extolling the infinite superiority of Jesus Christ, who is beyond compare. He is superior to the prophets, to the angels, to Moses, to the Jewish priesthood. He is the fullness and completion of the Old Covenant. His point is, if Jesus is infinitely superior to Judaism why would someone be tempted to abandon Him and return to Judaism. If the Old Covenant was but a shadow of the fullness of God's Covenant purpose in Christ why would anyone be tempted to return to the shadow.
4. In **Verses 6-10** he was in the process of describing the superiority of the priesthood of Christ and comparing it to the priesthood of Melchizedek. It was a rich topic and worthy of careful consideration. In the midst of his argument he suddenly pauses. He realizes the level of his teaching was beyond the ability of some to comprehend. He offers a scathing rebuke. The author may not be the Apostle Paul, but this rebuke is certainly Pauline.
Hebrews 5:11 NAU - "Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."
1 Corinthians 3:1-3 NAU - "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly."
5. In the context of the situation in this church it was a serious charge. The author was considering the possibility that they were outside the faith; that they were not believers. Why does he have this suspicion? Over the course of the following verses he is going to express some of his concerns. It is a serious matter, one that all of us should consider.

I. These church members had not grown in their faith.

Hebrews 5:12 NAU - "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God"

A. There is a universal principle of life and growth.

1. A seedling will eventually become a tree – there is growth.
2. A child grows progressively to adulthood. We can see this in the life of our Savior. He went from birth to adulthood.
Luke 2:52 NAU - "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."
3. The same is true with spiritual growth. We begin as spiritual infants and progress to maturity. It is a lifelong process.
4. The author describes the difference between spiritual infancy and spiritual maturity. He illustrates it using the example of milk versus solid food.
Hebrews 5:12-14 NAU - "you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."
1 Peter 2:2 NAU - "like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation"
5. Imagine the grotesque image of a grown man who is still nursing off his mother. But this is the case with some on a spiritual level. They are still nursing babies unable to partake of solid food.
6. There are people who have been affiliated with evangelical churches for decades who cannot tell you the Ten Commandments. They can't list the Books of the Bible. They can't give a clear presentation of the Gospel message – how a person obtains eternal life. They can't describe the work of the Godhead—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

B. As we grow in maturity we are able to instruct others

Hebrews 5:12 NAU - "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God"

1. A person who has been a Christian for year should be able instruct those new to the faith.
2. Those who have been a Christian for several years should have the benefit of years of study and years of walking with Christ.
2 Timothy 2:15 NAU - "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."
3. We can see this principle with Pastoral qualifications.
1 Timothy 3:6 NAU - "not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil."
Titus 1:9 NAU - "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."

4. Instead of advancing in maturity so that they might instruct others, these church members were stagnant in their faith. They were still in need of spiritual milk. They could not receive the meat of doctrinal truth. Instead they had to be continually taught the basics. **Verse 12** calls it “elementary principles.”
The ESV translates it “basic principles.” The basic things.
 5. As a pastor I’ve sometimes been amazed to find someone who has been a professing believer for years who doesn’t really understand the basics of the Gospel or how a person is saved. It is most fearful.
- C. There is an expectation of growth.
- Hebrews 6:1-3 NAU** - "Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do, if God permits."
- 2 Peter 3:18 NAU** - "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."
1. Apostasy doesn’t happen suddenly and unexpectedly, like waking up one morning and deciding to leave the faith. It has been there the whole time. In the absence of spiritual growth there may be the absence of spiritual life. They are still spiritual dead. There are no Christian appetites. No spiritual desires.
 2. These Hebrew church members were falling away because they were lacking spiritual life.
2 Timothy 3:5 NAU - "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power"

II. The extent of religious experience

- A. Chapter 6:4-6 has received many interpretations
1. Some see it as evidence that genuine believers can lose their salvation. How could an unbeliever be a partaker of the Holy Spirit?
Hebrews 6:6 NAU - "and *then* have fallen away"
Of course, this is inconsistent with the Gospel and God’s preserving grace. God preserves His people.
 2. Some see it as presenting a theoretical or hypothetical condition—a rhetorical warning of something that cannot actually occur. What if someone fell away from faith in Christ? If someone fell away it would be impossible to renew him to repentance.
 3. The problem with the second view is the stark reality before this congregation. These are not mere theoretical warnings. It is a real warning. Some had actually fallen into apostasy.
Hebrews 3:12 NAU - "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God."

