

The Danger of Falling Away

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • Hebrews 6:1-12

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It is good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakeschurch.org/visitor. Or, you can use the cards in the pews this morning – not just if you are visiting with us, but also for special questions and prayer concerns. You can put those in the box on the wall in the entryway or give your card to me on your way out this morning.

We are here this morning to worship God and to encourage each other. But we are also here to preach the love of God, the good news that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son to take our place as a sacrifice for sin; he was buried, but then he was raised up on the third day. We obey that good news by believing it, by repenting of our sins (by having a change of heart), by confessing our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And we've had many examples this week, but I'll just share two of these, both from the Lord's church in Coweta, Oklahoma. In the first post, they say that, "It was such an honor to baptize this wonderful woman Shania this evening! After some personal Bible studies, she recognized the need to respond scripturally to God's call and dedicated her life to God! Please keep her in your prayers as she starts this new journey with our Lord!"

And under the second picture up here, they say, "We are so proud of Lela and excited to have her working with us here at the Coweta church of Christ! Tonight she dedicated her life to God and set an excellent example for her grandsons as she put on Christ thru scriptural baptism! ... To God be the Glory!" Great things have happened in Oklahoma over the past week or so. And we share these two pictures to help illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. Wherever you may live, we want you to know that God loves you and wants you to be saved. And if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship today or reach out using the contact information on the website or on the bulletin, and we would love to study together.

This morning we return to our study of Hebrews as we look at the first half of Hebrews 6. Two weeks ago, the author tried to introduce the priesthood of Jesus by comparing Jesus to Melchizedek, but he was frustrated, because he was losing his audience. This was clearly over their heads, so he starts with this rebuke, almost as if it's in parentheses. We have the reference to Melchizedek in Hebrews 5:11, and we don't really get back to it until we come to the transition into Hebrews 7. And in between, we have something of a correction. It's

encouraging, but it is something of a rebuke, as he encourages these people to grow up. And part of this rebuke comes in the form of a warning, a warning about the danger of falling away.

This brings us Hebrews 6:1-12, as we come to one of the most terrifying warnings anywhere in scripture. It's so terrifying, in fact, that many have tried to dismiss this. "Certainly he must be speaking hypothetically," some have said. Others dive into this passage with the preconceived idea that it is impossible to fall away, so they will try to suggest that this passage isn't addressed to Christians at all. We see all kinds of mental gymnastics being used to try to dismiss this, so it is especially important that we look at this passage in context this morning. As we've noted from the beginning, the book of Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who were having a hard time listening to Jesus. They were tempted to turn back, and so we have this message as a reminder that Jesus is better; therefore, do not turn back. This is the theme of the book. So, with this in mind, let's look together at Hebrews 6:1-12,

¹ Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do, if God permits.

⁴ For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷ For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸ but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

⁹ But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. ¹¹ And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

So again, as the author of Hebrews encourages these people to stay faithful, as he encourages them to keep on keeping on, he gives a warning about the danger of falling away. I'd like to move through this passage one section at a time...

I. ...starting with the author's encouragement to MATURE BEYOND THE FOUNDATION. ****PPT****

"Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity." And then he gives some examples. These are the basics, the building blocks, the foundation of our faith. And he's not suggesting that we leave these things, that we abandon these things, that we neglect these things, that we forget these things, but he's suggesting that we establish the foundation and then we build on it. The alternative (the danger addressed here) is that we lay the foundation, and then we come back and rebuild the foundation, and then we come back and rebuild the foundation, and then we come back and rebuild the foundation, again, and again, and again. A good foundation is certainly important, but a foundation on its own isn't very helpful, is it? My house needs a foundation, but to be a house, it certainly needs more than a foundation. And yet, if we limit ourselves to nothing but the basics, it's like laying a foundation over and over again; it's useless.

And notice the examples he gives here. These are the basics, and yet, in my opinion, some of these are pretty deep. And to me, it's easy to imagine those who are immature getting a bit overwhelmed with some of these. They come in sets of two, starting with the ***"foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God."*** The idea of ***"dead works"*** is mentioned later in this book (in Hebrews 9:14) with reference to the sacrifices of bulls and goats under the Law of Moses, so it's possible this is a reference to the foundational truth of Judaism (the idea that we are not to go back to that), but in another sense, repentance is foundational to the teaching of Christ. After all, this falls under the category of the ***"elementary teaching about the Christ"*** (in verse 1). We think about Jesus and how his ministry started with him ***"preaching the gospel of God"*** (according to Mark 1:14), and saying, ***"repent and believe the gospel."*** That right there is ***"repentance"*** and ***"faith toward God."***

