**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of Hebrews (15): The Book Of Better Things**

**“Moving On To Maturity”**

**Hebrews 5:11- 6:3**

**April 14, 2024**

Anyone who reads the book of Hebrews can see that the Hebrews had a problem. The symptoms have been hard to miss. In his first exhortation, for example, the author had to warn them against “drifting away” from the truths of the gospel, lest they “neglect” so great a salvation (2:1). He’s also had to exhort them to “fix their eyes” on Jesus (3:1), and not to abandon their original confession of faith in Him (3:6, 14).

Then he’s warned them against having an “unbelieving heart” that might lead them to “turn away from” the living God (3:12). When he reminds them that the promise of entering God’s rest still stands, he’s concerned that some might fail to enter it (4:1). So he urges them to “strive to enter that rest,” so that “no one will fall” by following the example of the Exodus generation (4:11).

But today, we finally discover the root of the problem. According to our opening verse, there were many within this church who had become “dull of hearing” (5:11; ESV, NASB). The tragic result was that their growth had become stunted. They were *unable* to share the Word with others, and *unskillful* in using the Word in their own daily lives (5:12-14). Thankfully, our author knows how to bring them out of their spiritually infantile state. He insists that they move beyondthe elementary teachings about Christ and press on to Christian maturity (6:1-3). They were not newborn Christians, so it was time to change their diet. They had to get off the “milk” of God’s Word, and on to the “meat.”

The reason this problem has surfaced is because of what our author has said in the previous verses (5:5-10). He has begun to explain Jesus’ eternal priesthood, and has just said that unlike all priests of the Old Covenant, Jesus is not a descendant of Aaron. Nor is He from the tribe of Levi; His priestly lineage is “after the order of Melchizedek” (5:6, 10). However, as much as our author would love to explain more of what that means, he knows he can’t. So he interrupts his teaching about Jesus’ priesthood and addresses the root of their problem (5:11). Then he points to the tragic result of the problem (5:12-14) before he offers the remedy to the problem (6:1-3).

**A. The Root of the Problem (5:11):** “*About this* (the previous reference to Melchizedek) *we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing*” (ESV). What exactly does this mean? The word “dull” is used only one other time in the New Testament, and that’s in Hebrews 6:12, where its translated “sluggish” (ESV, NASB), or “lazy” (NIV), or “slothful” (KJV). That’s the reason the for the translation of the later editions of the NIV (2015, 2020): “. . . *it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand*.”

These were Christians who didn’t have the right attitude toward the Word of God. They may have been “hearing” the Word, but they had stopped “listening.” The Word was no longer appetizing, and they had become lazy, bored, uninterested spectators on Sunday mornings.

Let’s note well that our author is describing their *spiritual regression*; they “have become” dull of hearing. Evidently, they had been progressing in their spiritual development for a time. But for some reason, they were now spiritually slack, inattentive, and lethargic. They were suffering from spiritual inertia, and were now living in “Standingstillville,” with no inclination to move on. Other interests and concerns had captured their attention. As we would say today, “The lights are on, but nobody is home.”

**B. The Result of the Problem (5:12-14):** “*For 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. Everyone who lives on milk, still being an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*”

Evidently, the Hebrews had been saved long enough to share their knowledge of God’s Word with those who were still young in the faith. Sadly, however, they had slipped back to a place where they themselves were in need of a teacher who could give them a “refresher course” on the basic principles of the Word. Like third grade children who are unable to read or write, they needed to go back to preschool to learn their ABC’s. They were little more than babies, who couldn’t stomach anything more than the milk of God’s Word.

With only a “baby-food diet,” they were unskillful in applying the “word of righteousness” to their daily lives. Just as babies will put anything into their mouths, an immature Christian will listen to any teacher or preacher and not be able to discern whether the teaching is true to Scripture. Without the ongoing application of the Word, it’s impossible to sharpen our spiritual senses and develop our spiritual discernment.

By way of contrast, only those who are mature can sink their spiritual teeth into the meat of God’s Word. As a result, “*their powers of discernment*” (ESV), or “*their perceptions*” (NEB) are “trained” by constant practice to discern good from evil. So, as we continue to feed on the Word of God and apply it in daily life, our “spiritual senses” get their needed exercise and become stronger and stronger. The result is that we are consistently discerning the difference between truth and falsehood, and good and evil. This becomes especially important when it comes to the countless choices you and I have to make, when no specific directive is given in the Bible.

**C. The Remedy for the Problem (6:1-3):** How does one overcome spiritual lethargy? How do we grow out of spiritual infancy? These next three verses are going to tell us. Our author simply says, “*Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity*” (v. 1).

These “*elementary teachings about Christ*” are the same as the “*elementary truths of God Word*” (5:12). All of us, of course, must be sure that we have understood these truths. There’s nothing wrong with them. We have to start somewhere if we want to grow up in the faith, just as we must learn our ABC’s before we can read. But these truths are merely the foundation on which we build the framework of our Christian life. So our author is not telling us to “abandon” those fundamentals, but rather to build on them and grow up in Christ.

In verse 2, he lists six of these fundamental principles, which naturally fall into three pairs: **(1)** “*repentance from dead works*” and **(2)** “*faith toward God*” are the prerequisites for Christian conversion. Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a turning away from works that cannot save. Faith is complete trust in the gospel, by which we enter God’s rest (Heb. 4:1-2).

**(3)** “*Instructions about washings*” and **(4)** “*the laying on of hands*” relate to life within a local assembly. The baptism commanded by Jesus was different than the baptism of Jewish proselytes, and John’s baptism. And the laying on of hands was practiced in connection with ordaining or commissioning men to ministry (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). **(5)** “*the resurrection of the dead*” and **(6)** “*eternal judgment*” also go together. Both relate to the future end time events at Christ’s return (John 5:28-29; Rev. 20:4-6; 12-15).

The last verse is something far more than a pious cliché: “*And this we will do if God permits*” (6:3). In verse one, we have already seen our author’s exhortation: “*Let us . . . go on to maturity*” (ESV) or “*Let us press on to maturity*” (NASB). But in the later editions of the NIV (2015, 2020), we find a more literal translation: “*Let us . . . be taken forward to maturity*.” The point is that the Christian’s life is in God’s hands, and that He is the One who moves us forward to maturity as He enables us to move past these elementary truths.

“*This we shall do*” is an expression of confidence on the part of the author. From his vantage point, it’s that more probable than not that the Hebrews will progress toward maturity. At the same time, however, he knows that there at least some among them who will not move forward, as the following verses will plainly show (6:4-8). Thus, he adds “*if God permits*.” In fact, God does *not* permit apostates to advance; for them, repentance has become an impossibility.

All pilgrims should make progress if they are truly pilgrims. We begin by absorbing the elementary truths of God’s Word. But since we weren’t built to live on a “baby food” diet, we have to dig deeply into the meat of God’s Word and surround ourselves with others who have the same heartfelt desire. That’s the only way we grow up in the faith. And along the way, we should always examine our hearing. “Am I listening well? Am I exploring more of what I hear? And as we make our way through Hebrews, we must ask, “Am I *listening* to our author, and do I believe that Jesus Christ really is better? How we answer that question makes all the difference in the world!