

**The Hebrews Initiative:
A Great Challenge from a Challenging Text
Hebrews 5:11-6:20**

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Text Introduction: We are in a series that we are calling the Hebrews Initiative. It is an important journey. Though not exactly the same, our circumstances are similar to that of the original recipients of Hebrews. As such, it is my prayer that this study will provide significant encouragement for us to persevere in this post-Christian and at times anti-Christian world in which we find ourselves living.

Many consider the book of Hebrews to be one of the most complex books in the New Testament. William Barclay called it the most difficult book in the entire New Testament. However, another New Testament scholar, William Lane said, "But if you will press into it, it is one of the most rewarding books in the whole Bible.

Our unfamiliarity with the Old Testament sacrificial system is probably one of the issues that makes this a difficult book. In addition, the "warning" or "apostasy" passages also cause great concern for some. And, we have one of those such passages for our consideration today.

We can make the book much easier to understand if we understand the context of the original letter. The Book of Hebrews, written by an author unknown to us, was written to encourage Christians to persevere in their faith in the midst of persecution. Even though the recipients of the letter were victims of persecution, the call of the author is for them to persevere in their faith. Nothing, even persecution, should detract them from following Christ. Salvation through Christ is and was so superior to every aspect of their former religion, Judaism, that they would be fools not to persevere in their commitment to Christ.

We have a rather large section of Scripture today, so let me begin with reading just a portion of it and save other parts of it for later in our study. Let's begin in Hebrews 6:1.

Text: 6 Therefore, leaving the elementary message about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, faith in God, ²teaching about ritual washings, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And we will do this if God permits.

⁴For it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, became companions with the Holy Spirit, ⁵tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, ⁶and who have fallen away, because, to their own harm, they are recrucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt. ⁷For ground that has drunk the rain that has often fallen on it and that produces vegetation useful to those it is cultivated for receives a blessing from God. ⁸But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and about to be cursed, and will be burned at the end.

Introduction: William Barclay, as I noted a moment ago, says about the whole book in his introduction, "Hebrews is the most difficult book in the entire New Testament." David Allen, Professor of Preaching and Dean of the School of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth says in

his introductory paragraph to this section, “We now turn our attention to what may be the most difficult passage to interpret in the entire epistle.” (NAC, 339.)

Not to be outdone, George Guthrie, also a noted Southern Baptist professor, says of this text: “It is no exaggeration to designate the passage we now consider as one of the most controversial in the book of Hebrews—indeed, one of the most disputed in the entire New Testament. (NIV Application Commentary, 216)

So, here we have arguably the most difficult passage in the most difficult book. Aren’t you glad you are here?

What makes this passage difficult and controversial, especially for Christians of our theological bent, is the assumption that “falling away” in verse 6 refers to the losing of one’s salvation. However, if this is not assumed, then we have to define from what they fall.

And, I think a close examination of this text in context helps us to do all of that. I have given you this morning a pretty structured outline to try to keep us on track this morning. You will want to write your own notes underneath the major headings to help you remember some of the details.

The Contextual Problem (5:11-14)

We get immediate help in the first word of Hebrews 6:1. Our interpretative minds are now trained when we see the word “therefore” to look back to see the reference point. Indeed we see a good backdrop to the context when we read Hebrews 5:11-14.

¹¹We have a great deal to say about this, and it’s difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy (or slow) to understand. ¹²Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God’s revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. ¹³Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.

The writer of Hebrews has turned his attention to his readers’ maturity as believers in Jesus. They have become lazy in their understanding. Other translations give this phrase, “dull of hearing.” The issue is one of lack of maturity. He indicates three problems that their lack of maturity has created.

1. By this time in their spiritual development, they should be teaching others, but because of lack of maturity, they are unable to teach.
2. They still need milk. This is obviously an analogy to our physical maturation process.
3. Because of their lack of maturity, they are unable to distinguish between good and evil.

So, what is the call to action with this kind of problem? That brings us to the “Central Premise” of this text.

