

The Foundational Importance of Growing Up

Hebrews 6:1-12

Addendum: We come to one of the most controversial texts in the entire Bible. More than possibly any other, this text has been bent and twisted and crammed like round pegs into square holes of theological presuppositions. As soon as someone says, "We all know that this text cannot mean this" you know you are about to hear some theological squirming. Sadly, the controversy over whether one can fall or not fall from a state of true salvation that has emerged from this text probably has ruined the Spirit's intended effect of the text. Our understanding of the Scriptures is that true believers who are regenerated by the Spirit of God are kept by God's power through sanctification until God glorifies them. And God causes them to persevere in believing faith by giving them enabling grace through strong exhortations.

Many of us have lasting memories etched like Durer engravings in our minds. They are moments of feeling and experience that we can replay with amazing clarity. When I was 8 or 9, we boarded the HMS *Staatendam* in Southampton, England to cross the Atlantic and come to the United States. I have a very strong memory of that liner leaving the quay and going out into the English Channel. I had a sense of leaving a life I had always known and going to a life that would be all new and very different. And this ship across all those unknown waters was going to bear me along to the future. Sometimes, 9 year old hearts can sense and feel things much larger on the inside than they are on the outside.

This text opens with words that sound to me like that experience felt. "Let us leave ... and go on." There is a departure from that carries us along to something greater and wider and larger than where we are now. That we do this: that we leave some things and move onward and upward to greater things is vital. It presses upon us the foundational importance of growing up.

The Foundational Imperative

(v.1-3)

We are beginning at a conclusion that flows from what he has said in chapter 5. The Hebrews were dull of hearing and in real need of getting experience with the milk they had so as to reach a maturity that could feast on meat. In the light of that, then here is what we must do.

¹ 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, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.

Its Command

(v.1a)

What we must do is given in two verbs: leaving and going on. In these two verbs is actually a single action. To go on, I must leave. To come to church, I must leave my house. To go on to maturity I must leave elementary teachings.

This is a command. Maturing as a Christian is a foundational imperative. Why it is foundational is the argument of verses 4-6. That it is an command is the argument of verses 1-3. So don't miss this. Christians ought to be growing up. Christians ought to be exercising with milk so that their spiritual senses are trained to discern good and evil. And I can say to each of you who hear me this morning that you ought to grow up, that you must be ever maturing in your understanding and believing of the Word in an obeying way.

What is interesting here is that "going on to maturity" is in the passive voice. It has the sense of being borne along, of submitting to the maturing influences. I got on the boat with

my mom and dad and the boat carried me along to its destination. Now hold that thought because the author comes back to it in two ways, which we will see.

Its Clarification

(v.1b-2)

Maturing requires going on and leaving something. It is called “the elementary doctrine of Christ.” What is this? Literally this reads, “The beginning words about the Messiah.” This would ring true for Jewish people who had professed Christ out of Judaism. For them, an elementary assertion of the gospel is that Jesus is the promised Messiah. For them, this was a big step and one that we don’t resonate with much. The underlying truth is that Jesus is God and therefore is both Sovereign and Savior.

Further, the Author clarifies what those foundational truths are that do not need to be laid down once again. They are given in three sets of couplets.

Truths relating to personal salvation – The foundational truths are repentance from dead works and faith towards God. These are essential to saving belief. We turn away from a principle of works and we turn to a trust in God whose promise and provision of salvation is seen as real and trustworthy.

Truths relating to public confession – Foundational truths relating to baptisms and to the setting aside of believers for special service or offices. Our understanding of baptism and church offices is foundational truths on which we move on the personal and corporate maturity.

Truths relating to basic eschatology – While our understanding of the schema of eschatology may differ, we all must agree as foundational that we will be resurrected from the dead and that there is eternal judgment. If there is no resurrection then what is the use? And since there is a resurrection, then there are eternal consequences arising from the matrix of God’s decrees and our choices.

Two important things strike me from these words:

These elementary principles would be understood in either the Old or New Testament. Each of these 6 labels designates lasting principles, but changing uses. For example: the word for baptisms here is not the normal form used to describe Christian baptism. It is a more general form of the word that encompasses both the Levitical washings as well the New Covenant baptism of believers as an outward confession of faith. So these foundational truths are not unique in and of themselves to New Testament Christianity.

They are unique however when they are related to Jesus Christ. These elementary truths must be understood and accepted and embraced *as they stand in relation to Christ*. This was the heart of the matter for these Jewish Christians. Profession of belief meant that all they knew from the Old Testament now had to be understood in the light of Jesus’ coming as the Messiah. There could be no going back. If Jesus had come, then these things now must relate to Him and not to Moses.

