

Hebrews 5:7-6:12 “A Warning Against Falling Away”
Isaiah 5
Psalm 80

February 21, 2021

Israel was the vineyard of the LORD.

As Psalm 80 says, God took a vine from Egypt and planted it in the land.

Isaiah may be commenting on Psalm 80.

Because in Psalm 80 the question is asked,

“why have you broken down the wall?”

And the question isn’t really answered.

But Isaiah answers the question of Psalm 80:

because Israel has produced “stink fruit” – wild grapes.

They have not loved God – they have not loved their neighbor –

they do not regard the deeds of the LORD or see the work of his hands.

So man is humbled and each one is brought low.

But Psalm 80 will point us to the solution:

“let your hand be on the man of your right hand,

the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!”

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!

Let your face, that we may be saved!

Sing Psalm 80

Read Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Have you ever known a person who seemed to be a strong Christian,
who wound up denying the faith and abandoning Christ?

We call it apostasy.

You can look at apostasy from the viewpoint of the divine perspective
or from the viewpoint of human perspective.

From God’s perspective, the elect will never finally fall away.

But from our perspective, we have all seen Christians fall away!

Because not all Christians are elect!

What does it mean to apostatize?

What does it mean to “fall away”?

Some Christians have said that a person can be truly and fully regenerated and justified, and yet can still apostatize and lose their salvation.

The Reformed have rejected this.

But some of the Reformed have gone too far the other direction – and said that Hebrews 6 is just a hypothetical warning– that if someone who was enlightened really did apostatize, then it would be impossible to renew them, but in fact, none ever will.

But that won’t work either, because Hebrews 6 follows after Hebrews 3-4, where Hebrews has reminded us of the wilderness generation.

And *they* had been enlightened in their own day.

Some dispensationalists resolve this by saying that it was possible to fall away in the old testament, but not in the new testament.

But that won’t work either, because these warnings are given to new testament believers.

In order to understand this,

we need to understand the covenant.

All those who are members of the covenant community partake of the covenant benefits.

To be a part of the church of Jesus Christ is to be a part of God’s eschatological community.

It is to participate in the blessings of the end of history, even as you live in the middle of history.

The church is where God dwells with his people– no not in this building–but in this body.

And the body of Christ is the visible church.

But the visible church includes some who apostatize.

And while they participate in the visible church, they participate in the benefits of the new covenant.

Therefore, there *is* such a thing as “temporary” participation in the benefits of the covenant.

As we go through the book of Hebrews,

we have come to the third and central section of the book.

This section runs from 5:11 to 10:39,

and is bracketed with two lengthy exhortations (5:11-6:12 and 10:19-39), both of which warn against apostasy.

In between these two exhortations is the exposition

of the Son of God as our great high priest, the redemptive sacrifice for our sins.
And that theme lies at the center of the opening exhortation here in 5:11-6:12.

The apostate “crucify once again the Son of God to their own harm.”

To put it simply:

If the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is not good enough for you,
then there is no hope for you!

1. “Sluggish Hearing” and the Need for Maturity (5:11-6:3)

¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² 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, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

⁶ 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, ² and of instruction about washings, ^[b] the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.

5:11 and 6:12 mark the boundaries of our passage with the theme of “sluggishness.”

5:11 says that the Hebrews had become “sluggish of hearing”

and 6:12 concludes by exhorting them not to be “sluggish” any longer.

Now notice that the problem with the Hebrews is not that *they* are apostatizing.

In Galatians 5:4, the problem *is* apostasy.

Paul says to the Judaizers in Galatia,

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law;
you have fallen away from grace.”

The problem in Galatians is apostasy.

And what is worse, the apostates appear to be very prominent in the church!

But Hebrews speaks to his audience not as apostates—

nor even as those who are in particular danger of apostasy—

but as those who are “sluggish in hearing.”

Yes, there are apostates *around* the church that he writes to,

but apparently not *in* the church.

Those who wish to go back to Moses, have in fact already gone back to Moses,

and are no longer in the church.

