

SESSION FIFTEEN

A CONFRONTATION OF
THEIR NEED FOR MATURITY*Heb 5:11–6:3*

Note: Subsequent to writing these notes (Sessions 15 & 16), I wrote an article on Hebrews 5:11–6:12 that was published in a journal. A copy is provided as Appendix A.

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with 5:11, the author is ready to move on to a new section in the development of his "exhortation." Thus far, he has been attempting to argue for the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant by virtue of the superiority of Jesus Himself. He will continue this same tactic until the end of chapter seven, but at 5:11 he wants to take up a new superiority of Jesus. In 1:5–2:18, he demonstrated the superiority of Jesus to the angels. In 3:1–5:10, he pointed out the superiority of Jesus to Moses and went on to reveal how Jesus is guiding His people to a greater "rest" than Joshua did under the Old Covenant. The greater rest is not the mere land of Canaan, but the Messianic kingdom where faithful believers are to enjoy their rest and inheritance. To be successful in this pilgrimage that results in an eternal *eschatological* salvation, however, they will need the help of a high priest (namely, Jesus).

FIRST MAJOR MOVEMENT OF THE BOOK (Heb 1:1–7:28)

MAJOR THESIS: The New Covenant is superior to the Old, because of the superior person upon which it is based.

Heb 1:1–2:18

The Son is superior to the angels who mediated the Old Covenant revelation.

Heb 3:1–5:10

The Son is superior to Moses through whom the Old Covenant came, and has a superior task to Joshua in leading us to God's "rest."

Heb 5:11–7:28

The Son (as High Priest) has a superior ministry to those of the Levitical priestly ministry.

In 5:5-6, the author demonstrated that the Old Covenant revelation anticipated that the Messiah would not only be a king but also a high priest (so Ps 110). Hence, there is a legitimate basis for Jesus to be regarded as a high priest. Beginning in 5:11, then, he wants to set forth a third case for the superiority of the New Covenant by arguing for the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry to that of the Levitical priestly ministry. The author senses, however, that this will be a much more difficult task, given the spiritual condition of his readers. They will need to be able to comprehend deeper spiritual truth, if they are to bear with him. In particular, they will need to be able to understand the Melchizedekian priesthood and its relation to the priesthood through Levi and Aaron.

Though the main force of this argument will be given in 7:1-28, the preceding material in 5:11–6:20 is meant to help prepare them for this presentation. He first must address their immaturity and declining spiritual state. This is indeed a serious matter. Not only will their immaturity hinder them from comprehending the truth he wants to present, but continued persistence in their condition could result in their "*falling away*" (6:6), a situation that would not only incur God's judgment upon them but would mean their forfeiture of inheriting the promises.

II. THE STATEMENT OF THEIR SPIRITUAL PROBLEM (5:11-14)

A refined theological argument based on the priesthood of Melchizedek is not an easy matter to explain. This section presumes that there is a correlation between spiritual maturity and one's ability to understand spiritual truth. As one progresses toward spiritual adulthood, he should grow in his ability to comprehend spiritual truth. Yet, in the spiritual realm, one's ability to comprehend does not necessarily increase with the passing of time. How one has responded to truth along the way determines one's present capability to understand and whether or not he ever gets past the spiritual *ABC's*. The proper response, of course, is one of faith and obedience . . . applying the Word to one's life and thus becoming a "doer" of the Word . . . becoming more Christlike in character and being drawn into a deeper experience of worshiping God. Before God gives us more spiritual light, we must first respond to the light He has already given us! This is one of the fundamental principles of the Christian life.

A. The Readers Are "Dull of Hearing" (5:11)

The problem with the readers of Hebrews is that they had not responded properly to the spiritual light they had received. Consequently, they had failed to grow and develop; they remained in spiritual infancy. This makes explaining about Christ's priestly ministry difficult, for they are "dull ($\nu\omega\theta\rho\iota$) of hearing." The word $\nu\omega\theta\rho\varsigma$ basically means *slow* or *sluggish*.¹ They are *sluggish hearers*, meaning that they do not hear well. Lane (1:136) remarks, "Deafness or dullness in receptivity is a dangerous condition for those who have been called to radical obedience. The importance of responsible listening has been stressed repeatedly in the sermon (2:1, . . . ; 3:7b-8a, 15; 4:1-2,7b)."

The adjective $\nu\omega\theta\rho\varsigma$ is important to our evaluation of this whole unit, since it only occurs one other time in the NT and that is in Heb 6:12. What we have, then, is an *inclusio* with $\nu\omega\theta\rho\varsigma$ marking the beginning and ending points of the subunit. So, within the larger unit of Heb 5:11–6:20, 5:11–6:12 is one subunit, and 6:13-20 is a second subunit (see the structural outline of the book at the end of session 4 for further detail).

5:11 - "you are dull/sluggish of hearing"

6:12 - "that you might not be sluggish ($\nu\omega\theta\rho\iota$), but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises"

¹ We do have three occurrences of $\nu\omega\theta\rho\varsigma$ in the LXX (Pr 22:29; Sir 4:29 11:12). The idea of "sluggish" is seen, for example, in Sir 4:29 (= Ecclesiasticus) where it is contrasted with the idea of "hasty": "Be not hasty in thy tongue, and in thy deeds slack ($\nu\omega\theta\rho\varsigma$) and remiss."

