

# “The Full Assurance of Hope”

## The Eighth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 5:11-6:12; Genesis 3:8-19*

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In the first five chapters of the Book of Hebrews, the author has made a very powerful case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses, and to the priests of Israel. The author of this epistle has built a powerful case because the church to which he is writing is facing a serious crisis. A number of people in this church came to faith in Jesus Christ as converts from Judaism. Now, apparently, a number of these same converts were facing serious persecution. As a result, many have renounced their faith in Jesus and returned to the synagogue. Having made his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ, at this point, the author now issues a stern warning to the members of this church to grow to maturity, to know what they believe and why, as well as warning them of the need to persevere to the end of their lives in faith. But the nature of the warning raises an important and long-standing theological question. Can a Christian fall away from Christ and be lost? Can a true Christian believer lose their salvation?

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews, and we now come to the author’s very direct warning about the possibility of apostasy (Hebrews 5:11-6:12). Christ’s church has long debated the meaning of this passage—some see it as proof that a true Christian can fall away from Christ and be lost, while others see the passage as a warning for Christians not to fall away from Christ, a warning which those are truly Christ’s will heed, meaning that those who fall away were never truly Christ’s in the first place. Unfortunately, this important debate often takes place apart from the context in which the possibility of apostasy arises, and that is the author’s warning to professing Christians about returning to Judaism. So, as we deal with this issue, it is imperative that we keep the original context in mind.

The author’s warning takes place against the backdrop of his five chapter argument for the superiority of Jesus Christ to all things. Repeatedly, the author has cited from well-known portions of the LXX, demonstrating that the Old Testament Scriptures foretold of Jesus Christ, Israel’s priest and king, who is the Son of God as well as the creator and sustainer of all things. The author has shown us that the death of Jesus renders us perfect (because Jesus’ death propitiates the wrath of God), and that because Jesus suffered and was tempted as we are, we have in Jesus a high priest who sympathizes with all of our weaknesses. Jesus is not just a great high priest, he is **the** great high priest.

**A**s we turn to our text (Hebrews 5:11-6:12) and address the question as to whether or not a Christian can lose their salvation, the severity of the author’s warning soon becomes clear.

Throughout the epistle so far, the author has warned his readers about their need to persevere in their faith Jesus Christ, while at the same time giving his readers ample reason to persevere. Jesus Christ, and the New Covenant, of which he is the mediator, is vastly superior to the Old Covenant, whose mediator was Moses, and whose priests were sinners who needed to offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for the people of God. In this section of this epistle, however, the author breaks off his argument for the superiority of Christ’s priesthood to Israel’s priesthood, and scolds his readers for their collective spiritual immaturity, before warning them about the gravity of the sin of apostasy.

The author has already shown the superiority of Jesus Christ to all things central to Judaism, so it is with that case in mind that he rebukes his readers in verse 11. “*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*” The “about this we have much to say,” refers to the author’s discussion of the priestly and kingly figure of Melchizadek in the previous section. Melchizadek is a bit difficult to explain to people because Melchizadek is in many ways a mysterious figure, as well as

a type of Christ. Although we do not know much about him, Melchizadek is one of those unique individuals in redemptive history who simultaneously holds the offices of priest and king. Even though the Psalmist (as we see in Psalm 110:4) applies these two offices held by Melchizadek to king David and to his descendants (because of David's ties to Jerusalem, the ancient city of Melchizadek), no one person has held these two offices from the time of David until the coming of Jesus Christ. Although the Jews were looking for such a person (the coming Messiah), they need look no further than to Jesus Christ.

The author of this epistle would like to spend more time unpacking this important and interesting connection between Melchizadek and Jesus Christ, but he realizes that this will take much time and will be difficult to explain. But his bigger concern is that his audience won't spend the time, or make effort to follow his argument about Jesus and Melchizadek, even if he spent the time to make it. Why? Because the people in this church are dull of hearing. Those who have neglected such a great salvation and who are allowing themselves to drift away from Jesus Christ, his gospel and his church (cf. Hebrews 2:1-4), frankly are not interested in the author's case that Jesus is the king and priest in the order of Melchizadek. Many in this church are dull, and not interested in such things. They don't care about Melchizadek, because they really don't care much about who Jesus is, and they don't care how his saving work makes Jesus a better mediator of a better covenant.