The problem with the Hebrews is that they have become sluggish in their hearing,

they have not matured in the faith as they should have.

To be sluggish in hearing is dangerous.

Verse 9 has just said that Jesus is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

The word for obey there is “upakouousin”
which is related to the word “akoais” here, which means “hearing.”
To be sluggish in hearing will invariably lead to being slow to obey.

And this must change.

You have been Christians long enough that by now you should be teachers,
but you still don’t understand the basics.
As a rebuke to the Hebrews, he says “you need milk, not solid food!”
You’re acting like babies!
Everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness,
since he is a child (or infant).
At the beginning of the Christian life, you need spiritual milk—
the basics of the faith.

This is why we teach through the scriptures;
that’s why we have our weekly catechism quiz.
That’s why I make it a practice to offer individual or small group instruction
to those who are young in the faith.
We need to make sure that we are always providing milk for them.

But you cannot keep drinking milk forever.
Imagine a grown man still nursing!
The thought is repulsive to us!
And the thought of a grown Christian still unskilled in the word of righteousness
should be equally repulsive!

To be “skilled in the word of righteousness” does not mean that you are a master exegete,
who has great knowledge of the biblical text.

The problem is not an intellectual problem.
Notice how verse 14 puts it:
“Solid food is for the mature,
for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice
to distinguish good from evil.”

To be unskilled in the word of righteousness means that they have a basic *moral* problem.
They cannot distinguish good from evil.
What is the problem, then?
What is the “good” and the “evil” that they cannot distinguish?

Think back over the ground that Hebrews has prepared for us:
he has emphasized the superiority of Christ over the angels.
Who emphasizes the importance of angels as covenant mediators?
Certain factions in Judaism.

Hebrews has emphasized the superiority of Christ over Moses.
Who emphasizes the importance of Moses?
Judaism.

He has shown that Jesus is a greater high priest than Aaron.
Who emphasizes the greatness of the Aaronic High Priesthood?
Judaism.

Can't you see that the Son is greater than the angels?
Can't you see that Jesus is greater than Moses?
Can't you see that Christ has a greater priesthood than Aaron?

The basic meaning of "falling away" in Hebrews (as in Galatians)
is going back to Judaism.

Once you have embraced Christ,
how could you possibly go back to Moses.
Once the light has dawned, how could you possibly go back to the shadows?

This is why Hebrews employs the language of maturity.
As Paul had said in Galatians 3-4,
Israel was the son of God in his minority.
But Jesus is the Son of God in his maturity--
and because Jesus has grown up and received his inheritance,
so all those who are in him have also entered into that inheritance.
Hebrews uses similar language.
Because you are in Christ, you need to grow up.
You cannot go back to wearing diapers
and throwing tantrums like your fathers in the wilderness!

Now of course, 6:1 reveals that Hebrews does not think of his hearers as infants.
You are acting like babies, but you *know* better.
You know about faith and repentance.
You know about washings, laying on of hands, the resurrection and eternal judgment.
Now you need to grow up
In verse 2 the "instruction" could be translated "catechetical instruction"--
in other words, these are the basics
that you learned at the beginning of the Christian life.

You know the basics,
so now you need to grow into maturity.

But there is a problem.

2. It Is Impossible to Restore Those Who Crucify the Son Again (6:4-8)
Because there are those who have refused to grow up into maturity,

and who have literally returned to infancy.
In other words,
there are those who have returned to Judaism—
and there is nothing you can do about them.
Hebrews is not saying that God cannot restore the apostate—
rather, it is that *you* cannot.

⁴ 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, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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.

The main verb sequence in verses 4-6 is “it is impossible...to restore”
who is impossible to restore?
there are five participles that describe the apostate:

“Those who have once been enlightened,
Who have tasted the heavenly gift
Who have shared in the Holy Spirit,
Who have tasted the goodness of the word of God
and the powers of the age to come.”

