

The Book to the Hebrews

Remember

The purpose of the book is to encourage despondent, weak believers suffering ostracism and denunciation from the Jewish communities, not to drift away from all that they gained in Christ.

I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18

A. The Superiority of Son to the Angels. 1:1-14, 2:5-18

Parenthesis I: Warning against drifting, 2:1-4

(The path to glory is the way of suffering.)

B. The Superiority of Christ to Moses, 3:1-6

Parenthesis II: Warning against Doubting, 3:7-4:13

(The path to rest is the way of trusting.)

C. The Superiority of Christ to the Aaronic Priesthood, 4:14-10:18

1. Superior because of a better position, vv. 14-16

2. Superior because of better qualifications, 5:1-10

Parenthesis III: Warning against immaturity, 5:11-6:20

(The path to growth is the way of obedience.)

1. The fact of stagnation, immaturity, 5:11-14

The question that caused many to struggle is the spiritual state of the recipients ("it is impossible to renew that again... [6:6].") Are these people only professors with no genuine faith in Christ, "seed scattered on shallow soil"? Are these people genuine believers in danger of lapsing into lostness? Are these people genuine believers who have failed to mature in the faith and need encouragement to do so? I take the last option to be the situation for the following reasons:

----No book of the Bible is written to unbelievers; they are all addressed to the believing community. The most horrific warnings in terms of uncertainty of state, *Galatians*, is clearly written to believers ("I am astonished that you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ [1:6]" and yet he writes to those for whom "Christ died to "rescue us [1:4])." The point is an exhortation with a view to correction, not a warning of the potential of loss.

----The book is addressed to believers (3:1, 4:14). Further, the writer makes the point that they are genuine believers in the

parenthesis (“Beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you and things concerning salvation, though we are speaking in this way [6:9]”).

- The other warning passages in the book are addressed to believers; it would be strikingly odd if this were an exception.
- The parenthesis assumes that these are believers. Unbelievers do not retrogress in faith and obedience; they never possess those things.
- Think about how the writer uses illustrative material in the passages we have already examined. He uses material to make a single point, focuses on that, without considering other points that one could derive from an event, story, or example. Think of how he used the exhortation to rest in chapters 3-4 with Israel in the wilderness. Failure was not about being separated from the eternal promise, just the temporal blessings of it. Christ learned the cost of obedience through suffering, the point being that he is caring (a single point). In chapter 7, he will exploit the figure of Melchizedek who “had no father or mother,” the point being that he skips a lot of details to fasten on a single point.
- It is also true that genuine believers cannot become willful unbelievers (John 1:12-13) since they came to Christ through a divine revelatory gift (John 6:44), not by personal insight.
- If the passage teaches that a genuine believer can retrogress to a forfeiture of salvation, it clearly teaches that that salvation is impossible for them (“it is impossible to renew them again to repentance [6:6.]”). Once saved would mean no further opportunity to be saved. No one teaches that as Orthodox Faith!

It seems best for these reasons that the parentheses are addressed to genuine believers who are drifting away, endangering their spiritual health to stave off the momentary discomfort of community ostracism.

a. A fact realized, v. 11

“Concerning Him...” refers to the ongoing discussion of the superiority of Christ as our great high priest, prefigured by Melchizedek. They have become dull or sluggish in understanding so as not to grasp the meaning of the connection. The discussion of Jesus as the great high priest ends after 5:10 and is resumed in 7:1 (5:11-6:20 is a parenthesis). The writer must have been aware that his readership did not possess the spiritual maturity and knowledge of the Scriptures to understand his point.

These believers have suffered a spiritual retrogression that should not have been if they had assimilated the instruction they received.

By this time, they should be teachers, not mere sluggish dullards.
This state was an acquired one!

b. The cause explained, v.12a

They should have progressed in their understanding of spiritual things (the greater clarity of the new revelation in Christ, the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Greek Scriptures, that Jesus is what the Hebrew Scriptures announced in shadows), but they have suffered from a decline of spiritual fervency. In failing to be instructors in the faith, they have regressed as learners!

c. The cause illustrated, v.12b-14

1) The metaphor of milk and meat stated, v.12b

Though milk is used positively as a source for spiritual growth for the newborn in Christ in I Peter 2:2 (“the milk of the Word”), here it is used for the food that the mature should not be consuming as their complete diet (see I Cor. 3:1-2).