In verse 12, the author continues his rebuke. *"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God."* Apparently, these people have been well-taught, and some of them have been Christians long enough that by now they should be able to teach others, so as to prepare new converts for the struggles that now have come upon them—persecution and the pull to return to Judaism. But what they've been taught, has not become part of their lives, nor does this information serve as the basis for their thinking. Because they are dull (not interested), they have not matured. Although they should now be in a place where they are teaching others (presumably those converts who are coming to faith in Jesus Christ), sadly, these people require someone to come and teach them the basics of the Christian faith all over again—the basic principles of the oracles of God, (the word of God). They passed Christianity 101. But as time passes, they never enrolled for Christianity 200, and probably would have trouble passing Christianity 101, if they had to take it again.

Because this is the sad state of affairs in this congregation, the author can say of them *"you need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child."* The contrast between milk and solid food was a common one in the early church and was taken from Greek philosophy, where this is a popular metaphor. By making the contrast between milk and solid food, the author is calling these people "spiritual babies" who have never made the effort to move from infancy to maturity. Although they should be reaching maturity, they are still in diapers, and still on the bottle. There is no excuse for this "immature" condition.

Given the difficulties facing this church, it is imperative that the church's members move on to maturity if they hope to effectively deal with the issue as to why so many among them are returning to the types and shadows of Judaism. As the author states in verse 14, *"but solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."* There is no excuse for those who cannot discern truth from error (not knowing why Jesus is superior to Moses). There is no excuse to be indifferent to the truth as presented by the author in the first five chapters of this epistle.

These dull Christians are the milk drinkers who are still in diapers. They may believe that Jesus is the son of God, but they do not yet understand how that confession must impact their lives. If Jesus is everything the author has shown that he is, then people should be able to discern why returning to Judaism is such a serious matter. If Jesus is truly human and truly divine, if he is the one predicted throughout the Old Testament, then people in this church must see the serious error on the part of those who profess faith in

Jesus, but who then renounce Christ when they encounter persecution. If someone understands who Jesus truly is, they will be far more likely to stand firm in the face of attacks upon their faith and will be far less likely to return to an inferior covenant, with an inferior mediator, and inferior promises.

In verses 1-2 of Hebrews 6, the author spells out those basic doctrines upon which this church was originally founded, and which must serve as the foundation from which move beyond their basic confession to a more mature faith which can withstand the troubles that this church is currently facing, enabling its members to persevere to the end. The author writes, “*therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*” The author spells out three pairs of basic doctrines (milk) which the members of this church embraced when they first came to faith in Christ, and which stand in sharp contrast to the basic teachings of Judaism, from which many of them have come.

The first of these elementary pair of doctrines is repentance from dead works and *sola fide*. This refers to ceasing to trust in our own good works to justify us, and instead, to rely upon the merits of Christ (not human merit) received through faith alone. This is the same thing Paul affirms in Galatians 2:16—“*we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” The Christian gospel (grounded in the covenant of grace) stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing Jewish notion at the time that human works (i.e., obedience to the law and its ceremonies), was the basis for one’s relationship to God.

The second elementary doctrinal contrast mentioned by the author may come as a surprise to us—washings and the laying on of hands. But this makes perfect sense given the situation facing this particular church. The reference to washings is no doubt a reference to the Jewish practice of ceremonial washings, which stood in complete contrast to the Christian doctrine of baptism.<sup>1</sup> Baptism is not repeated, while Jewish ceremonial washings were repeated. The reference to the “laying on of hands” probably refers to that initiatory rite performed by the elders when people were baptized, or when they were commissioned for office as ministers, elders, and deacons, or when the elders prayed for others (i.e., for healing). The “laying on of hands” was the ceremonial way of tying new believers to Jesus and his apostles, which is why we still practice it today. So, the elementary principle here is that baptism marks the initiation into the covenant community (the *ekklesia*) while the Jewish washings were perpetual (like the animal sacrifices) and ineffectual.

The third elementary doctrine concerns the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. From the very beginning of the church, Christians confessed the resurrection of the body (when Jesus returns at the end of the age), and eternal life (immortality) which begins at regeneration and continues on after the bodily resurrection at the end of the age. The Christian hope is not eternal life in some heavenly sphere with wings and a halo, but living eternally in a resurrected body on a new earth. It was this hope of the resurrection of the body which gave Christians confidence in the face of persecution and even martyrdom. Many Jews believed in the resurrection from the dead (i.e., the Pharisees), but apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Jews had no way to make sense of how our bodies are raised.

