

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

5:11-6:20

After establishing a number of aspects that show how Yeshua is superior to Aaron as high priest, the author pauses once again to address his concern for the audience.

The danger of falling away (5:11-6:8)

v. 11 – The statement: “we have much to say,” indicates that he is not finished with the issue of the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek. And that will be the case when he resumes that discussion in chapter 7. But he also notes that it is “hard to explain,” and he perceives that is a problem because he doesn’t think they can comprehend a complex subject.

As he puts it, they are “dull of hearing.” The Greek word *nōthros* can also mean “lazy or sluggish.” Spiritually speaking, we become dull, lazy or sluggish when we remain centered only on elementary spiritual matters, because it is easy to become bored and dull or lazy, or even to drift away.

v. 12 – The audience “ought to be teachers.” This describes people who been believers for awhile, and they know what the elementary principles are. With expected spiritual growth, by this time they should be teaching others, but they haven’t gone further in understanding deeper spiritual issues. In this case, they haven’t just failed to become teachers, they are acting like they need to learn the basics over again. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:2, and Peter in his first epistle (2:2), the writer to Hebrews uses the metaphor of milk for elementary principles.

In 6:1 he uses the word foundation (*Gr. themelios*) to describe the same concept. The terms, elementary, milk and foundation all describe elements that are basic, but they are important because they can be built upon with more complex elements. Those foundational elements are described as:

- “Repentance from dead works”—This audience had come out of the Levitical system, so they were very familiar with observing Mosaic Law. This does not mean that obeying God’s commandments implies dead works. On the contrary, keeping them was explicitly demanded by God (Lev 22:31). But when people assert that ritual observance alone is necessary for salvation while devaluing the significance of faith, it becomes a works-oriented religion. That was an issue that was corrected at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In Hebrews 9:13-14 the author revisits the issue of “dead works,” associating them with sacrifices that are inferior to that of Yeshua. Turning away from these things is a foundation that had already been addressed by this audience early as a body.
- “Faith toward God” is not expressed in this way anywhere else in Scripture. Prepositions are extremely important in Greek. They tend to have more diverse, yet specific meaning than equivalent English prepositions.

In English, the prepositions “on, in, upon, to, or toward” all have very specific meanings. But in Greek, the preposition *epi* can express all of those English terms, and that is the preposition used here in verse 1. So how can we know which meaning is being made? English nouns are never modified grammatically in order to determine whether it is the

subject or direct object. That determination is made by word order. But Greek nouns are modified so that you can make that determination just by looking at the spelling of the word, regardless of where it falls in the sentence. These modifications are called cases. And prepositions associated with a noun having a particular case, determines the specific meaning of the preposition. In other words, a preposition can mean many different things, but that meaning is limited to one or two possibilities because of the case of its associated noun.

Here in Hebrews 6:1, the word God is written in the accusative case (which identifies the direct object of the sentence), and that restricts the preposition *epi* to the meaning of “toward.” (it is not “in,” as used incorrectly in some translations).

It is true that “faith *in* God” is used elsewhere in Scripture. But that has a different emphasis than is being made here. “Faith *toward* God” is the corollary to the first phrase, “repentance *from* dead works.” The Hebrew concept of repentance (*teshuvah*) literally means “to turn around.” The Greek word translated as repentance – *metanoia* – literally means to “reverse your thinking.” So, in the case of the audience of the Hebrews, they had reversed their thinking or turned from an emphasis on works toward God based on faith. It’s an important distinction that shows you can only be looking in one of two directions. It will either be toward dead works or toward God according to faith.

