

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 6, Verses 9-12
Notes From Class on October 13, 2009
Last Revised on (October 26, 2009)

Good evening everyone!

Welcome to our continuing study of the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

Before we begin please make sure that you have everything you need.

Tonight you will need a Bible and a song book.

If you are using an English translation of the Bible other than the English Standard Version ("ESV"), then it may help you to have the handout which I have prepared, which has the ESV text of Hebrews, Chapters 1 through 6.

There is coffee and tea at the back.

Please get what you need and, then, let's get started....

Introduction

OK. Last week we finished reading Chapter 5 and started reading Chapter 6.

We finished reading through through Verse 8.

But I am not certain that we really finished discussing those 8 verses.

Tonight, as usual, I will begin with a brief review of what we have studied so far.

If you have comments and questions related to the first 8 verses of Chapter 6 (or anything else) please share them with the class.

When we are finished with that review and discussion, we will continue reading at verse 9 of Chapter 6.

Review

Hebrews is a document written in Greek around the end of the **First Century** A.D

It is perhaps best thought of as the text of **sermon**,

to be preached to a particular church, one which the preacher **knew**.

One of his main objectives was to encourage them to **hold fast** to their confession of faith.

It seems most of them had long before confessed their faith in Christ, but that some were in danger of "**falling away**".

This theme, of holding fast **until the end** and not falling away, is a constant and pervasive theme in Hebrews.

As we have seen, there is some real **mystery** surrounding the question of what exactly is meant by the expression "to fall away"

We know that in some sense falling away involves first coming to know Christ and later **rejecting** Him.

We know that this is a **bad** thing, which may have very serious **consequences**.

We know that this is something to be **avoided** at all costs.

This may be all we ever **need** to know about falling away (i.e. don't do it!)

Certainly our preacher is **not** saying that any of his audience **have** fallen away.

On the contrary he says that they have been **saved** and must therefore hold fast to the end.

And he says that Jesus is the **one** who can **help** them do that.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 speak of the **unqualified supremacy** of Christ.

He is greater than **everything** on Earth and in the heavens, greater even than the **angels**.

However it is not the angels he came to help, but the offspring of **Abraham**. (2:16)

That is why, for a time, Jesus became just like us, "so that he might become a merciful and faithful **high priest** in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." (2:17b)

This metaphor is **pervasive** in Hebrews but rarely seen elsewhere in the the Bible.

Chapters 3 and 4

Right away the author shapes this metaphor by making it plain that Christ is superior to **Moses**.

We are therefore urged more strongly **to** hold fast to our confession of Christ and **not** to behave as did the Exodus generation in Israel, who rejected God and his servant Moses

Contemplation of the Exodus generation dominates **Chapter 3** and continues through the first **11** verses of **Chapter 4**.

This is an **example** of some of God's chosen people "falling away."

This example **preserves** the mystery with which we struggle.

We know that generation did **not** enter Canaan.

But we do not know what happens to them in **eternity**.

And should perhaps not be overly curious about such things.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (4:12-13)

We are **all** naked and exposed. We are all willfully disobedient, just as the Exodus generation in Israel was, and all subsequent generations in Israel were, and all men everywhere have been since Adam.

Thank God that Christ, **Himself** is our great high priest. The last paragraph of Chapter 4 reads:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:14-16)

Chapter 5, Verses 1 - 10

The first 10 verses of Chapter 5, **expand** the metaphor of Jesus as our great high priest, looking at the three ways in which he is like the Levitical high priests of the Old Testament.

A priest can only be appointed by God --- Jesus was appointed by God, not as an ordinary Levitical priest but a priest forever of the order of **Melchizedek**.

A priest must understand and be sympathetic to the circumstances of the people --- Jesus understands better than anyone else ever could, through his **experience** of enduring the struggle and suffering of perfect obedience to God

Thus he became not only the perfect **priest** but also the perfect **sacrifice** and therefore the **source** of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Hebrews, Chapter 5, Verses 11-14

Last week we started reading at Verse 11 of Chapter 5.

Please follow along with me in the text as I quickly review that material.

(Verse 11)

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

The author has very much more to say about Jesus as a high priest

and he does not expect it to be easy to explain these things to them.