2) The milk-metaphor explained, v.13

Milk is a metaphor for immaturity in the things of the faith, a state devoid of knowledge beyond the basics of the faith. The symbol indicates that, though they should be adults in the faith, they need the diet of infancy.

3) The meat-metaphor explained, v.14

The writer suggests that there are two stages in Christian development, an elemental stage, characterized by faith without deep understanding, and a mature stage, characterized by knowledge and ethical sensitivity. Discernment, discriminatory judgment, characterizes the mature! Maturity is a process of time (“sense trained”). It is a sad case when those in stage two lapse into stage one!

2. The need for progress, 6:1-8

a. The exhortation, vv. 1-3

What it means to go on to maturity is to leave behind the introductory principles of the Christian faith (milk) for other things. Again, we have a hint that these are believers; the call is to maturity!

1) The call to leave, pressing forward, v. 1a

2) The things to leave, pressing forward, vv. 1b-2

The six topics are the initial insights these believers gained in coming to Christ, His message, and departing from Judaism. The six elemental religious values that the readers are urged to leave behind, having come to the initial insights “(ABCs)” of the Christian faith, can be arranged in this way.

The word “instruction or teaching (v.2)” stands in opposition to “foundation (v.1).” This suggests that the initial couplet is composed of foundational elements, the two couplets following clarifies the first. The first couplet is elucidated by the second and third).

----“Repentance from dead works and faith toward God” looks at salvation, one negative and one positive.

----“Repentance from dead works” means works that issue in death, a change of mind about the value of works to save us. This was the message of John the Baptist (Matt 3:2, Mark 1:4, Luke 3:8) and Jesus (Matt 4:17, Mark 1:15). The connection between moral conformity to the Law (1st century Judaism), as the cause and merit of divine grace in redemption, should be poignantly clear to them.

----“Faith toward God” was clearly taught in the Hebrew Scriptures (Is. 7:9). Repentance and faith express the same idea though one expresses a negative turning away from something and the other a turning to something. Together they express the facets of coming to Jesus. “Turning from” and “turning to” are inseparable.

----“The teachings of baptisms and laying on of hands” looks at rituals. “Teaching of baptisms (“washings” or “cleansings”)” refers to Old Testament Jewish ceremonial washings (cleansing rites). Note that “baptisms” is plural. The plural is never used in the Greek Scriptures of Christian Baptism. Multiple washings prefigured the once-for-all washing of salvation by the washing of the Spirit (Titus 3:5). We should leave behind ritual that has been fulfilled. In the Old Testament era there was a constant need of cleansing because the final cleansing had not come. We are not to anticipate cleansing, but evidence it by Christian baptism.

----“Laying on of hands” in the Hebrew Scriptures was a symbol of commissioning, the transferal of authority, group identity. We have a greater, invisible identity through the gift of the Spirit who identifies us with Christ.

----“Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” looks to future events.

“Resurrection of the dead” was an Old Testament teaching but twisted to mean only ethnic or proselyte Israel. That identity has been clarified in Jesus who is “the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

----“Eternal judgment” of those who opposed God was altered to mean those who opposed ethnic Israel. The writer is saying that his readers should leave such shadows behind, going on to better things in Jesus.

3) The reason to leave and press forward, v. 3

The “if” does not indicate the meaning of the word in the English translation. It is a third-class condition, meaning that it is a certain thing and can be translated “since.”

Maturity is the will of God! The fault for immaturity is not divine.

b. The reminder, vv. 4-6

This is the most difficult paragraph in the book. In the broader context of the entire book and in the immediate context, the issue is a lack of endurance by a group of believers. Several things are affirmed: (1) they have had spiritual privileges, (2) there is evidence of spiritual retreat, (3) renewal in such cases is impossible, and (4) there are reasons for this impossibility. Renewal is always possible in this life for believers (v. 3), so the writer must be posing a case that is not real, but uses it to show the lunacy of retreat, dullness, and sluggishness to avoid a momentary displeasure. Retreat, apostasy, is not an option; it is not remedial (it would require something that cannot happen!).

