

## HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part twenty-two

Sunday, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #1980

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

### WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN IN MY LIFE AFTER I RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS?

**Hebrews 6:1-8** - "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."

This may well be the most challenging teaching passage in the whole New Testament. The *"Therefore...."* introducing **verse one** is the writer's way of linking up these verses with the *warning* he launched into in **5:11-14** - "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."

Because our writer knows the charge of being *"dull of hearing"* (5:11) is easily ignored - that's what one would *expect* from someone dull of hearing - or even denied, he stays with this warning a little longer. Our text today is the Holy Spirit's tool for reminding dull of hearing, immature Christians theirs is a very dangerous position, so he forces them to consider the possible outcome - **Hebrews 6:4-6** - "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, [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."

What do those words *mean*? Surely no one starts out with the desire to treat the Son of God with *"contempt"* (6). *Who are* these unrepentant to unrepentance people? And how does this *happen*? That is the almost impossible task before us in this text. These verses divide into two self-contained parts. The *first three verses* are the easier to deal with - and *they're* very difficult. Then, next Sunday, we'll examine the *last five verses* - which have divided the church for centuries - so that should be no problem.

Here's the plan for this morning. We're going to work through what our writer - quite surprisingly, I think - calls the *"elementary doctrine of Christ"* (1). This actually turns out to be *plural*, not *singular*. We'll see what these doctrines are (1-2), and how they are a *"foundation"* (1) for moving on to *"maturity"* (1).

#### 1) GROWTH IN CHRIST MUST LEAD TO FRESH LEVELS OF REVEALED CHRISTLIKENESS - NOT REPEATED CYCLES OF FOUNDATION LAYING AND REDEDICATION AFTER SINNING

I'm *not* saying God, in His grace, doesn't welcome back repentant sinners after periods of repeated failure. The prodigal son is welcomed home after *"coming to himself"* in the far country (Luke 15). Our Hebrews text is dealing with a deeper issue. In what sense did the prodigal son repent and return if the following week he left home for the same far-off country again? And what if he fled the father's home every week-end? After a while *what does his coming home mean*? And what is he doing to his own heart with his repeated homecomings?

Our text defines the legitimate *starting place* for spiritual life. Our writer very carefully defines it in that first verse - **Hebrews 6:1** - "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...."

Notice the coupling of *"repentance from dead works,"* and *"...faith toward God...."* Those are the gateway events to spiritual life. Our own efforts are useless (*"dead"*) in making approach to a holy God. So, of course, *faith* is the only logical replacement for these *"dead works."* If not by *works* of our own merit then *faith* toward God is the only option. That's why repentance from dead works and faith toward God can never be split apart.

Paul makes this clear in his preaching in the book of Acts: **Acts 20:18-21** - "And when they came to him, he said to them: **"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, [19] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; [20] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."**

The wording is slightly different but the theology is the same. Repentance and faith aren't **two different actions**. They are the **same** action expressed in **different directions**. One doesn't exist in its true form apart from the other.

This whole idea is constantly repeated in slightly varying forms throughout the New Testament. The heart of the message is always, **"Repent and believe the gospel."** Repentance is mere self-pity and regret without belief in the gospel. And belief merely intellectual ascent apart from a deep changing of mind and turning from sin.

But our text is making a slightly different point. This **entry** into life must never be treated as a **destination**. This issue is sharpened to a finer point when we read **5:14** and **6:1** together - **Hebrews 5:14-6:1** - "**But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. [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...**"

Here is the process of growth in grace. The issue here is God's prescribed path to **maturity(5:14)**. Here we have explained the **opposite** of **dull hearing(5:11)**. The disciple gradually sees the difference between **goodness** and **wickedness**. He learns to **value** the one and **refuses** the other. That's what **"...trained by constant practice"** means.

Our writer knows our hearts. This is not some slight side issue. How many times - without ever saying it in words - do we lighten the weight of the summons of the Spirit and the Word to deep hearing and radical transformation in some area by the quiet inward, never spoken out loud assumption that we're **already saved** so how important can this be? What do I have to **lose** by not applying my soul - not **leaning in to obey** - at this later point of growth? I don't have to **change**. I'm already **in**.