Because they have become dull of hearing.

(Verses 12 through 14)

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, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

One would think, based on what they had heard over a long period of time, that they would have become teachers by now.

Instead they themselves remain in need of the most basic teaching from the word of God,

some of which they had understood in the past, and now need to be taught again.

They are sliding backwards rather than moving on to maturity.

The metaphor of milk and solid food suggests that they are like babies now in their understanding and not grown-up Christians.

That's why it is difficult to explain certain things to them which require maturity in order to understand.

As many of us know from experience, bad and good, it is only by living Christianly that we grow as Christians.

This is a process which involves prayerful study and application of the word of God.

It requires the we allow ourselves to be **led** by the Holy Spirit.

And it is only **through** growth as a Christian that one gains in **capacity** for further growth.

There is no station-keeping (believe me I tried).

To **stop** going forward as a Christian, is to go **backward**,

To stop growing is to **regress**.

The **ultimate** danger, I suppose, is what he has been calling "falling away"

Which brings us back to the rather difficult early verses of **Chapter 6**

Hebrews, Chapter 6, Verses 1-8

Will someone please read Hebrews Chapter 6, Verses 1-8 in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Will someone now please read those verses in English (ESV)

1 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, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

3 And this we will do if God permits.

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.

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.

Thank you.

This is a difficult text we have just read.

It is largely because of this passage, verses 4-6 in particular, that the early Western Church Fathers resisted including Hebrews in the Bible.

Later as they came to understand the text better, they agreed that it was an inspired text that belonged in the Bible, which has remained the nearly universal opinion of all parts of the church for 17 centuries or so.

But that does not make the text easy.

Some have tried to sidestep the issue by reading the word translated "impossible" in verse 4 as "difficult"

But that is not true.

Others have tried to read the "case" describe in verses 4-6 as being "hypothetical" (i.e. something you could describe logically but would never really see in practice),

But I think that is not what the author means to say,

And making this case "hypothetical" seems to be at odds with at least two parables of Jesus that I can think of: that of the wheat and the tares, which rests on the premise that we actually cannot tell who in the church really is and who really is not saved unto eternity.

But more to the point is Jesus' parable of the sower, which is based on the idea that the same seed can be planted in different soils, several of which sprout and seem to be fine in the beginning, but later fail to develop healthy roots or become choked by weeds.

Clearly Jesus was, and is, teaching that even though many who hear the gospel may seem to begin in the same way, and give every external evidence of being saved by it, not all will hold fast until the end.

In view of all of that, I do not think we can sidestep the passage or dismiss it in any easy way.

We must do our best to grapple with it....

(Verses 1 through 3)

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.

The preacher certainly does **not** despise the foundation or seek to **remove** it but, rather, wishes to **build** on it.

This (his desire to build) is why he will **not** be speaking of foundational issues, which he also refers to here as the elementary doctrine of Christ.

Instead he proposes to lead them on to maturity, "**if God permits.**"

This caveat is fairly **standard** among Christians and Jews.

But our preacher means to issue **more** than this standard caveat

(Verses 4 through 6)

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.

I do not think that this impossible case is merely hypothetical.

Rather, he means to say that one may sometimes actually encounter people for whom it is **impossible** to come to maturity, because God will **not** permit it!

Please notice that he is **not** saying that it is impossible for **God** to restore anyone to repentance or bring them to maturity.

Rather he is saying that it would be impossible for the **preacher** to bring someone to maturity without God's permission.

So far this is uncontroversial.

Q. **Why** does he think that God might ever withhold his permission?

A. The preacher is saying that God is not willing for Christ to be "**crucified**" again

I think that is a figure of speech meaning that the **humiliation** of Christ on the cross was once for all and God is not willing to see Christ again humiliated. Christ has now been glorified and there is no turning back.

Once you **know** who Christ is, and only **God** can make you know this, then you must make a **choice**: either accept him, or reject him.

A person to whom Christ has been **once** been revealed --- as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world --- and who, in light of this revelation, nevertheless rejects Christ as his savior, has knowingly rejected the **only** one who can possibly make atonement for his sin.