Within this *inclusio*, he will confront them about their immaturity, exhort them to mature, warn them about failure to do so, and finally encourage them that he has high hopes for them—even that they might "inherit the promises."

B. The Readers Cannot Partake of "Solid Food" (5:12)

The problem was not that the readers had not had time to mature and progress to a point of greater spiritual understanding. In fact, had they made appropriate progress, they could have (and should have!) even been teachers by this time. The word "again" (πάλιν) was a reminder that someone had indeed taught them the basics of Christianity before . . . the "elementary principles of the words of God." The word for "truths" (*NIV*) or "principles" (*NASB*) is the word στοιχείον which means *fundamental principles* or what we might call the *ABC's*. The term was used of the letters of the alphabet as they might be learned by a school child. The author likens the *basic truths* of the faith to "milk" in contrast to "solid food." Just as a baby has to drink milk until it develops to a point of being able to eat solid foods, so it is in the spiritual realm as well. Not all truth is at the same level, and not all truth is digestible by all Christians. Only those who have worked their way through the "milk stage" are ready for deeper spiritual truth. Yet, the author is not going to correct their problem by trying to lay again the foundational truths. Rather, he will warn them seriously, and then seek to exhort and motivate them to obey.

C. Spiritual Maturity Involves the Capacity to Discriminate, But One Must Be Trained For This (5:13-14)

There is nothing wrong with being an infant (νήπιος), but there is plenty wrong with remaining an infant. One should make progress beyond *spiritual infancy*. If one never feeds on anything other than the "milk" (the first basics), he will be inexperienced (ἄπειρος) in the "word of righteousness."² The expression "word of righteousness" (λογου δικαιοσύνης) has been variously interpreted.³ The *NIV's* "teaching about righteousness" reflects their

² The word ἄπειρος is a *hapax* in the NT, although it is used four times in the LXX (Num 14:23; Wis 13:18; Zech 11:15; Jer 2:6). It is used in Num 14:23, for example, to speak of an "inexperienced youth" and in Zech 11:15 to speak of an "unskilled shepherd." The word basically means to be inexperienced in something, and thus lacking the appropriate skill for such an endeavor. In Jer 2:6, it speaks of the wilderness as an "untried land," i.e., no one had passed through it before.

³ Lane (1:138) interprets the phrase in a more restricted way as meaning the "paramount lesson in holiness" and connects it with endurance that has martyrdom in sight. He states, "It may be preferable, therefore, to take account of a technical use of the formulation in the early second century that clearly links the phrase with martyrdom. In calling for unceasing perseverance in Christian hope, Polycarp appeals to Christ Jesus and says, 'he endured everything. Therefore, let us become imitators of his patient endurance and glorify him whenever we suffer for the sake of his name. I, therefore, exhort you to obey the word of righteousness πειθαρχεῖν τῷ λογῷ τῆς δικαιοσύνης] and practice patient endurance to the limit—an endurance of which you have had an object lesson not only in those blessed persons Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in members of your own community as well as in Paul himself and the other apostles' (*Phil.* 8.1B9.1). J. A. Kleist comments on the expression τῷ λογῷ τῆς δικαιοσύνης: 'Polycarp now shows that the great and paramount lesson in holiness which a Christian has received is to hold himself in readiness for martyrdom' (*ACW* 1:193, n. 65)." Although Lane's interpretation would fit in with the larger concerns of the epistle, it is too dependent on a 2nd century use and not clearly attested to in the immediate context.

classification as *objective genitive*,⁴ though Ellingworth (307) prefers a *genitive of quality*, meaning "righteous Word." Consideration could also be given to a *genitive of purpose*, in which the phrase could be translated "the Word for righteousness." In this case, the author would have in mind the intended outcome that growing in the Word should provide. Also, there would be a natural connection with "training" by way of God's discipline so that we share in God's holiness and righteousness (note Heb 12:11 in which δικαιοσύνη is used again with γυμνάζω). Whether an objective genitive is preferred or genitive of purpose, the author's point is that "spiritual infants" are untrained and inexperienced in this facet of the Christian life. Such righteousness does not come easily, but only as one moves beyond spiritual infancy and the "milk" and begins to walk by faith and endure through the God-given *training sessions* designed to produce righteousness and holiness in one's life. Retreating in the Christian life will certainly not help one attain these goals.

The solid food of God's Word, however, is for those who are mature. In the case of the mature, their senses (αἰσθητήρια) have been trained for distinguishing between good and evil.⁵ One who would desire the "solid food" of God's Word must realize that he cannot gain it apart from the process of maturing . . . a process that will require difficult training. The idea of stressful "training" is suggested by the word γυμνάζω, a word meaning to exercise naked or train (from which we get our English word gymnasium). But this *maturing process* is worth the price one pays, for in this way he comes to distinguish good and evil. This thought sets the stage for the author's exhortation in 6:1 in which he urges them to move on to maturity.

