

DAY 7: THE PERILS OF APATHY AND APOSTASY

Hebrews 5:11–6:8

Because his readers are too spiritually immature to understand the significance of the Melchizedek priesthood, the writer of Hebrews exhorts them toward spiritual maturity before continuing his letter. To understand the message of Hebrews—the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, of Christ over the sacrificial system—requires mature faith.

FAILURE TO PROGRESS IN THE FAITH Moral and spiritual laziness seem to prevent the original readers from understanding and applying truth. Though the Hebrews should have been instructing others, by now, they still needed elementary teaching.

“*The basic principles of the oracles of God*” (Hebrews 5:12) refers to rudimentary teachings, or simple ABC’s, of God’s Word. Spiritual immaturity inhibits understanding advanced Christian teaching. The writer uses the metaphor of *milk* and *solid food* to make his point. Milk is appropriate food for infants. After infancy, proper development demands solid foods also.

“*The word of righteousness*” (5:13) includes teaching on the priestly function of Christ. The writer feels, however, a more thorough explanation of the relationship between Christ and Melchizedek depends on whether the readers are prepared to consider deeper truth. The next verse describes the person for whom the solid foods, or strong teaching, are suitable. The mature adult is one who partakes of deeper truths, acts on them, and “*by constant practice*” (5:14), develops knowledge based on experience of what is right and wrong.

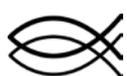
EXHORTATION TO PROGRESS “*Therefore*” (6:1), both teacher and reader are to proceed from simpler teaching to deeper truth. They are to “*leave the elementary doctrine of Christ,*” not in the sense of throwing it aside, but in the sense of growing past it to greater stature. “*Let us ... go on to maturity*” uses the word *mature* in the sense of *complete*.

THINK ABOUT how Christian growth requires discipline, concentration, and application. We don’t automatically receive Christian maturity. It is unreasonable to expect spiritual growth to require no effort. Paul’s comparison of our spiritual development to an athlete’s rigorous training applies as well to the study of God’s Word: “*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*” (1 Corinthians 9:25).

The writer stresses that the basics do not make up all Christian truth. He includes three groups of paired subjects that comprise the essentials of Christian teaching: (1) repentance and faith; (2) baptism and “*the laying on of hands,*” and (3) resurrection of the dead and judgment.

Verses 4-6 contain a solemn warning against *apostasy*—a *deliberate abandonment of the truth* so severe that the apostate person actually shames Christ. Such an extreme denial of God has no remedy and no possibility of repentance because the only One who could bring them back has been rejected. The danger is not that of *falling into sin*, but of *willful opposition to God*. “*Those who have once been enlight-ened*” (6:4) seems to refer to people who have understood who Jesus is but have not moved beyond intellectual understanding to personal faith.

“*Who have tasted the heavenly gift*” may refer to eternal life, salvation, or Jesus. Some interpret *tasting* to mean *eating*, but it can also imply *sampling*. The Greek word for “*shared*” in the next phrase—“*who ... have shared in the Holy Spirit*”—can refer to anyone who has been present when the Holy Spirit manifested Himself. Not everyone who witnesses manifestations of the Holy Spirit becomes personally filled with the Spirit. Verse 5, “*who ... have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,*” seems to imply, as did verse 4, *tasting* but not *digesting* the Word. Many heard the gospel and saw awesome miracles without moving on to personal faith.



“*It is impossible, in the case of those ... who ... have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance*” (6:4, 6) does not mean that true believers’ salvation is lost. The apostates

have hardened their hearts to the extent that repentance is not possible. They have totally rejected the Holy Spirit's work. The underlying reason is that "*they are crucifying once again the Son of God ... and holding Him up to contempt*" (6:6). The enormity of the sin is that they are repeating the same heinous act committed by the religious men who crucified Jesus because He said He was the Son of God. In their hearts they commit the same dreadful act.

THINK ABOUT how members of human families have the same genetic makeup. When we are spiritually born into God's family, we are eternally part of His family. Once we have His Holy Spirit within us, we have the DNA of God's family. This doesn't mean that Christians will never sin again, but when we do, God forgives us: "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*" (1 John 1:9). Why are apostates not forgiven? They refuse to admit their sins and ask God's forgiveness.

Commentators are split on whether the people described in Hebrews 6:4-6 know God or know *about* God. If they really know God, can true believers lose their salvation? Consider the following points:

- If God is sovereign and His Word says His sheep will never perish, can we not rest in that assurance? (See John 10:28-29; Romans 8:29-39.)
- Our salvation depends solely on Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross for our sins. (See Galatians 2:15-16; Ephesians 2:8-9.)
- Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit being a seal, a guarantee of our salvation. Only God knows our hearts and exactly when we are sealed for eternity, but the Holy Spirit is the evidence (guarantee) that this has taken place and will be true forever. (See Romans 8:16; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:11-14.)
- Though Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2:20-21 may seem to indicate that salvation can be lost, we must look at the Scriptures as a whole and see what truths are expressed throughout. Most scriptural evidence supports the conclusion that salvation is through grace alone, and that same grace ensures eternal life. Those who have hardened their hearts to the extent that the Holy Spirit can no longer work, and see no value in Jesus and His death on the Cross, are the ones who need to worry.

The writer follows his warning with an illustration from nature. A field will yield whatever seed is buried in it, just like the human heart. God gives the blessing, but the heart must be free of "*thorns and thistles*" (6:8). To avoid reaping condemnation, everyone must carefully cultivate his or her own faith. The possibility of failure calls forth the warning, but the author reassures them that "*in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things*" (6:9).

PERSONALIZE this lesson. What can we learn from this difficult passage? The one thing we must not do is doubt the mercy and grace of God. God never turns away a repentant sinner. However, we must be careful not to tolerate in ourselves an attitude of carelessness toward God's revealed truth. Is the Holy Spirit speaking comfort or conviction to you today? How will you respond to Him?

REVIEW: THE PERILS OF APATHY AND APOSTASY

13. Describe how this lesson affected you. Were you challenged, confused, or relieved?