These then, were the basic doctrines of the early church, particularly the church to which this author is writing. It is time, the author says, for this congregation to move on from these basic truths and mature in their faith. In other words, these basic doctrines are the foundation of Christian maturity, enabling

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<sup>1</sup> Contra Bruce, Hebrews, 141-142.

believers to apply these same doctrines to real-life situations like having a number of their own renounce Christ. These basic doctrines form the categories for Christians to move on to weightier, more challenging theological matters, like the biblical arguments from the LXX, which refute Judaism by showing the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, the angels, and the priests of Israel. Those who move on to maturity will understand why it is important that Jesus is a priest and king after the order of Melchizedek, and that this argument is yet another reason for Christ's superiority to Moses. They won't find such things "dull." As the author laments in verse 3, "*and this we will do [move on to maturity] if God permits.*" But whether or not this happens still depends upon how the congregation responds to this letter.

As an aside, often times these verses have been used to argue that once people have heard the gospel (milk) and then became Christians, they need to move on to other things (solid food, usually some point of doctrinal emphasis unique to that particular group and tied to some sort of emphasis upon the deeper life). In other words, once you've heard the gospel and accepted it, there is no need to keep preaching the gospel (milk) to (mature) Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth. Since the Holy Spirit creates faith through the preaching of the gospel, and that faith is confirmed and strengthened by the sacraments, then the gospel must be preached, and yet at the same time, because the gospel creates and sustains faith, people who hear the gospel will be those actually motivated to move on to maturity and to wrestle with the deeper things of the faith. The gospel is the cause, the effect is maturity.

In verses 4-6, the author now raises the question regarding those individuals who have, apparently, embraced the milk of the Christian faith, but who have not moved on to maturity, and even worse, have fallen away from Jesus Christ by returning to Judaism. This is one of the strongest and most pointed warnings in all the New Testament. The author writes, "*for it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*" Whatever we say about this passage, the only way we can make sense of it, is to treat it within the context of the author's overall argument regarding the need for people in this church to realize the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, to move on to maturity, so as to persevere to the end of their lives in faith, despite whatever persecution comes their way.

The first matter to be addressed is the meaning of the elements listed here by the author: "once been enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift," and so on. To what do these things refer? "*Once been enlightened*" probably refers to someone hearing the gospel, and apparently understanding it, and then responding to it with a profession of faith. This may even have included baptism, which was considered the public profession of faith throughout the apostolic church. "*Tasted the heavenly gift*" is undoubtedly a reference to the Lord's Supper. "*Shared in the Holy Spirit,*" probably refers to the fact that someone has participated in the laying on of hands, and/or has witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of this congregation through the preaching of the word. "*Tasted the goodness of the word of God,*" refers to the kind of teaching and preaching which the author desired the church to embrace so as to move on to maturity. It refers to people who have been instructed in sound doctrine. Finally, the reference to "*the powers of the age to come*" refers to the fact that Christ's resurrection power has been proclaimed, and even witnessed through the transformation of various individuals in the congregation. These things are all tied to the word and sacrament ministry of the church. Whoever it is who is in view here (in terms of falling away), has participated in word and sacrament, and has responded by making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and has been baptized. For all intents and purposes, these individuals appear in every sense to be Christians. But are they truly Christians? Are they Christ's?

The second matter raised here is the nature and gravity of the warning. "*It is impossible,*" the author says of those who have participated in these things, "*and then have fallen away, to restore them again to*

*repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*” Apostasy is not only possible, when it occurs, it is final. This is the author’s warning to the congregation of the serious nature of this act. This warning is designed to “shiver our timbers,” so to speak! Apostasy is a serious thing. If someone professes faith in Christ and then falls away by returning to Judaism (the specific issue in view here), they come under all of the covenant curses which come upon lawbreakers apart from the mediation of Jesus Christ. To fall away from Jesus Christ is to demand to be judged by the law and our obedience to it. It is hard to imagine a more foolish move than this.

The third matter to be addressed is question of “who is it who does such a thing?” Can a Christian commit apostasy? The answer is “yes.” Professing Christians who are baptized can and do fall away. It happened in this church—this is why the author is warning the congregation so directly. It has happened in our church—we’ve excommunicated four members in our history. It will, no doubt, happen again. The question is “were these people ever truly Christ’s?” and if so, “how did they get away from the Savior who bought them and made them perfect?” Notice, I phrased the matter as I did because it is clear from the historical context of this letter that the author is not addressing in the abstract the question as to whether or not a Christian can lose their salvation. That is not the question being addressed here.