1) The privileges of the believer stated, vv. 4-5

Five things characterize these people.

a) “They have been enlightened,” v. 4a

A definite event has occurred, a spiritual awakening. Light has come into their darkness and things can never be the same. Often this is associated with the symbolic cleansing of Christian baptism. The “enlightened are the baptized for they are viewed as within the redeemed community.

b) “They have tasted the heavenly gift,” v. 4b

The phrase suggests a time of actual, conscious enjoyment of blessings. It may indicate participation in the Lord’s Supper, symbolic of the reception of spiritual blessings.

c) “They have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,” v. 4c

This was symbolized in the church of the time with the laying on of hands. They have received this in the ritual of baptism.

- d) "They have tasted the good word of God," v. 5a
They have experienced the preaching of Jesus and the apostles confirmed by miracles (mighty works).
- e) They have experienced "the power of the age to come," v. 5b.

They know the power of God, seeing the miraculous workings of the kingdom, the wonders that accompanied the preaching of the good news.

- 2) The hypothetical happening described, v. 6a
The "if" is crucial; it is hypothetical of true believer's lest the Bible becomes a contradictory book like all others. The writer is saying that there is no forgiveness for defection after the reception of privileges. Permanent defection is not possible of genuine believers. We have all lapsed, only to return.

The reason for retrogression among these people is the thought that they can revert to Judaism, the world of shadows and anticipations, and return when it is more convenient, less threatening. The writer is making the point that such an approach to the problem of ostracism is to deny what they surely believe, the superiority of what they have become in Christ, and denigrate His accomplishments of redemptive culmination.

- 3) The hypothetical consequences stated, v. 6b
Those who willfully, with constancy and hardened attitude, repudiate the salvation procured by Christ, reject the advances of His great priesthood (redemptive finalities) will find no possibility of returning to Christ.
- 4) The hypothetical causes stated, v. 6c
The causes are two; both are impossibilities. He seems to be saying, "Do you know what you would be saying?"
 - a) Renewal would require a second death ("again") of Christ, a second final cleansing act, that would make the first cleansing act a non-final one, contradicting 1:3.
 - b) Such a second death would invalidate His first death, denigrating and shaming His first and only death.
- c. The necessity of progress: illustrated, vv. 7-8

This is a common agricultural fact. The production of a crop from the soil depends upon the reception of moisture. Blessed soil produces a blessing if it receives the blessing! Soil that does not receive moisture (blessing) produces a curse (thorns and thistles, undesirable consequences).

The ground rendered unproductive would remind the reader of the original curse on the earth (Gen. 3:17-19). The point is that an unproductive life is a judged life, bringing divine judgment and waste of potential. "Burning" has caused some to think of hell and loss of salvation, but that is not the point. God's anger with His failing people is often likened to the burning of fire ("Our God is a consuming fire [12:29]"). "Burning of fields in ancient Israel was a practice to promote productivity (remove hindrances to productivity); it was a positive thing.

(Continued in the next lesson)

Applications:

1. It is expected in the Holy Scriptures that all Christians become teachers ("you ought to be teachers"). Though there is a place for the educated, formally trained teacher, it is to teach the Lord's people to be teachers. We should all be teachers, though we may not all stand behind a lectern. The older in the faith should be teaching the younger in the faith. Are you helping someone grow in the faith?
2. Our passage defines the mature Christian. It is one who has experienced the word of righteous (the word that issues forth in righteousness), who, over time, has become trained in spiritual and ethical discernment; and who can instruct in the things of the faith. How long have you been a Christian? Have you been too long in stage one?
3. One cannot be brought to maturity without leaving indifference. This is a choice that we not only need to make initially, but daily. It is a daily endeavor to lay aside indifference and do the things that God would have us do. How are you doing in this process? Indifference is one of our greatest enemies! Are you striving to become a teacher; the best circumstance for it is not the classroom; it is the home, the marketplace, and the office.
4. We are secure in God, but the problem is that we are not constant in the enjoyment of that privilege. Enjoyment of a privilege and the fact of a privilege are not the same.