All you have to do is find any pastor in any church and he or she will tell you of the scores of professing Christians who commit sexual sin, never darken the door of the church, don't know Genesis from Revelation in their Bibles, have more fun in the bar Friday night than they could ever find with followers of Jesus, fill their minds with whatever slop Netflix dishes up, but insist to others and probably have even convinced themselves they are Christians because of some decision made long ago. So they're in. Why change?

That's why the first thing our writer denounces in today's text is the life-denying practice of never **building** on the **"foundation of repentance"(6:1)**. Foundations are never meant to be **stand-alone structures**. The value of any foundation is revealed by what's built upon it. That's the **only purpose** of a foundation. The structure must follow the foundation. This is not marginalizing the **importance** of repentance. It's defining the **nature** of it. By its very nature repentance is meant to be **built upon**. That's what that term **foundation** means.

Please understand. The issue here is never **how deep and extensive is God's grace**. To make that the issue is to pass the buck. The issue here is **how genuine is my repentance**. And our writer isn't **minimizing** the importance of **repentance from dead works** or **faith toward God** when he says we must **leave** these things and **move on to maturity(6:1)**.

We don't **"leave"** these things in the sense of **casting them aside**. We leave them - as the text makes clear - in the same sense the construction project **leaves the foundation** by extending the mass of the structure built upon it. This is not **ignoring** or **de-valuing** the foundation. It's **using** it.

Here's a never-miss, life-generating principle of how divine grace breathes and manifests itself in disciples. Remember it all your life. Every Christian needs to think through what he or she is **asking God to do** when they come for forgiveness. Every time God extends **forgiveness** He **replaces the sin He forgives with deeper commitment to obedience and growth in either the same area or a newly exposed area of my heart**. In other words he makes my **repentance a living foundation for fresh construction - not just cleansing**. If **all** you come for is a clean slate you're never going to understand forgiving grace as Father God extends it.

2) **THE FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS OF THE FAITH ARE NEVER MEANT TO BE LEARNED AS ENDS IN THEMSELVES**

**Hebrews 6:1-3** - "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. [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."

Including the first two (*repentance* and *faith*) there are six items on this list. And they are stated in the form of 3 pairs of 2. "*Repentance from dead works*" is paired with "*faith toward God*." Then "*instruction about washings*" is paired with "*the laying on of hands*." And finally, "*the resurrection of the dead*" is paired with "*eternal judgment*."

While the writer gives very little explanation with these terms most commentators see them as samplings of truths corresponding to the *beginning* of the Christian experience - *repentance and faith*(1) - the *ongoing corporate life* of the Christian - *washings (baptisms) and the laying on of hands*(2) - and the *final triumph* of the Christian through Christ - *the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment*(2). I don't think this is meant to be an exhaustive list. But I do think a picture of the whole Christian experience is revealed.

*Repentance and faith* we've already studied. The next two are tricky - *washings and the laying on of hands*. The *ESV* translates the first of these two as "*washings*." The *KJV* goes with "*baptisms*." And the *NIV* translates it "*cleansing rites*."

And there's a good reason for the variation. The word literally is "*baptisms*," but it is not the same word translated for "*baptism*" anywhere in the New Testament. Our writer seems to have had a reason for using this one-time *plural* - "*baptisms*."

Here's what I think is happening here. Remember this letter's first audience. They are *Jewish* believers being attacked for their commitment to Jesus Christ. They are being called back to the practices of the Old Covenant. And that covenant was full of "*washings*." There were ceremonial cleansings by the dozen.

And I believe a large part of the instruction for these Jewish believers was the way in which the atoning work of Christ *fulfilled* all of these cleansing rituals. They were clothed in the imputed righteousness of Christ. And the sign of their *participation* in Christ was their *baptism* right at the beginning of their faith.

But the reason our writer doesn't just mention *baptism singular* is these Jewish believers were having their *baptism in Christ* explained *in comparison with all those other "washings"*. Their Christian baptism *completed and fulfilled* what was only pictured under the Old Covenant. Later in this letter our writer will come right out and say these washings and sacrifices have been made "*obsolete*" in Christ Jesus (8:13).