III. THE CALL TO MATURITY (6:1-3)

A. The Readers Must Choose the Goal of Maturing (6:1a)

Having confronted the readers of their woeful state of immaturity—in which they are *sluggish hearers* who lack the capability to comprehend "solid food"—the author calls upon them to move on to maturity. Lane (1:140) notes, "In this context spiritual maturity implies receptivity and responsiveness to the received tradition (5:14), an earnest concern for the full realization of hope (6:11), unwavering faith and steadfast endurance (6:12)." This is the only logical inference (Διὸ) to make. There is still hope and opportunity for them, but this is the decisive moment in which they must choose which way they are going to go (note that he is not suggesting a continued diet of "milk" for them). Any appeals to leave the faith and abandon their confession must be rejected in preference to the goal of maturing.

B. Focus Should Not Be Upon Laying Again the Foundational Truths (6:1b-2)

The author is not suggesting that the foundational truths they had learned about Messiah must now be discarded, as though they were unimportant. Rather, he is suggesting that these should not be re-laid; they should move on beyond these teachings. That is where their

⁴ In support of the *NIV*, note the use of λόγος in Heb 6:1 which follows: "the elementary λόγος (teaching) about the Messiah."

⁵ "Senses" means the inner part of man where moral reasoning takes place (4 Macc 2:22; cf. Jer 4:19).

efforts should be put.

There is debate as to whether the teachings mentioned in these verses pertain to Jewish or Christian matters of faith. Lane (1:140) points out that the latter has been questioned on the ground that in none of the six items mentioned in 6:1-2 is there any reference to anything specifically Christian (e.g., Adams, *NTS* 13 [1966-67] 379-84; Weeks, *WTJ* 39 [1976] 74-76). Each of the articles, however, is related to the high priestly christology developed in the subsequent chapters, which makes explicit the christological structure of the foundation.

The solution is probably not a matter of either/or (i.e., that the teachings were either totally Jewish or totally Christian). Given their Jewish background, their faith in the Lord Jesus and participation in the New Covenant called for a radical reassessment of their previous understanding of spiritual matters. In other words, their Jewish worldview needed to be recast and given new understanding in light of the Christ event.

The mention of "dead works" in vs 1 does not pertain to human works of the flesh in general, but more specifically to the external regulations of the Levitical cultus. Notice the use of the phrase "dead works" in Heb 9:14, in which the accomplishment of Christ's sacrifice is able to do so much more than Levitical sacrifices ever could. The "dead works," then, represent the efforts connected with the earthly sanctuary to provide cleansing and acceptance before God. Now that Christ has come and made a perfect sacrifice (one that does not merely take care of *external cleansing* but even makes possible the cleansing of the conscience), those Jewish believers who turned to Christ repented of (changed their mind about) the Levitical approach to God and adjusted their theology to place their faith in the Lord Jesus.

Other teachings had to be adjusted in light of Messiah's coming. Notice that the four items remaining in verse two are all related (grammatically) to the word "instruction" which in turn is related to "foundation" in verse one:

Not laying again a foundation (1) of repentance from dead works and faith toward God
 (2) of instruction about:
 ritual washings
 laying on of hands
 resurrection of the dead
 eternal judgment

The word "washings" (βαπτισμῶν - plural) probably does not refer to baptism but to Levitical washings connected with the cultus (note the use of βαπτισμός in the plural in Heb 9:10). The "laying on" of hands was commonly practiced under the Old Covenant. This was associated with sacrifices (e.g., Lev 4:15 – by elders; 8:14 – by priests; and 16:21 – by the high priest on the Day of Atonement). Also, hands were laid on the Levites when consecrating them to ministry (Num 8:10). Lane (1:140) states,

The discrimination between useless washings on the one hand and purification by the blood of Christ on the other (9:9-10, 19; 10:22), or between priests appointed by the imposition of hands according to the law, which in its weakness could not achieve the perfection of the people of God, and the high priest appointed by the oath of God and the

power of an indestructible life (5:1-6, 7:5, 15-28) demonstrates the relationship between the foundational teaching and the advanced instruction provided in 7:1–10:18).

Whatever understanding they previously had about resurrection and eternal judgment now had to be corrected in light of Christ Jesus. There was certainly a resurrection: since He had been resurrected, so they would be also. Furthermore, the Father had entrusted all judgment into His hands (Jn 5:22). Believers must be prepared for giving an account at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), while unbelievers will face condemnation to hell at the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11).

Yet these foundational matters had already been dealt with in days past. There was no need to cover this ground again, but rather to "press on."

C. There Is A Danger That The Readers May Not Be Able to Press On (6:3)

With the mention of the eschatological issue of "eternal judgment," the author suddenly stops. The thought of judgment is a reminder of the potential danger his readers face. If their present situation is not corrected, they may be in store for a negative judgment experience. Furthermore, God Himself may not permit them to "press on to maturity." The phrase "if God permits" in 6:3 raises a note of alarm. While there is still the possibility of "pressing on," they must know that they are dangerously close to complete spiritual disaster. The author will now (in 6:4-6) confront them with the situation in which God may *cut off* the opportunity, whereby they will be left facing the severe judgment of God.