The Central Premise (6:1-3)

The main point of this text is found in verse 1. “Let us go on to maturity.” And there are two simultaneous actions to take if they are going to grow in maturity. First, they have to move past the elementary message about the Messiah. Second, they have to stop laying the foundation of repentance.

Don't misunderstand here. The writer is not indicating that these are not foundational messages to keep sharing. These are messages that they in fact should be sharing. These are not messages, though, that they should have to keep on learning.

This is kind of like the old joke about the young preacher who went to a new church. He gave his first sermon. The sermon was well put together, well received, and got an overall good response from the congregation. The second Sunday came, and the preacher preached the same sermon, exactly word for word from the previous Sunday. That, of course, got some chatter after the service. The general consensus though was that it was a good sermon and the preacher was young, so nothing was said. The third Sunday came and the preacher preached the same sermon, exactly word for word from the previous two Sundays. This got a little more attention and a visit to the pastor from the head deacon in the middle of the week.

The conversation went something like this. "Preacher, some of the members wanted me to talk to you about your sermon. Now, preacher, it is a fine sermon, but it has been the same sermon three weeks in a row. We are just wanting to make sure that there are some other sermons."

"Oh, yes," the preacher said, "there are plenty of other sermons to come."

"Ok, then when do you think we might begin to hear some of those sermons?"

"Just as soon as everyone starts obeying the message of the first sermon."

Here is the central premise: Let us go on to maturity!"

The Challenging Point (6:4-6)

Having seen the problem being addressed and the central premise, we now arrive at the challenging part of this text.

First of all, verses 4-6 are one sentence.

Second, notice that the sentence begins and then is interrupted so to speak with five attributes to describe those he is talking about. The first four attributes seem to clearly present those who are believers in Christ.

In addition, the context we have already considered seems to make clear that these are believers. So, from what are they falling? They are falling away from their zeal and enthusiasm. Times have become difficult. As a result, they have ceased to grow as Christians.

The Clarifying Picture (6:7-8)

Then, the writer of Hebrews does what all the great preachers do when a subject is complex. He illustrated the teaching with a word picture. The picture is an agricultural one. The land that is well-watered will produce fruit. The crop that does not produce is worthless.

As believers, we will either produce fruit or not. The key to our continuing to produce fruit is one of maturity. So, we pause to get the main point of all of this teaching this morning.

We must continue to mature as believers so that we will continue to bear fruit.

They are falling away from bearing fruit!

The Concluding Principles (6:9-20)

⁹ Even though we are speaking this way, dear friends, in your case we are confident of the better things connected with salvation. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you showed for His name when you served the saints—and you continue to serve them. ¹¹ Now we want each of you to demonstrate the same diligence for the final realization of your hope,¹² so that you won't become lazy but will be imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and perseverance.

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself:

¹⁴ I will indeed bless you,
and I will greatly multiply you.

¹⁵ And so, after waiting patiently, Abraham obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For men swear by something greater than themselves, and for them a confirming oath ends every dispute. ¹⁷ Because God wanted to show His unchangeable purpose even more clearly to the heirs of the promise, He guaranteed it with an oath,¹⁸ so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. ²⁰ Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner, because He has become a high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

So, how do we keep maturing?

- Keep learning—He is confident that they will.
- Keep serving—Notice verse 10.
- Keep leaning on Jesus—Notice verse 19-10.

I ran across the words to an old hymn this week that was written with the book of Hebrews as its theological text. The hymn is "Arise, My Soul, Stretch Every Nerve." The first line goes like this:

Arise, my soul, stretch every nerve. And press with vigor on. A heavenly call demands thy zeal.

Most of you, probably will relate better to the modern song, "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)." That song begins, "You call me out upon the waters, the great unknown where feet may fail." Near the end of that song, we get this wonderful lyric, "Spirit, lead me where my faith is without borders....Take me deeper than my faith could ever wander."

That's what God wants from you and me. So, let us go on to maturity! You have meandered long enough on the beach of faith. Wade out into the waters. Go deeper than you have ever gone!