So the text is clear. If you are going to grow up, there are certain foundational truths that you must grasp and on which this maturity rests. You must believe in an obeying way that Jesus Christ is the center of all that it means to be a Christian. You must turn away from a reliance on works and law keeping turn to trust in Jesus to save you. You must understand the importance of publicly confessing your faith through baptism. You must understand the foundational truths that relate to being in submission to the elders and being served by

the deacons. You must believe that what you are doing now matters because you will come to life after death and you will experience either conscious eternal punishment or conscious eternal blessing. And if you are going to grow up, you must begin using these truths to discern right from wrong and go on the meat of the Word.

Its Condition

And this is precisely what the author is going to do. He is going to move beyond the elementary truths and explain meaty truths in showing how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Levitical system.

But there is a condition and frankly, a startling one. We will do this “if God permits.” Now wait. Does this just mean that if God permits the author to continue to write and finish this letter? Or does this condition modify the whole? In other words, leaving elementary truths and moving on to maturity will happen if God allows it.

What is being driven home once again is our utter dependence on God. God is governing the steps and stops of our growth in grace towards glory. He is sovereign over both our salvation and our transformation. That we grow is enabling grace. It is moving forward as God permits. So we must at all points hear and exhortations to grow up, to move on, to change all the while humbly confessing our dependence on God for each step.

It also means the God is sovereign over our lives as Christians. We are all growing, changing and maturing *precisely according to God's plan*. There is no, “if I had only... then I would be...” Just as God ordained the details of the way and when of your entry into faith, he has also ordained each step of your Christian life. Your sins are included in that. Now, you are still responsible for an obedient faith. You are moving on to maturity through active faith and obedience exactly on the trajectory God has ordained for you.

The Frightening Impossibility

(v.4-6)

In the light of what we have just said, the next paragraph suddenly becomes quite clear. If moving on to maturity is commanded and under the sovereign control of God, what about those who not only do not go on, but actually fall by the wayside? In other words, what danger lies ahead of a person who is professing to be a believer and then rejects Christianity?

⁴ 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, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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.

This paragraph poses immense exegetical problems. Who are the people he has in mind? What action does “falling away” describe? What is impossible? Why is this an impossibility? I am not going to wade through all the thorny issues here. My approach to this text is governed by several principles:

True believers are constantly portrayed in the Scripture as being sustained in their faith by the keeping power of God. True children of God cannot be unborn.

The purpose of the book of Hebrews is to exhort those who are faltering to hold fast. Those who hold fast do so because they receive grace through the exhortations to hold fast. That they hold fast is the evidence that they are believers. It is unbelievers who let go and will fall away.

The context drives me to the conclusions I draw. After these frightening words, the author expresses his confidence that the conditions he has just described are not true of them.

So we must come to this with a very serious attitude.

Its Basic Assertion

Here is the core sentence from this paragraph. "It is impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away." There is a category of people who, if they fall by the wayside (this is not the word usually used for apostasy) cannot be brought back to a place where they will have a true change of heart and mind. Now if you want to say that it is Christians who are falling from grace, then there is no second chance. It is irreversible.

Its Shared Experience

These people are described as sharing in the experiences of Christianity. They have had high religious experience. They have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared [or become partners] of the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of God's Word and experienced the miracles that will be a part of the eschatological age. Whether these are true believers are not *cannot be determined from the description of their experiences*. After all, there will be people sent to hell who preached and cast out demons and did miracles in Jesus Name (Matthew 6:21-23). So loved ones, sharing in high religious experiences is not how you know if you are believer.

The Puritans had a category called, "awakened sinners." Awakened sinners are those who are affected by spiritual things, awakened by the Spirit and truth, have spiritual experiences but have never been regenerated and converted. But, they wither, fail, fall, don't hold fast and may even do so over and over again. But at the end, they love their sin and pursue and let go of their confession of Christ.

Its Crucial Step

Here is how you know if you are a true believer. Do you fall by the wayside? Do you reject the truth of the Word? Having heard and experienced and shared in the goodness and glories that are our present privilege and our future hope, you turn away from them and leave them and do not continue to embrace them. You turn aside from being carried along by the sovereign providence of God towards continuing in your faith and you abandon the faith.

Its Justifying Reason

...since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Look carefully at this phrase. It does not say, "since Jesus would have to be crucified again." It is saying, "Since what they are doing in turning away is crucifying Jesus again and holding Him up to contempt." Remember that his original audience are primarily Jews. He is reminding them that the rejection of Jesus as Messiah led the Jews crucifying Him. The nation fell away while individual Jews fell away. So be careful. Having professed faith in the Messiah, don't fall away because now you are holding Him in contempt. Whatever you fall away *to* seems more valuable, more trustworthy, more to be believed in than Jesus.