- “Instruction about washings”—The word translated as “washings” (*baptismos*), is not limited to the act of immersion that serves as a sign for someone coming to faith. In other places in the New Testament it used in reference to the Levitical ritual washings that took place in Judaism. Commentators are not in agreement as to which concept is in mind by the writer to Hebrews. The Septuagint does not use *baptismos* to translate the Hebrew words for ritual washing anywhere in the Old Testament. But the writer to Hebrews clearly uses in that way in 9:10. This makes it difficult to be adamant about the interpretation. If it is about the Levitical washings, he is saying leave those behind. If it is about baptism in the New Testament sense, he is saying to go beyond making a initial public profession of faith, symbolized by immersion. The use of the word “instruction” (*didachē*) suggests that there was a formal teaching in this regard at the time of the writing of Hebrews. This is consistent with the first century treatise known as the *Didache* (also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), which includes among its basic teachings for believers a section on instruction for baptisms
- “Laying on of hands”—Again, there is no single meaning associated with this phrase. It describes the way that hands were placed on the heads of animals before sacrificing them, as a way of identifying with their death as atonement for people (Lev 4:4; 16:21). The laying on of hands also referred to the way that blessings were imparted (Gen 48:14, Mat 19:13) and healings were conferred (Mk 5:23; Jas 5:14). Furthermore, the ordination of leaders was accompanied by the laying on of hands (Num 27:18; Acts 13:3). It seems reasonable to conclude that each of these practices were familiar teachings in the the community being addressed in the book of Hebrews.
- “The resurrection of the dead”—The issue of the resurrection should be settled for new believers. It shouldn’t be something that has to be proven over again.
- “Eternal judgment”—Likewise, there should be no question for believers that a day of judgment is coming for all humanity (Acts 17:31).

So, going back to 5:12, these are all the elementary principles or the milk that should be settled for new believers.

- v. 13 – Partakers of spiritual milk are “not accustomed to the word of righteousness. *Dikaioisune*, translated as righteousness, is a legal term that means being found innocent or justified. So a baby believer does not fully grasp what it means to be found innocent or righteous before a holy God in spite of our sin. That is truly an awesome concept that cannot be fully comprehended without spiritual maturity. So the stage is being set for one aspect of righteousness in chapter 6 that is truly awesome, and beyond the understanding of the audience of Hebrews.
- v. 14 – In contrast to spiritual milk, “solid food is for the mature.” It is important for us to recognize that this is not about mere spiritual maturity. The word translated here as “mature” is *teleios*. It is essentially the same word translated as “perfect” in 5:9 and several other places in Hebrews (7:19,28; 9:9; 10:1,14; 11:40; 12:23). In 5:9 it is not used to describe Yeshua attaining spiritual maturity, but He was spiritually perfect. The root of this word is *telos*, meaning “goal or completion.” So it is a picture of the goal that we are seeking—spiritual completion.

We are told here that one of the characteristics of having reached the goal of being spiritually complete is being able to “discern good and evil.” Spiritually mature persons are better able than spiritual infants to make that kind of discernment because spiritual warfare is best left to mature believers because they have the experience to cope with it and are better equipped to resist the temptation of evil.

From the greater context of Scripture, solid food also includes suffering, being faithful under persecution, the silence of God, living with a total commitment to the ways of God, including His commandments, loving your enemies, practicing mercy, dying to self, and so on. This all serves as a prelude to a discussion in chapter 6 that truly is a solid food issue. And you have the sense that the author is concerned that the audience is not capable of dealing with it because they haven’t matured spiritually.

Hebrews 6:4-6 is one of the most challenging passages in all of Scripture to interpret. It describes the circumstances in which God will not bring people to the point of spiritual completion or perfection that we talked about earlier. It is one long sentence, spanning all three verses. The first thing that we can observe is that the sentence begins in the KJV and the NIV with the word impossible. But the NASB and the CJB move the word impossible to verse 6. In the original Greek text, impossible is the first word. But since it is one sentence and word order is not as critical in Greek as English, placing the word in the first part of the sentence or later on are both valid.

Five participles are given as characteristics of this impossible situation. And to bring out the nature of participles (verbs used as nouns), they can be expressed as follows:

- “Having been enlightened” – This is the same word used in the gospel of John: “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, *enlightens* every man” (John 1:9). It is a picture of having an awareness about Yeshua. Not everyone who becomes aware of Yeshua responds correctly to Him, but it is an essential starting point for all believers.
- “Having tasted the heavenly gift” – Tasting does not imply complete consumption. On the cross, Yeshua tasted wine mixed with gall, but he did not drink it (Mat 24:34).

Yeshua is also said to have tasted death (Heb 2:9), but it was not a finality, for He lived again. So again, this is a picture of initial incompleteness. In this case, it is an incomplete tasting of “the heavenly gift,” which contextually refers to the gift of salvation (Eph 2:8). Tasting salvation can be thought of as knowing what it means, without having the full conviction of applying it to yourself.