And then there are two more verbs that describe their state:
falling away
crucifying once again

These are not just “hangers-on” who never had any share in what God has done.
These are those who have been enlightened.
In other words, they have seen with new eyes the work of God.
They have tasted the heavenly gift.
Remember how Paul says that the wilderness generation
ate the spiritual food in the wilderness,
and drank the spiritual drink—for that Rock was Christ?
They have shared in the Holy Spirit.
Think of Simon Magus in Acts 8 who was one of those in Samaria
upon whom the Holy Spirit fell.
They have tasted the goodness of the word of God
and the powers of the age to come.

In other words,
the apostate today are like the wilderness generation at Kadesh Barnea.
They have seen God’s mighty works.
They have partaken of Christ and his benefits—

just as Paul says the wilderness generation did.
But in the end,
their partaking was only temporary and partial.

It may have looked the same as the faithful (outwardly).
It may have felt the same (experientially).
But in the end, it was not the same,
because they were *not united by faith* with those who believed.
In the end, they refuse to believe God's promises.
They would rather go back to slavery in Egypt
than believe that God will give them the Land.

And a temporary and partial participation in the benefits of the covenant of grace,
is, in the end, worse than never participating in the first place!

Because those who have fallen away from Christ
have crucified the Son of God once again to their own harm.
What does that even mean?!
How can the Son of God be "crucified" again?

It's not referring to a literal crucifixion.
It's rather speaking of your relationship to the crucifixion.
Jesus died for your sins on the cross.
Those who believe in him are forgiven of all their sins.
What happens if you stop believing in him.
What happens if you go back to Judaism?
Some would say, then God never really forgave your sins.
That's true—in one sense:
as 1 John says, "They went out from us because they were not of us."

But think about what Jesus says in Matthew 18:21-35.
Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who settled accounts with his servants.
One servant owed him 10,000 talents—an immense sum of money.
(say, \$1 million)
The king forgave the debt.
Jesus says the king "forgave him the debt." (18:27)

But then the servant went to his fellow-servant who owed him 100 denarii
(Maybe \$10-15,000)
The "forgiven" servant throws his brother servant into prison.
When the king hears of this he *revokes* the forgiveness
that he had granted the first servant.
"In anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt."
The debt was forgiven—but is now reinstated.

Some might say, “Oh, but this is a parable.
We shouldn’t press theological points out of a parable!”

But look at what Jesus says in 18:35—the very next verse.
Jesus tells us explicitly what is the theological point of this parable:
“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,
if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
There is such a thing as a “temporary” forgiveness.

Jesus says that God’s forgiveness is contingent upon you forgiving others.
If you do not forgive others, then God will not forgive you.
After the Lord’s Prayer,
Jesus says “if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
but if you do not forgive others their trespasses,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Of course the elect *will* forgive others,
because God graciously grants this gift as well.

And as the parable clearly reveals,
a temporary forgiveness is *in the end* no forgiveness at all!

The one who has tasted the heavenly gift and been a partaker of the Holy Spirit,
in other words, the one who has professed faith in Christ and repentance from sin,
if such a one rebels against Christ,
then it is not as though they go back to the state of “one for whom Christ never died.”
To be an apostate is NOT the same as being an unbeliever!

No, for the apostate it is far worse!
Unbelievers are simply covenant-breakers in Adam.
They are under God’s wrath because they were born in sin and misery.

But apostates are covenant-breakers with Christ.
Think of the parallel that Hebrews makes with the wilderness generation.
The wilderness generation was brought out of Egypt—out of bondage to slavery.
The apostate Christian was brought out of slavery to sin and death.
They were brought into the household of God—they were made partakers,
not just of a Mosaic salvation from Egypt,
but the eschatological redemption from sin and death!
The wilderness generation partook of Christ—and died in the wilderness.
How much worse is it for one to have partaken of the Holy Spirit!
How much worse is it to have tasted the eschatological salvation,

and then spat it out as though the cross of Christ was worthless!?

This is why verses 7-8 speak of what will happen to these people (read).

⁷ For land 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. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

God's covenant has sanctions.

If you repent and obey, then you will live.

If you rebel and disobey, then you will die.