The Familiar Illustration

(v.7-12)

That this is what the author intends is clarified by the familiar illustration.

His Assessing Contrast

(v.7-8)

⁷ 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. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

The soil all looks the same. This illustration is different from the parable of the sower. There, it is the different kinds of soil and environments that determine the harvest. Here, the soil seems to be the same. It is what is produced that makes the difference. One produces good crops and thus is useful to the farmer and is blessed. The other is useless in the thorns and thistles it grows and is still under the curse and eventually will be judged.

His Assuring Comfort

(v.9-10)

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ 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.

His assurance to them turns on the word “but”. In contrast to what he has described, he has an informed confidence that they are and will prove to be different.

The encouragement comes in the tender use of the word *beloved*. It is the only time in the whole treatise that it is used. We must also learn to hear challenging and correcting words from people who love us. Hopefully they will be words of truth framed with wisdom and spoken from hearts that are concerned for your welfare. Preaching is often like this. Words that go forth whose first penetrating power wounds and then whose effect is to heal.

The encouragement also comes in the use of the word *better*. What he observed in their lives was so much better than those whose profession of faith was not sustained by the grace of God. Thus, grace was producing in real believers those things that accompanied and came along and flowed from true salvation.

How can he say this? Because of what was true about the character of God. Now we usually think of God’s justice as meeting out the proper punishment to those whose sinning offends the holiness and majesty of God. But notice that this turns the justice of God in another direction. God’s justice also means that He is righteous in rewarding godly works. Now don’t misunderstand me. God is just to reward godly works *because He is the author and sustainer* of those works. But that God is just in this way comforts and encourages us as we know that His righteousness will reward what His purpose has designed and His power is accomplishing in us. So my godly conduct stirs up an assured confidence because of the character of God.

What then had he observed in them that motivated this encouragement? The loved God by serving people. They exhibited their genuine love for God by sacrificially serving one another. But even more, they showed their love to the Name of God. It was His character that shaped their conduct. This is the affection for God that comes with trembling pleasure to the knowledge of God and finds at the foot of the thundering cataract of God’s character a pool of delight.

They were serving people. This is how they showed their love for God. In our world we define serving in ways that fit what we are willing to do. But in Bible days, house servants were common. Many people had them. And many people in the church were servants in their everyday lives. So when they heard this word, they associated it with a reality that is hard for us. So love for God was their master. Serving one another is what their master gave them to do. So they loved God in a people serving way... Are you?

His Arousing Challenge

(v.11-12)

His comfort of them leads him to challenge them. He is constrained by their depravity and their difficulties to press them forward, to motivate them to continued diligence in these encouraging things.

¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

What he says to them emerges from two important words: earnestness and assurance.

The author is calling all to be earnest in your desire to have an assurance of faith. He has confidence in the ones he loves because of the better things he sees in them. So we all can have an assurance of faith if we are serious and diligent in loving God in a people serving way. Loved ones, this only comes when we turn away from serving self and nursing our wounds and promoting our preferences to joyfully living for God and others.

How long must this be true? Till the end. Show diligence to gain assurance all the way to the end. The author unfolds his purpose. This is what he expects will flow out of this exhortation.

YOU WILL NOT BE SLUGGISH – This is the way a lot of Christians are. They are loving God and serving people like that taste in our mouth and the wool in our brains when the alarm rings at 4:00 AM or after a huge meal at noon. They are like a slow moving river, full of silt and mud and garbage that is deposited all along the bank.

YOU WILL MODEL FAITH'S PIONEERS – Listen to these words, "Who through faith and patience inherit promises." There it is. Faith and patience must be married together in the heart of Christians who earnestly love God in a people serving way. The fruit of that union will be realized promises. I wonder how many of you faltered just on the brink of seeing God's power extended in fulfilled promises. Are you mixing your obeying belief with patient diligence? Are you pressing on in difficulty and seeing within you a growing assurance that God will do what He said? When you do this, you are following the model of faith's pioneers in the Scripture and down through church history.

Reflect and Respond

Here is the point of all this:

If you continue in infancy;
If you are comfortable with dullness

Then you are in danger:

Of never growing up;
Or of never having been saved.

But you may have assurance:

To love God and serve saints;
To be diligent to the end.

As you love God in a people serving way you will discover an emerging confidence in the God who keeps His promises.

As you love God in a people serving way you will have a growing assurance of faith.

But in the end, these powerful words that expose false professors are turned into comforting words that encourage true believers.