- “Having become partakers/partners with the Holy Spirit” – In chapter 3 the same word is translated as “partaker” (3:1,14) and in Luke 5:7 in is rendered as “partner,” where Simon Peter, James and John are described as fishing partners. It has the sense of being commonly involved in something and having the same purpose. Having the same purpose as the Holy Spirit suggests something more than mere awareness. On the other hand, the text does not refer to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that occurs upon salvation. So it has been argued that it refers to people being involved in a community of faith while the Holy Spirit has been active,
- “Having tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” – These “tastings” demonstrate an awareness of what has been revealed in Scripture, and being able to experience in part the blessings today that will be fully manifested in the future Messianic age. This would include things like true peace, and worshiping the Lord fully as He desires, people genuinely loving their neighbors and things of a miraculous nature. But both of these things were incomplete for this audience—they are only tastings, not full consumption.

Those, then are five elements that share the common characteristics of having an initial involvement with genuine spiritual concepts. But the addition of one more element turns it into an impossible situation—namely, “having fallen away.” It should be noted that this is not conditional. There is no “if” in the original text (as in the KJV and the NIV). It’s in the aorist tense, which is completed action.

This mix of characteristics creates an impossible state—renewing them again to repentance. How you interpret verse 6 is dependent on how you interpret the description in verses 4-5. The question that has to be answered is: what kind of people have been initially enlightened about Yeshua, have a taste of salvation, partake the Holy Spirit but are not necessarily indwelt by Him, and taste the Word of God and the Messianic kingdom of God, but fall away? Many explanations have been given, and it has been at the heart of the Arminian-Calvinist debate for centuries. But three main views have been proposed:

1. It refers to people who are true believers but have fallen away and lose their salvation.

In light of the full text, the result is not just becoming an unbeliever again, but it is impossible for them ever to be saved again. This view is largely contingent on the aspect of partaking with the Holy Spirit in verse 4, suggesting a relationship.

2. Another interpretation holds that this is merely a hypothetical situation.

The author is proposing a set of circumstances that are impossible to exist concurrently. In this view, it is a description of true believers, and because of that fact, it would be impossible for them to fall away, because that would negate the saving power of the Cross. And since Messiah died “once for all” in the next chapter (7:27), a person could not be saved again. That combination would create an impossible set of circumstances, and thus makes it only hypothetical in nature. So the author is using it to motivate his audience to move beyond the elementary things to those that make us spiritually complete.

3. The passage describes people who are false believers and are tempted to turn away from

Yeshua. They have been significantly exposed to the truth, but have never been saved. In this particular context in Hebrews, we know that they had been well taught, and that it was apparent that they were tempted to turn away from Yeshua. So this passage would be a description of acting on that temptation. It would be a direct rejection of salvation by grace through faith in Yeshua alone. In this case, the impossible situation is renewing them again to the point of repentance. And we know that the Bible does speak about the hardening of hearts to the point of no return, like in the case of Pharaoh. Moreover, in the context of the book of Hebrews, by returning to rabbinic Judaism, they would be aligning themselves with the very people who crucified Yeshua in the first place, which would be like crucifying Him again on their own, just as verse 6 suggests, thus putting Yeshua to open shame.

There are problems with each of these views.

1. Losing your salvation and never being able to be saved again goes against the greater context of Scripture.

- According to John 6:37-40, Yeshua promised that He will never lose anyone who the Father gives to Him and believes in Yeshua.
- In John 10:28 Yeshua declared: “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”
- Paul writes in Romans 8:29-30 that when God initiates the process of salvation, He completes it all the way to the point of final glorification.”
- He also states in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “If anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

So when you look at salvation from God’s perspective, it is something that always endures because He is the one who gives it. There are also examples of people repenting like Balaam (Num 22:34; 31:16) and Judas (Mat 27:3-5), but it was not a repentance unto salvation.

2. The criticism of the hypothetical interpretation is not based on grammar or context, but on reasoning. It is argued that if it is impossible to do something, then what kind of a warning could that be? The writer to Hebrews is dealing with a very real situation concerning his audience, and a more direct warning would be more compelling for them in particular.

3. The problem with the false believer view is that there is no direct statement that they were unbelievers and these things are just implied. There is also a problem of semantics. If these people were never saved, what are they falling away from? And if they never repented, why does he talk about being *renewed* to repentance?