So, I would ask: Although this is an ***"elementary teaching,"*** is there ever a time when we can somehow move beyond repentance? Have any of us reached some kind of exalted state in our Christian faith where we no longer need to repent? Of course not! In a sense, repentance is ongoing. Repentance is a change of mind concerning sin, and it results in a change in the way we live. We are doing something wrong, we learn that it's wrong, we have a change of mind, and then we change our behavior. In a sense, we never move beyond this. But in another sense, repentance is foundational to the Christian faith, and we need to build on it and move forward. The same is true of ***"faith toward God."*** Yes, faith is an ***"elementary teaching about the Christ,"*** but that doesn't mean that we leave it; it means that we build on it. We establish faith, and then we move forward.

The same goes for the ***"instruction about washings and laying on of hands."*** ***"Washings"*** may be a reference to those ritual purifications under the Law of Moses, but it might also be a reference to baptism. We do have multiple ***"washings"*** referred to in the New Testament – the baptism of John, the baptism of fire (a reference to eternal punishment), the baptism of the Holy Spirit (only happening twice, for the apostles in Acts 2 and for Cornelius and his household in Acts 10), and then we have it narrowed down to the ***"one baptism"*** by the time we get to Ephesians 4, and immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. This is an ***"elementary teaching."*** It's important, but we have to build on it and move forward.

The same goes for the ***"laying on of hands."*** In the Law of Moses, the priests would lay their hands on the head of the bull before making the sacrifice, symbolically transferring the sins of the people to the animal. In the New Testament, sometimes the laying on of hands refers to a miraculous healing, sometimes it refers to the transmission of spiritual gifts, and sometimes the laying of hands is not miraculous at all – sometimes we lay hands on people as a way of setting them apart for some kind of special service or mission (the appointment of elders or maybe sending people on a mission trip, as in Acts 13:1-3).

And then we have the reference to ***"the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment."*** Both are found in the Law of Moses, but both are found in the New as well. The dead will be raised, and those who are not pardoned by God will face ***"eternal judgment."*** Many will disagree with this, but these are the basics. These are all considered the ***"elementary teaching about the Christ."***

So, we lay the foundation, and then we press on to maturity, and we will do this ***"if God permits,"*** the author says. And we are reminded here that God causes the growth. We grow with God's permission, with God's help. So, this is the encouragement, that we mature beyond the foundation.

II. **As we continue with verses 4-8, we come to the warning, that we are to BE AWARE OF THE DANGER OF FALLING AWAY.**

And this is where many people in the religious world will do the best they can to try to twist this passage into saying the exact opposite of what it actually says. And it goes back to a reaction to the sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church back in the early 1500's. Back when they were building St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, they needed to pay for that, so if I could simplify, they basically allowed you to pre-pay for your sins! If I know I'm facing some special temptation in my life, I can purchase a little dose of forgiveness ahead of time. We've been to St. Peter's Basilica, and I can tell you, it is a beautiful building! This was a very popular program!

Well, in response to this abuse on one end of the spectrum (the idea that you could pay for your salvation), a young priest by the name of Martin Luther steps forward and objects. Among other things, this is not okay! But in doing so, in protesting one abuse, he actually swings the pendulum to the other extreme, to the idea that we are saved by "faith alone" and that there is nothing that we must do in order to be saved. And not to be outdone, a guy by the name of John Calvin steps up and suggests that not only can we not "do" anything to be saved, but the saved have been pre-chosen by God, and we have no choice in the matter – either to be saved or to not be saved. So, according to this theory, once a person is saved, that person is always saved, and there I nothing he or she can do about it. And the theory seems to have some support in scripture. We have Jesus saying (in John 10:28), ***"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand."*** And there are other similar passages, but what we need to realize is that yes, nobody can take us out of the Lord's hand, but that doesn't mean we can't jump. Not to be flippant about it, but we do have freedom of choice.

So we come to this warning about ***"falling away,"*** and many people try to find a way around it. Some, for example, will suggest that these people must not have been truly saved in the first place. But think about how these people are described (in verses 4-5). These are those who have been ***"enlightened,"*** they have ***"tasted of the heavenly gift,"*** they have been made ***"partakers of the Holy Spirit,"*** and they have ***"tasted the good word of God"*** and have tasted ***"the good word of God and the powers of the age to come."*** I've passed along a good article on this that goes into much greater detail, but these people are saved! We will get back to this when we come to something of a parallel passage in Hebrews 10, but my understanding is that on the one hand, we know that we are saved, we can be sure of our salvation – we are not saved and lost, saved and lost, saved and lost throughout the day (depending on whether we slip up here and there), but on the other hand, we can sin to the point (even as Christians) where we may not care anymore. And there may be a point of no return. We may get to the point where our conscience is seared, to the point where there's no feeling, and I can get to the point where I am ultimately lost. And that's the warning here. If a person knows better but decides to sin anyway, on an ongoing basis, there may be a point where we can no longer go back. I've heard it compared to tripping and falling on the deck of a ship, as opposed to actually falling (or jumping) overboard. There is a huge difference! And again, this isn't Satan snatching us out of the Lord's hand, this isn't God kicking us out; no, this is walking away; this is us (knowing better) making a decision to leave the Lord. We have the freedom to do that, just as we had the freedom to follow Jesus in the first place. And I think we've seen this. I've known people to not just wander away, but to stomp away. Somebody let them down, maybe they didn't get their way over something, they get mad at God or the church or a Christian brother or sister, or maybe they get caught up in a sin, and they decide that they no longer want any part of the Lord or his church.

And I hope we notice: These are people who ***"again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame."*** When they are in the process of doing this, ***"it is impossible to renew them to repentance."*** So I hope we notice: The inability to repent doesn't fall on God; no, this is a choice THEY are making. This is not God's

failure to forgive, this is our failure to repent. And the author illustrates by painting a picture of two fields: Some ground drinks the rain and brings forth crops, while other ground yields only thorns and thistles and ends up being burned. God provides the sun and rain for both fields, but the choice falls on the soil (on the heart), obviously a reference to Jesus' parable of the soils.

Before we move on, I hope we realize that yes, this is a terrifying warning; however, let's also realize that the warning is here for a reason. We have the ability to heed the warning. This isn't one sin sneaking up on us here and there. As God's people, when we sin, God encourages repentance. God invites us to turn back and to make things right. The response to God's invitation is completely up to us. And we actually have two very good examples of this, almost completely parallel. I'm thinking of Peter and Judas. Both men were chosen by Jesus himself, both had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, both preached the gospel, both performed miracles in the Lord's name; however, both men also betrayed the Lord and denied him (on the same night, in fact). Peter, of course, came back from that, but Judas did not. Both men had a choice as to how they reacted to sin. And we have that same choice. If you have sinned, and if you are willing to come back to the Lord, come back! Thinking back to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father is out there on the porch, looking for us to come back.

III. This brings us to the last paragraph up here as the author encourages the original audience to **BE DILIGENT, MOTIVATED BY HOPE.**

So, we have this incredibly stern warning, followed by, *"But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you."* In other words, some people may fall away, but I don't anticipate this with you! And so, he is encouraging these people. He's not beating them over the head, but he is encouraging diligence. You can do this! And he's not just saying this, he's not just patronizing these people, but he's basing his optimism on evidence: God sees what you have done, *"For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints."* God sees what you've done, but in a good way! And the good work you've done hasn't been done to brag, but they have been working in God's name. They have been giving God the credit here. And his hope is that they continue, that they would show this same *"diligence"* until the end, that they would *"realize the full assurance [of their] hope."* Don't be *"sluggish."* This is the same word, by the way, that we had back at the end of Chapter 5, that idea of being *"dull of hearing."* Some are *"sluggish,"* some may be *"dull of hearing,"* but you don't need to be that way. Instead, we want you to be *"imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."* Look around for those who are standing firm, and do what they do. Find yourselves some good role models!

So he ends this little section with some encouragement. Hang in there! We have faith in you! Don't turn back, but take responsibility for your spiritual life. Keep on keeping on!

Conclusion:

And all of this is for us! We've been challenged this morning to mature beyond the foundation, we've been warned about the danger of falling away, and we've had the reminder to be diligent, motivated by hope. And that reference to hope ties in to our study next week. I am looking forward to sharing some unusual artwork from one of the kids here next week. And next week we also hope to share a fellowship dinner together.

Before Josh leads us in a song to prepare us for the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We come to you this morning through Jesus, our great and merciful high priest, and we come to you in worship today recognizing that you are a holy and awesome God. Thank you, Father, for making our salvation possible. We pray that we would always appreciate what you have done for us, that we would never turn away. We pray that you would restore the joy of our salvation.

We come to you today through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com