

## Chapter 12

# Warning: Don't fall away!

(Hebrews 5:11-6:20)

### SOLID FOOD? (5:11-14)

Hebrews is meant to be a word of encouragement, and as we have seen, encouragement for the writer is not just soothing words but sound theology. His present difficulty is that those who most need to learn this theology of the priesthood of Christ are also those who are most likely to find it hard, heavy and unpalatable. '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 writer is disappointed with his readers, for he expected that by now they would be having a ministry of teaching others, but they were still at the baby stage! '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!' Think about his assumption that ordinary believers should be able to teach others. We should learn for ourselves, but also learn so that we can teach others (see [Colossians 3:16](#)). Remember this every time you read the Bible or hear a sermon. 'Dear heavenly Father, teach me so that I learn for myself, and so that I can teach others'.

How long were they going to stay there? The writer is not sure what to do: if he keeps giving them elementary teaching, they will remain as babies; but if he gives them solid food, they won't be able to cope with it. 'Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.'

So Christians begin with milk, by learning the elementary truths of God's word. Then, as we put into practice what we learn, we grow in spiritual discernment and are able to take more solid food; we become mature Christians, and are able to teach others.

But in this case something has gone wrong. The readers are drifting away, and the writer hopes to encourage them back again. He decides that it is not worth giving them more milk; he will give them solid food instead, which he resumes at [6:13](#), after a solemn warning.

## THE GREAT WARNING (6:1-12)

‘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’ (which is how their Christian instruction began), ‘instruction about cleansing rites and the laying on of hands’ (that is, how to join the Christian community), ‘the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement’ (basic information about the future). If the writer expected his readers now to cope with a good dose of heavy theology, it was because they had already become Christians by means of rigorous and comprehensive instruction!

### For reflection: Theology again!

Not just for mature Christians, but also for beginners. Has our zest today for immediacy and relevance resulted in the removal of theology from evangelism and discipleship? What do you think are the consequences a) for evangelism and discipleship? and, b) for theology?

‘Preaching and theology should never be divorced ...’ says James Denney, ‘If our gospel does not inspire thought, and if our theology does not inspire preaching, there is no Christianity in either.’ ‘Theology’ for Christians is our ‘world view’. World views shape our world, our actions and reactions. Bad world views create bad worlds: good world views can help create good worlds. We all have a ‘theology’, a ‘world view’: but they need to be shaped by God’s world view, God’s theology, which he teaches us in the Bible.

Our theology is our policies for living. A Christian or a church without theology is like a politician without policies but with a quest for popularity and re-election: no firm direction!

‘And God permitting, we will do so’. It is best to link this verse with verse 1: ‘Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ, and be taken forward to maturity’. For after the stern warning of verses 4–12, the writer will return to his theme of Christ’s priesthood—solid food, and will not give them milk any longer—the foundation of repentance, faith, baptism, and the rest.

This is because he recognises that once a person is a Christian, he or she cannot go back to the beginning. ‘It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened ...

who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance.’

How should we tackle this most difficult passage in Hebrews? Warnings about apostasy are frequent in this letter (see [3:12–19](#); [10:26–31](#); [12:25–29](#)), but students of Hebrews have not found it easy to agree on what the writer is saying. The main disagreement is about the exact state of those described in [6:4–6](#) as ‘enlightened’, those ‘who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age’.

One view is that the writer is describing Christians, who begin as sincere followers of Christ and who later abandon their faith or fall away. If this is so, then it is a notable warning to all of us that we have the possibility of losing our salvation, but this view is difficult to tie in with other parts of the New Testament which teach that believers cannot be lost (for example, see [John 10:27–28](#)).

Another view, accepting this teaching that Christians cannot lose their salvation, sees verses [4–6](#) as referring to those who show outward signs of being Christians, but in fact are not. They have dipped the toe, but haven’t jumped all the way in! And it is clear from elsewhere in the New Testament that there will be people like this who appear to be members of churches but whose apostasy proves that they were not genuine (see [1 John 2:18–19](#)).

A third view agrees that Christians cannot lose their salvation, regards verses [4–6](#) as describing genuine Christians, and sees these verses as a solemn warning against disobedience. God uses severe warnings like these to keep his people from falling away. He gives them because we need them!

It is important to realise that the people described are not just quietly drifting away; their apostasy is deliberate, public and continuous: ‘they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace’. They are not just syncretists, supplementing their Christian diet by returning to pagan sacrifices or Jewish rituals, but people who publicly repudiate their faith in Christ, abandon it and return wholeheartedly to their former ways. And in turning away from Christ, God’s Son, the priest and sacrifice God has provided for our forgiveness, they have turned away from God, and so there is no hope for them (see comments on [2:1–4](#)).