4. Apostasy is a reality in every generation. There are those who profess Christ but do not possess genuine faith. The Apostle John wrote:
1 John 2:19 NAU - "They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."
- B. The situation the author is addressing was people actually falling away.
1. They fell away but before they did they had made an appearance of being genuine believers.
It demonstrates the great benefits of the church even for the unbeliever.
 2. "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened"
 - a. It literally means "to give light."
 - b. The preaching and teaching of the church instructs and informs. It enlightens the mind to Gospel truths. The excellence of Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. They have been exposed to all of the teachings of the Gospel.
 3. "have tasted of the heavenly gift"
They made a profession of faith, they attended worship and partook of the Lord's Supper—gifts of God's grace.
 4. "and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit"
Sharing in what the Holy Spirit was doing with others in the church. Even the unbelievers in the church share in the good gifts the Holy Spirit gives to others.
 5. "and have tasted the good word of God"
When the Word of God is preached it becomes nourishment to those who hear, even unbelievers.
 6. "and the powers of the age to come"
They have witnessed the power of God's transforming grace.
- C. In spite of all of these benefits some were falling away.
1. They had tasted the good Word but had become dull of hearing.
Hebrews 5:11 NAU - "Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*"
 2. Even some of those who were receiving this letter were slowly drifting away from what they had heard.
Hebrews 2:1 NAU - "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it.*"
 3. Their forefathers in the wilderness forever stood as a warning.
They experienced all the blessings of the covenant community. They had witnessed the grace of the Passover as the first-born in Egypt perished. They experienced the miracle of the Red Sea and of God's presence in the pillar of cloud and fire. They were fed supernaturally in the wilderness. In spite of these blessings, they did not heed the Word preached to them and did not enter into their rest.
Hebrews 4:6 NAU - "Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience,"

- D. The author warns that it would be impossible to return from apostasy.
1. God calls sinners to repent and all who turn to Him will be saved. But apostasy is particularly dangerous. Apostasy is turning away from the light of Christ. It is to profess Him and then turn away from our profession.
 2. Apostates so harden their hearts against Christ that they are unable to repent.

Hebrews 3:13 NAU - "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

 - a. We've often read of the Man in the Iron Cage in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.
 "I left off to watch and be sober: I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts; I sinned against the light of the word, and the goodness of God; I have grieved the Spirit, and he is gone; I tempted the devil, and he is come to me; I have provoked God to anger, and he has left me: I have so hardened my heart, that I cannot repent."¹
 - b. We must never presume upon the grace of God. God must change the sinner's heart. If He doesn't the heart will remain unchanged.
Hebrews 6:3 NAU - "And this we will do, if God permits."
 - c. There is danger in open willful sin against the knowledge of the truth.
Numbers 15:30-31 NAU - "But the person who does *anything* defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. ³¹ 'Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt *will be* on him."
 - d. Willfully sinning against the knowledge and revelation of God is the unforgiveable sin in Matthew 12—sin against the Holy Spirit.
 3. They make a mockery of Christ and His sacrifice upon the cross. It is a complete dismissing of Christ. It is as if to shout, "Away with Him!"
Hebrews 6:6 NAU - "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame."

¹ Bunyan, John, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Publishing), page 27.

Conclusion:

1. The author's warning is clear. There is an expectation of progress in the Christian life. And there is the assurance of perseverance. Some turn away long before they depart.
2. If someone turns away from the Gospel one can only assume they never knew it at all. Peter describes it:
2 Peter 2:21-22 NAU - "For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²² It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, *returns* to wallowing in the mire."
3. If you turn away from God's only way of salvation where will you turn? Don't expect to find another way. "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins"
Hebrews 10:26-27 NAU - "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries."