

## Hebrews 5:11-6:8 A warning to heed

### Introduction

In the midst of his doctrinal arguments about Jesus the great high priest, our author breaks off to address a pressing series of pastoral problems in this congregation. These words are amongst the most solemn and serious in the New Testament. The issues are real and genuine not hypothetical. The intention is to both to challenge and reassure genuine believers, but also to warn against those who make claims to be followers of Jesus but whose profession does not produce the fruit associated with genuine claims to be a follower of Jesus. The person who is genuinely concerned about their spiritual state, by definition, is showing evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in their life, because there would be no concern without the influence and activity of the Spirit of God. The New Testament rightly warns us against taking our eyes off Jesus (Hebrews 12:2) and of the necessity of exercising great diligence and effort to maintain and strengthen our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul declared in Colossians 1:29: *To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.* In I Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul compared living the Christian life to the dedication of an Olympic athlete who maintains a strict self-discipline over all aspects of their life in order to maximize their chances of winning the prize. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*<sup>25</sup> *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.*<sup>26</sup> *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.*<sup>27</sup> *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* He does not assume because he is the great apostle to the Gentiles that he can slacken off in his dedication to the Lord. In addition, although he has no doubts about the eternal security of the follower of Jesus (Paul wrote Romans 11:29: *for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.* These words simply confirm Jesus' words in John 10:27-28: *My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me.*<sup>28</sup> *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand.*) it is no excuse for careless living. This is why Paul urged the young churches under his care to keep watch over their lives to keep themselves close to the Lord. For example, to the congregation in Philippi he urged: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*<sup>13</sup> *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose* (Philippians 2:12-13). The teaching of this section of the book of Hebrews is conveying a similar message with respect to three distinctive problems.

#### 1. The problem of ignorance (Hebrews 5:11-14)

All these challenges in this section of the letter are addressed to genuine followers of Jesus. The writer makes this clear in Hebrews 6:9: *Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation.* That is, they are the Lord's people, but like statement of the proverbial school report, they 'can do better'! The question that naturally follows is this: in what way can I or should I 'do better' in my walk with the Lord? In this particular local setting the problem of ignorance could be divided up into three aspects, self-discipline, personal devotional life and progress to spiritual maturity. It is likely that similar issues will arise in each and every generation. The Word of God is like a mirror to us

(James 1:23-25); our task is to look carefully at what we see and examine whether any of these challenges are applicable to our own lives today.

(a) **The lack of self-discipline** (Hebrews 5:11) *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.* The author has broken off from his teaching about the priesthood of Jesus and its significance to our lives convinced that his hearers or readers needed to be challenged about their lack of self discipline in managing their walk with the Lord. There are believers who would never dream of missing a day at work without a good reason or of failing to complete work tasks to the best of their ability, but who are careless about making Sunday worship with their church family a priority, or who might offer inferior quality service in God's work. Our calling as believers is actually to do our best in all situations because we are doing what we do to honour the Lord. Sadly, in every congregation across the world this has been a problem over the centuries. Do I need to be reminded of this practical challenge? However, this was not the issue the author was addressing here, as it is addressed in Hebrews 10:23-25. In this particular verse the challenge was about us striving to get to know God's Word better. It might be a particular doctrinal belief or the teaching of a particular book or section of a book in the Bible; it may be a practical matter of Christian discipleship with which we are wrestling, but when the Lord places it on our hearts do we endeavour to work through it? I can recall a couple of times in my undergraduate student days when I particularly profited with wrestling with particular biblical doctrines. The most memorable one was over the issue of whether we are 'once saved always saved' or whether a genuine Christian can lose their salvation because of an act of sin and need to be saved 'again'? Unknown to me, at that time the majority of our Christian Union Executive Committee was doing exactly the same thing over some weeks and came to remarkably similar conclusions. The verse that was the clincher for me and the revelatory moment was Paul's words in Romans 11:29: *for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.* I had an overwhelming sense of the joy of the Lord and was literally skipping or dancing with joy on the footpaths of our college campus on an early morning 'walk'. I cannot recall if another person was around that early morning but the sense of security in Christ and being His forever brought tears of joy to my eyes and has done so again as I recall this moment from my late teenage years. Do you have a hunger to know God's Word better? I hope so – it is not just Ministers and lay-preachers or house-group leaders who have a passage to prepare for a meeting or service that should want to dig deep into God's Word – hopefully all of us will want to grow in our knowledge and understanding of it. We are so blessed with an incredible range of Bible commentaries and Christian books, together with a local Christian bookshop, that we cannot say there are no sources of assistance if we need them. Have you / have I retained my hunger for knowing God's Word better. Remember Peter's words in I Peter 3:15: *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* In context this is a basic outline of the gospel, but it is always good to know more of God's truth.

(b) **The lack of a credible devotional life** (Hebrews 5:12) <sup>12</sup> *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!* Some years ago one of my older colleagues in ministry who is with the Lord did a survey of his congregation's devotional routines. The questionnaires were anonymous so that people did not put down what they thought the pastor wanted them to say. He was profoundly shocked and distressed that in far too many homes the honest answer was that the time for spiritual input was on a Sunday in church and Sunday School. There was no personal prayer or daily Bible reading going on in those homes. We need regular physical food each to

keep us physically healthy. We don't need to recall what we ate for dinner three weeks ago, but it was for the good of our bodies! Likewise, the regular practice of reading a few verses or a longer section of God's Word daily and a time of prayer is a powerful input of spiritual food into our minds to resource us for the day. For many of us the use of one of the many excellent Daily Bible reading notes provides a great structure so that we cover a variety of sections of God's Word over any given year. How are you and I getting on? Do we make a little time each day for the input of spiritual food? It certainly will provide the vital spiritual nourishment that is so beneficial to our spiritual growth.

(c) **The lack of growth into Christian maturity** (Hebrews 5:13-14) <sup>13</sup> *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.* <sup>14</sup> *But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* Imagine going round to your friend's house and the family is having dinner. Your friend's children are now well into teenage years but to your surprise are tucking into Farley's Rusks in milk in a bowl, with bibs around their necks. I hope not! What is fine for a little child taking its first solids is far from adequate for an older child or young adult! In practice, such a scenario would not happen except in a home where there were some significant and serious concerns about parenting and child welfare! However, the alarming thing is that spiritually such a picture is far too common. There are Christians who have been on the journey of faith for decades and sometimes know little more of the Bible than relatively new believers; there are disciples of Jesus who have only been following Him a few years whose maturity in attitudes, speech or conduct is light years ahead of older believers who have failed to grow spiritually in some areas of their lives. When the pressure is on and the challenges of life present themselves to us the extent of our growth in grace and Christian maturity becomes all too evident at times or it can cause us to be humbled and praise God because a brother or sister is honouring a God in a way that challenges our own level of devotion to Him. As a pastor I have had occasions when I have wondered what on earth I could say to someone experiencing some incredibly tough life situation- but actually their powerful testimony of God's sufficient grace in their time of need caused me to well up with praise to God in that setting. Are you / am I growing more like Jesus? Seeking to become more mature in our faith? Year by year we can ask ourselves the questions that only we can do alone before the Lord.

## 2. **The problem of immaturity** (Hebrews 6:1-3)

*Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, <sup>2</sup> instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. <sup>3</sup> And God permitting, we will do so.* Here there are six foundational truths of the faith that are referenced here in three pairs of subjects.

(a) **The initiation of the Christian life** *...repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God...* (Hebrews 6:1b) The language here in this list of key topics can be explained in a Christian context, but equally can be understood in a Jewish context from which these first hearers and readers came to faith in Jesus. This will be particularly apparent in the second pairing of terms. The first term *repentance* is an essential part of putting our faith and trust in the Lord in that we express our renunciation of things we have said or done that break God's law. We turn from it and turn to Jesus. This was foundational in the preaching of John the Baptist. Luke 3:3 states concerning John: *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for*

*the forgiveness of sins.* It was not unique to John. Jesus also clearly made this demand upon His hearers. Luke 13:1-5 makes this very clear: *Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.* <sup>2</sup> *Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?'* <sup>3</sup> *I tell you, no! **But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*** <sup>4</sup> *Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?'* <sup>5</sup> *I tell you, no! **But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*** The Early Church taught this same message. Peter on the Day of Pentecost, the first public evangelistic service in Christian history- on day one! After the Holy Spirit had inspired his powerful message individuals in the crowd indicated that they wanted to respond to it, but we not quite sure what to do. *Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* <sup>39</sup> *The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call'* (Acts 2:38-39). This repentance was *from acts that lead to death* (Hebrews 6:1b); a Gospel of grace is received freely and produces a response which results in good works. Paul expresses that so clearly in Ephesians 2:8-9: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.* <sup>10</sup> *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Our salvation is received by faith as we place our trust in God through Jesus. Has there been a moment in your life when you put your faith and trust in Him? We are never too mature in the faith or too knowledgeable about the Bible to gain no benefit from hearing the gospel again and again. We rejoice in, desire to pass it on to other people and to build our lives in the light of its principles. Yet if all we are doing is the basic elementary discipleship course again and again and not growing as a Christian in other ways there is something wrong. The initial stage of Christian discipleship is formative, but we are called to become mature in Christ –able to model Christ-like living. How are you getting on? How am I growing as a Christian?

(b) **The grounding of the Christian life in the local church** ... *instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands* (Hebrews 6:2a) The Greek word for the first term of this second pairing is βαπτισμῶν (baptisms); but this doesn't fit no matter how some scholars try to squeeze it into some kind of Christian theological framework. Baptism is an initiatory ordinance which we do once as believers when for the first time in public we confess our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. However, this Greek noun is not normally used in the Bible for baptism (possibly in Colossians 2:12); it does, though, appear in Hebrews 9:10 *ceremonial washings* and in Mark 7:4 *When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.*) It refers to the various ceremonial washings that may take place through the day in the time of Jesus. The Dead Sea Jewish monastic community at Qumran that wrote the famous scrolls had manuals for its members describing the ritual purification ceremonies they were expected to follow. This included a daily self administered immersion at the end of the working day before the communal dinner. In the Christian Church we rejoice when someone is baptized and testifies to their faith in Jesus, but it is not something we repeat every few years. Our input to church life develops as we offer our gifts to the Lord. ...*the laying on of hands* (Hebrews 6:2a) in the Early Church and some churches today this certainly takes place after a person has been baptized. There may be other commissioning or ceremonies where this happens, but it is most often seen at baptismal services. In Acts 8, in Samaria, after Philip had baptized some new converts, Peter and John were sent by the Jerusalem Church to meet with them and pray for them. Acts 8:17 states: *Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.* Jesus in ceremonies of infant dedication exercised this ministry. Matthew 19:13 states: *Then people brought little children to*

*Jesus for Him to place His hands on them and pray for them.* It was also used in a ministry of praying for the sick. In Acts 28 on his way to Rome Paul and other passengers on a ship were shipwrecked off the coast of Malta. While on the island he heard that the father of a prominent citizen was unwell and went to pray for him. Acts 28:8 states: *Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him.* It was also commonly used at ordination to Christian ministry services. Paul writing to the young pastor Timothy in Ephesus gave him plenty of advice about how to conduct his ministry. I Timothy 4:13-14 states: *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.<sup>14</sup> Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.* These are initiatory acts or ceremonies in the life of the local church. This does not happen next week or the week after as well. When we share our testimony of the Lord's work in our lives –the question is not just what did the Lord do all those years ago when you professed faith, but what is happening in the present time and in recent years? In ordinary life for a child to speak a lot about what they did in school would be natural. For a thirty, forty, fifty or sixty year old to be doing exactly the same thing would be decidedly unusual as they had so much more experience of life on which to reflect. The same should be true of our faith stories? What has God been doing in your life in recent days? Would you be willing to share something of that testimony?

(c) **The future aspects of the Christian life** ... *the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment* (Hebrews 6:2b) Here both Jews and Christian share a common conviction of life beyond the grave that death is not the end. We do die and our bodies are buried or cremated, but we receive new resurrection bodies like Jesus' resurrection body (I Corinthians 15:48-49); we also recognize that we will one day stand before the Lord to give an account of our lives. <sup>10</sup>*You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* <sup>11</sup>*It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God."* <sup>12</sup>*So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.* (Romans 14:10-12); It is also clear in II Corinthians 5:9-10: *So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* <sup>10</sup>*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* God has taken care of our future. We acknowledge what lies ahead of us but are not continually speculating about it. Instead we focus on the calling before us in the here and now to fulfill the Great Commission of taking the good news to people who need to hear it and helping those who profess faith to grow as disciples of Jesus. We have a training in basic knowledge of the faith but then alongside learning more we get on with serving the Lord and living for Him.

### 3. **The problem of apostasy** (Hebrews 6:4-8)

This last section of this passage is a genuine warning to those who read it not a hypothetical teaching. However, the true child of God will persevere in the faith and show spiritual fruit in their lives, because they will heed the warning to watch over their life. The author and the recipients of the letter are aware of a series of pastoral situations that have arisen over the recent history of that severely persecuted Jewish Christian congregation in Italy. The hardships they have endured has led in time to deep discouragement when some have simply been tempted *to drift away* or had actually done so (Hebrews 2:10); others certainly had made professions of faith but when they realised the persecution and that would be their lot as followers of Jesus they felt the cost was too high and walked away (Hebrews 3:12); the pastoral problem in some of these

situations was that it led to the hardening of the hearts of some of these unnamed people so that they not only were physically away from meeting with God's people but became vocal opponents of the witness of this congregation as they sought to regain their place in the wider society and end the persecution they had been experiencing- which served as a double discouragement to this local congregation. Hebrews 6:4-8 summarises what individuals known to both writer and hearers of this letter have done.

(a) **They despise God's gifts** (Hebrews 6:4-5)<sup>4</sup> *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup> who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age* The problem is that you cannot never in any area of your life simply go back to what you were before. When a marriage ends in irretrievable breakdown the couple concerned cannot pretend it hasn't happened and be single as before. What has happened in life, good and bad, shapes to a degree who we are and our identity. In this case the individuals could not go back to ignorance of the gospel; when the Holy Spirit has opened your heart to see your need of Jesus and you have recognized God at work in your life, you cannot simply pretend it never happened. Or that they had seen God speaking to them through His Word, but now want to ignore it. Most Christians know people who claim to do that but they cannot regain past ignorance they are responsible and accountable to God for their choices.

(b) **They reject God's Son** (Hebrews 6:6)<sup>6</sup> *and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.* To recognize Jesus as the Son of God and our Lord and Saviour is wonderful, but to walk away having confessed faith in Him is a much worse state than before. Jesus in Matthew 10:32-33 stated: *Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven.* This is the most serious plight of all a person can be in. We can all be tempted to quit ministries and service for the Lord when times are hard- but faithful patient endurance is vital.

(c) **They forfeit God's blessings** (Hebrews 6:7-8) <sup>7</sup> *Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. <sup>8</sup> But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

The consequences of apostasy are of eternal separation from God. However, as Christians we must never lose hope for those for whom we pray and trust that even if it takes a long time the individuals concerned will soften their hearts, repent afresh and be restored to fellowship with the living God and His people. This passage was written in the light of sad pastoral experience, but its main intention was to keep Christians watchful over their own hearts and minds. May we do that in our lives and walk with the Lord, Amen.