This person has placed **himself** in a seemingly impossible position, although nothing is impossible for **God!**

The take-home point is simple: We must be careful **not** to fall away, **especially** those of us who really know who Christ is!

Just as God finally swore not to let the entire Exodus generation of Israel enter Canaan, it is not difficult to imagine that he might deny repentance and spiritual maturity on this side of the grave to those who openly and knowingly reject Christ.

Just as we do **not** know the eternal fate of the entire Exodus generation of Israel, we can **not** know the eternal fate of all who seem to have knowingly rejected Christ and died (apparently) apostate.

Scripture gives us just enough examples to keep us from drawing conclusions about the fate of individuals (viz. Moses not entering the promised land, Peter rejecting Christ three times, Judas having first been a disciple of Christ, the story of Simon the Magician, etc.)

The whole point of all of this is to encourage us to **avoid** apostasy within the church, in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters, and not to see whether we can identify those who may be apostate.

Only God knows the heart.

Comments?

(Verses 7 and 8)

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

Here we get a useful parable, similar to several that **Jesus** told and at least one that he acted out.

We cannot see the human **heart**, but we can see what proceeds from it. (i.e. The "fruit of the Spirit.")

God **blesses** productive land.

And the land that God blesses **is** productive.

But land that finally produces **nothing** good, only thorns and thistles, will finally be consumed in fire.

So the Christians to whom he is preaching had better become more productive **immediately!**

Before they start sprouting thorns and thistle!

This is a **threat**, sure enough, but one that is intended for their benefit, and for our benefit.

A Christian who is not **advancing** in spiritual maturity is ... in danger...and needs to be admonished for their own benefit.

Now our preacher needs to **balance** all of this with some **assurances**.

Hebrews, Chapter 6, Verses 9-12

Will someone please read Hebrews Chapter 6, **Verses 9-12** in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Will someone now please read those verses in English (ESV)

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.

Thank you.

(Verse 9)

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things---things that belong to salvation.

This is the only place in this sermon where the preacher refers to them as **beloved**.

His **feeling**, he says, is that he is **sure** they are saved

Even though it may have **seemed** by what went before that he thought otherwise.

(Verse 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.

He **feels** that they **are** going to make it.

His **feeling** is based not on what they **understand** at this point, but on what he has observed them **doing**

and, also, on what he knows of God's **character**.

They have been **servicing** other Christians in a way that demonstrates their love for **Christ**.

Such service **can** only be works of God, the Holy Spirit, in them and **evidence** of true salvation.

It would be **unseemly** for God to work in **reprobates** in that way.

God does not counterfeit the love of Christ in anyone.

So they must be **truly** saved

This is a generalization.

(Verse 11)

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end,

I read this to say that the loving Christian service of the saints which he has described was **not** exhibited **equally** in all of them.

Thus his frightening remarks from before are probably closer to being applicable to **some** than to others.

He urges them **all** to be **equally earnest**, which is how they can have assurance of their salvation.

It is, I think, the only way that **any** of us can have assurance of our salvation.

Only God sees the heart.

(Verse 12)

so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Such **assurance**, in turn, is what keeps us working for Christ and the brethren, until the end.

Those who **inherit** the promises are those who remain faithful and patient until the **end**.

Our preacher has already directed our attention to the **examples** of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb

In later chapters he will speak of many **more** patient men of faith.

He wants his listeners to **imitate** men such as these.

So that they may inherit the promises **also**.

And not become **sluggish** and fall away.

This is a clear indication that the faithful in both the OT and the NT share in the **same** promises.

Please notice one thing further: the **love** they have shown and **continue** to show (to the saints for God's sake) is a very encouraging sign, even though their understanding of God is immature to the point of being babyish.

But their immature understanding of the things of God is still a **real cause for concern**, otherwise our preacher would not have digressed to comment on it.

It is **not** OK to be just a loving person.

The world in which we live is ruled by **Satan** and a variety of forces from without and within threaten to overwhelm us.

We really **need** a mature understanding of God and, above all, we need the help of **Christ**, our Great High Priest.

Now our preacher is working his way back to the theme he mainly wishes to address.

n.b. this is where we ran out of time in class on October 13, because of the many good and useful comments offered by many. Class on October 20 began at Verse 13 of Chapter 6. GGR