Sodom and Gomorrah were once a fruitful garden,

but because they rebelled, they were destroyed by fire from heaven.

In our OT reading we heard Isaiah's lament about the vineyard.

God promises that because his vineyard produced "stink-fruit"
therefore he will destroy it.

And Psalm 80 speaks of how God did indeed bring judgment upon his vineyard.

Those who apostatize will be destroyed.

4. Our Confidence Concerning You (6:9-12)

Quite frankly, this is terrifying stuff!

To hear that there are those who once were enlightened, who once shared in the HS,
and then fall away, can only have one effect on you:

what if that is me?!

What if I fall away?

What if I am just deceiving myself?

Now the author of Hebrews knew that this would be your response!

And that is why he doesn't leave you with verse 8.

(Read 9-12)

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Look at the wilderness generation.

For that matter, look at those who have returned to Judaism
(or look at those who have denied the faith).

That's not you.

We have confidence concerning you, beloved, of better things—
things which accompany salvation.

As Jesus might say, we see you forgiving others—as God has forgiven you. (Mt 18)
As Paul might say, you are not relying on your own works for salvation (Gal 5).
But you are bearing fruit.

Verse 10 is perhaps not the way we usually say it,
but we shouldn't be afraid of saying it this way:

“For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work
and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints,
as you still do.”

Remember that Hebrews has already said that one of the catechetical *basics* of the faith,
is “repentance from dead works.”

Your works cannot save you.

Rather “your work” here refers to those things that “belong to salvation.”
Your work is the fruit and evidence of a lively, saving faith.

But notice how Hebrews invokes God's justice.

God would be unjust to overlook your work.

If God has forgiven your sins and removed every shred of iniquity from you,
accepting you and accounting you righteous in his sight—
only for the righteous sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ—
then when God looks at you in Christ,
what does he see?

He sees you patiently teaching the children in Sunday school.

He sees you serving the saints as you prepare meals for those in need.

He sees the things you do,
and he is pleased with you.

And you say, “But Lord, so often I'm doing it for selfish reasons—
my best works are tainted and polluted by my sin!”

And he smiles and says,

“Yes, but I forgave you for that, too!”

And when you stand before him at the final judgment,
you will be judged according to your works.

And with all of your sins forgiven in Christ Jesus,
God would be *unjust* to hold a single sin against you!
God would be *unjust* to overlook those good works
that he has created you to do in Christ Jesus.

Don't *for a moment* think that this gives you any bragging rights before God.

You know full well that *in yourself*, you do *not* deserve this!

This is entirely the work of God's grace!

“But we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness
to have the full assurance of hope until the end”

Your salvation does not depend upon your works.
Your assurance of salvation, in some respects, does.
That's part of the point of verses 7-8.
If the showers of God's blessings that have fallen upon you produce thorns and thistles,
then that's not a good sign!
But if they produce a useful crop—a crop useful for Christ
—then you are blessed.

What does it mean to produce thorns and thistles?
Remember Isaiah 5.
What did it mean to produce stink-fruit?
Idolatry—turning away from the living God.
We're not talking about the ordinary struggles of the Christian life.
Thorns and thistles is the response of a complete rejection of Christ.

But you are called to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.
Faith and patience.

You sometimes hear people say,
“Oh, don't pray for patience – God might give it to you!”

That is terrible advice!
A man recently said to me that one of his worst mistakes
was asking God to do whatever he needed
in order to help him to sympathize with others.
He thought this was a mistake, because of the suffering that God brought next!

I said, “No, my dear brother, the Holy Spirit gave you keener sight than you knew!
He knew what you would be facing next,
and so he gave you the wisdom to ask him for what you most needed”

By all means, *pray for patience!*
Because what is the alternative?
The alternative is that when (not if – but when) trouble comes,
you will lack patience – and so you will face the trouble
as an impatient and bitter rebel!

God regularly sends us trouble that is too much for us to handle alone.
So do not be sluggish – do not be dull of hearing –
but be imitators of those who through faith and patience
inherit the promises!