This, of course, would be the strong motivation to stand firm in the gospel in the face of their Jewish antagonists. And our writer is urging his readers to *move on* from these instructions about their baptism into fully appreciating the *ongoing priestly ministry of Christ on their behalf*. They weren't to stay at the *beginning* of the faith. That foundation was already laid.

Then their baptism was linked with the teaching about the "*laying on of hands*"(2). Just as they were baptized in participation of the body of Christ they were also immersed in *shared ministry* in that same body. In everything from prayer for healing, commissioning of workers and missionaries, the receiving of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and the intercessory prayer ministry of the body, there was deep personal attachment and involvement. There was a visible *togetherness*. There was the *engagement of Christ Himself* among His obedient people. This was a visible refutation of anything cold or detached in the body life of the church.

Again, our writer would call these Christians - and all of us here this morning - into deeper and fuller *ministry* with the body of Christ. Instruction is good. But instruction must lead each one into ministry to others in the body. Knowing the truth isn't the goal. It's the foundation. The *building on the foundation is ministry involvement*. Remember, without involvement with others in ministry all you have for your Christian faith is a foundation - a hole in the ground. You desperately need to build on that foundation.

This call can never be filled professionally in the body of Christ. There are people in this church who will remain *untouched* and perhaps even *unreached* apart from the ministry of *you*.

Finally our writer mentions ***“the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment”*** (2). But his interest isn't simply in what theologians today call ***eschatology***. Our writer isn't ***charting out future events***. He wants to help struggling Christians who may be just starting to give up.

I want to high-lite two reasons for our writer's direction in this text. When we consider ***“the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment”*** we all know we're dealing with the ***conclusion*** of all things. Our writer brings his readers to the ultimate ***destination*** of every life on planet earth.

Strangely, it's also one of the most ***ignored*** and, yes, even ***forgotten*** realities. So our writer calls his readers back as a source of strength and comfort. Very quickly, these closing two events on the list can do two things for thoughtful disciples:

***First, with the coming resurrection there is a new day and a different life coming.*** And this isn't the only time our writer makes practical application from it - ***Hebrews 11:35*** - ***“Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.”***

What a strange verse! First we have the wonderful miracle of women (probably mothers) receiving their dead (children?) back to life. And you have to ask what could be better than that?

That's where the next part of the verse chimes in - ***“...Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.”*** So there were others who were ***“tortured.”*** And apparently tortured to death. They didn't ***have*** to receive such treatment. All they had to do was renounce their faith. The text says they could have been ***“released.”*** But they wouldn't renounce Christ.

Why? Where did such strength come from? The text says they wanted a ***“better life.”*** Do you see it? Those mothers who had their children raised from the dead had their dead raised ***back to the same life.*** Those raised would soon die again - perhaps very painfully.

But there is a resurrection coming to the faithful that is being raised to a ***“better life.”*** This will be a ***permanent*** resurrection to a ***whole new creation.*** And the encouragement of this verse is to ***remember that resurrection.*** This will give endurance and courage and hope and strength in the face of every temporary trial.

The final event on our list is ***“eternal judgment”*** (6:2). And here's why our writer closes with this event. Remember his audience. These were persecuted Jewish believers. They were apparently being grossly mistreated. This very letter will tell us some were beaten and some were expelled from their homes and others imprisoned - ***Hebrews 10:34*** - ***“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”*** This is more than just name-calling.

How shall disciples stand such injustice? They remember the final judgment of God - ***1 Peter 2:23*** - ***“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”***

Peter says Jesus rested in Father God's future judgment of all injustice. And Peter says this is ***our example.*** Learn to do this. It's very hard. That's why, in each of these practical applications of truth we must constantly ***keep building on the foundations of known doctrinal truth.*** There's a whole structure of patient Christ-likeness still to be constructed on the foundation of my conversion. And the One who called you is faithful to keep building it. Don't be a dull hearer. Never stand still. The most joy-producing step in your life in Christ will be found in the ***next*** thing built on the foundation of your faith.