Scripture clearly teaches that a true Christian—someone for whom Christ has died, cannot sever themselves from Christ and be lost. But the author is warning those in this church considering doing such a thing of the gravity of their actions. True Christians must persevere to the end in faith, and they will persevere to the end in faith. As for the biblical evidence about perseverance, Scripture is very clear that a true Christian (someone for whom Christ has died, and whom he has given faith) cannot lose their salvation and come under God’s judgment. A couple of passages will suffice. John 6:37, 39—*“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. . . . And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”* John 10:28-29—*“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”* Romans 8:30—*“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* And finally, Philippians 1:6—*“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*

So, if someone who is Christ’s cannot lose their salvation, then the author of Hebrews is saying that those who have participated in all these things and then fallen away, cannot be Christians, despite their outward profession of faith and baptism. The author is warning this congregation as clearly as words will allow, that they must persevere to end in faith, and that those who do so are Christ’s, while those who do not, are not Christ’s and never have been, even though they have for a time publically identified themselves with Jesus Christ and his people. There is indeed such a thing as apostasy. People within the covenant community (the *ekklesia*, the church, the household of God), can and do fall away. But they are not Christ’s, and never were. But from our perspective, they look, sound, and act like God’s people. But these are the people who will hear the frightening words recorded in Matthew 7:21-23, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”*

The author follows his warning with an illustration drawn from agriculture, and which is found throughout the Old Testament (including the account of the Fall of the human race into sin, as we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning in Genesis 3). The illustration is to do with the bearing of fruit and the nature of the gospel. *“For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is*

*worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*” True Christians will bear fruit. God ensures that we will. We will persevere and manifest the fruit of the Spirit. But those who are not Christ’s do not persevere. They do not bear fruit—only weeds and thistles. Although weeds and thistles may look like fruit (grain) for a time, eventually, the difference will become self-evident. Time exposes everything.

In light of this, the author warns this church that the ultimate end of those who renounce Christ is the ultimate curse—to face the wrath of God. Acknowledging the serious nature of his warning, and making it plain that he truly believes that those who are truly Christ’s will take this warning in the way he intends it, he writes in verse 9, *“though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.”* The author fully expects that those who are Christ’s will receive the better things promised them, because they participate in that salvation accomplished for us by Jesus through his death for our sins, and through his resurrection and ascension to God’s right hand. Believers, the author says, can be sure of those things which belong to salvation, we need not fear coming under the curse. Why? Because Jesus Christ has borne that curse for us, and in our place.

Almost as if to assure any with tender consciences, he concludes his warning by reminding his hearers, *“for God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.”* God knows those who are his. His own will persevere because of his saving work on our behalf which manifests itself through that love which believers have, each for the other. In fact, as is plain from verses 11-12, the purpose for giving the warning in the first place was to offer encouragement to those who are indeed maturing in their faith and persevering in their faith in Christ. The author writes of them, *“and we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”* The mature have learned that the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. Christ’s own will persevere to the end because they have the hope of heaven, and know that they will inherit the promises Jesus has extended to them. Jesus has promised! And he alone sits at God’s right hand!

What then, do we take away from this warning regarding apostasy in Hebrews 6.

Although the warning in Hebrews 6 is often used as a proof-text that Christians can lose their salvation, the passage does not teach such a thing (much less actually address that question). The author is dealing with people who have apparently converted to Christianity from Judaism, returning to Judaism. In this context, the author sternly warns anyone who has made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, not to abandon that profession in the face of persecution. In fact, the author states that he expects those who are truly Christ’s will heed this warning in the hope and anticipation of the better things which are promised to Christ’s people. We have the full assurance of hope, if we trust in Jesus to save us from our sins.

Sadly, apostasy is a fact of life in Christ’s church. There will be those in our midst who profess all the right things, act like Christians, and who seem to be making progress in the Christian life. But they do not persevere, and at some point they walk away and return to whatever it was before they became Christians. There is always the hope and the expectation that such people will see the error of their ways and repent. Indeed, if they are truly Christ’s, eventually they will. Many of us know prodigal sons and daughters who have returned to the faith. Some of us were prodigals who have returned to the faith. There is always hope that people who have grown indifferent to the things of the Lord will return. Time will tell.

Nevertheless, the author’s warning cannot be dismissed or taken lightly. To renounce Jesus Christ and return to Judaism is to demand that God judge you by your works. You cannot make a more serious

mistake than this one. But we who are Christ's will hear this warning, live in the full assurance of hope, and strive to be imitators of those who faithfully and patiently inherit the promise.