These people are like those in the parable of the seed (see [Mark 4:1–20](#)), who hear the word of God, receive it with joy, and then, when trouble or persecution comes, they fall

away. Their response to God's mercy is unnatural: '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. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned'.

### **For reflection: Does this mean you?**

Not everyone who drifts away goes as far as publicly insulting Christ or repudiating him. If you, or any of your friends, have drifted a little, become lax or grown indifferent, don't despair. Remember, the writer has these verses to encourage you to return, and the impossibility of repentance refers to wholesale deliberate public and continuous apostasy.

Don't confuse the sin of apostasy here with the eternal sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, described in Mark 3:20–30, which is far worse. It is not only to reject Christ, but to assert publicly that his power is demonic, as the teachers of the law said of Jesus: 'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons' (Mark 3:22).

But see how crucial the death of Christ is in all this, and how central to our faith. Those who fall away strike at the heart of God and his salvation, for 'they are crucifying the Son of God all over again'. Don't neglect or undervalue the saving death of Christ, in your theology, or in your daily life. To drift away from the centrality of the saving death of Christ in our place for our sins is to drift away from Christ and from God, and to head towards apostasy.

Our writer, having given his severe warning, now encourages his readers by reminding them of the fruitful work of God in their lives. '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. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.' The readers' faith has resulted in love, and their faith has resulted in good works. These are encouraging signs that they have kept the faith.

However, if they don't go on in the same vein, they may yet fall back. 'We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hoped for may be fully realised. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.' If they don't progress, they will

regress.

It is like marriage or friendships: if they are not sustained, they fade away. We should be working to improve our marriage, our friendships, but most of all, our trust and hope in God. With these words (verse 12) the writer concludes his warning, gives a foretaste of ‘the rollcall of faith’ in chapter 11, and introduces the theme of the next verses with the word ‘promise’.

## **GOD’S PROMISE, OUR HOPE (6:13–20)**

Although there have been encouraging signs of faith being active in their works (verse 10), the real source of hope and encouragement for the Christians lies securely in the character and work of God; he is the one whose promise is certain and sure. ‘When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants”. And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised’.

Abraham provides an example to all Christian believers. He learned to wait patiently to receive what God had promised, a promise God himself had sworn to keep. In [Genesis 22:16–18](#) God renewed his promise to Abraham that he would have many descendants. (Note the double emphasis in [Genesis 22:16–17](#): ‘I swear by myself ... I will surely bless you ...’) God supported his promise with an oath, not for his own benefit, but to encourage Abraham’s faith and perseverance. ‘For people swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.’

But Abraham is more than a useful example of someone who believed in God. God’s promise of blessing through Abraham’s descendants was finally fulfilled in Christ; so God’s purpose was to encourage us, the heirs of what was promised, as much as to encourage Abraham. The writer uses the word ‘promise’ not only in the context of Abraham’s faith, but also with the bigger picture in mind, that the promise in the old covenant would find its fulfilment in Christ.

‘God did this so that, by two unchangeable things—his promise and his oath—in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.’ So we must not be lazy, but must imitate Abraham’s

response of faith in the doubly-sure promise of God, and take hold of that promise, fulfilled in Christ, who is our sure hope. ‘We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’

So the writer ends this warning with an encouragement (verse 18) based on the character and promise of God fulfilled in Christ.

And, as often, the writer ends this passage by introducing the theme of the next verses: Jesus, who is ‘a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’.

## **FOR STUDY, DISCUSSION AND PRAYER**

1. In the light of such a strong warning (see 6:4–6), how can you be sure that you won’t fall away? How does 6:13–20 reassure you? And do you see why Hebrews 3:12–13 is important?
2. Suppose you have a Christian friend who thinks he or she is beyond God’s forgiveness. How would you help them?
3. When do you think a Christian is mature enough to teach others (see 5:12)? Do you consider that you are ready? Why, or why not? What ‘elementary truths’ of God’s word do you still need to know? In what ways can your church improve its teaching and training of believers?
4. Pray that you will take the warnings and encouragements of this passage to heart. Pray for people you know who have lived as believers and have now fallen away. Pray that they will return to Christ, that God will draw them to himself. Jot down the names of those for whom you have prayed in your Hebrews Diary.