The greater context of Scripture contributes to our understanding of this passage. As the author has shown, there are parallels between the audience of Hebrews and the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. The ancient Israelites were enlightened about God’s plan of redemption. Like a baptism, they passed through the Red Sea. They tasted of heavenly gifts and were partners as the Holy Spirit was in their midst. As Moses passed the Torah on to them, the people tasted the good word of God. And they witnessed miraculous manifestations of God’s power that were a taste of the Messianic age to come. And yet, the people fell away in disbelief.

Only Joshua and Caleb believed and entered the Promised Land. So we have to look at these descriptions in a corporate light. And we see that reflected in the plural pronouns used in

Hebrews 6:4-6. In the wilderness, the ratio may have been extreme, but the point is that within any collection of people, there will be true believers and those who are not.

vv. 7-8 – The author backs up his argument with a metaphor involving soil that can either be nourished with rain and tilled so that it produces useful vegetation, or it can end up producing thorns and thistles.

- The soil refers to people. That is consistent with Yeshua’s parable of the sower (Mat 13:3-23).
- The rain refers to the Good News of salvation coming from God.
- The tilling of the soil represents believers who care for the hearers of that message so that it can be productive in their lives.

The metaphor describes two possible results. It can produce vegetation (KJV, herbs) that is useful to the community (“those for whose sake it is also tilled”). But it can also produce thorns and thistles. Edible vegetation refers to genuine believers who provide nourishment to the community. The thorns and thistles are false believers who do nothing for the good of community. And, in the end, like a field that is burned, they will face judgment for unbelief.

Like different fields receiving the same rain and the same kind of care, people can receive the same exposure to the truth and the same care within the believing community, but the results can be very different—ending up with true and false believers alike. It’s just difficult to know for sure who is who at the very beginning before the plants reach maturity, just like babies drinking milk and not knowing how they will grow up. That is why this metaphor is consistent with the false believer interpretation, and the author’s exhortation to get past the elementary principles that are like milk.

All things considered, the best explanation of intent in this passage is a description of the situation of His audience. There were too many people in this body who were stuck at the beginning, consuming the milk of elementary principles. And there were people among them that had experienced the great manifestations of God’s truth, Spirit and power, yet they had not been saved, and were highly susceptible to falling away altogether.

It is also important to recognize is that the writer’s concern is for these people that he knows personally. He doesn’t want them to return to rabbinical Judaism and their practices that were incomplete without Yeshua.

An affirmation of better things (6:9-12)

vv. 9-12 – The author returns to speaking to his audience directly. Only this time, it is affirming in nature, not critical. He commends them in verse 10 for their love for God and their ministry to the saints, although verses 11-12 goes back to the recurring theme of them being stuck at the beginning of their walk of faith and being sluggish about moving forward. His desire is for them to be fully committed to the Lord like the patriarchs who were faithful to God’s calling until the end of their lives.

An exhortation toward faithfulness (6:13-20)

The author’s words of encouragement are based on the faithfulness of God to His promises. In particular, he cites the example of God’s promise to Abraham. It is important that God swore by His

own name when He promised to Abraham the blessings of a great nation, land and by implication the Messiah who would bless the whole world because it emphasizes the reliability of God in keeping His promises.

God swearing an oath is also significant. Oaths were unconditional in nature—there were no contingencies for the commitment to be broken. According to Numbers 30:2, they were absolute and legally binding. As a result, swearing an oath meant that no matter what happened, you would do exactly as you said you would do. In addition, as verse 16 points out, while making oaths, people in the Ancient Near East would invoke the name of their deity, thus giving their commitment a sense of perpetuity and obligation. But since Adonai “could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself” (v. 13).

v. 17 – Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant was secured by God’s unchangeable purpose and His oath that is also unchangeable. That establishes two things that cannot move, like embedded anchors (v. 19).

v. 18 – As a result, we have another impossible situation—God cannot lie. His promises will be kept exactly as He has declared. That is true regarding the elements of the Abrahamic Covenant, including those made to the Jewish people. And that is true regarding the promises made to believers regarding the assurance of our salvation, which gives us “strong encouragement” and “hope.”

In the last two verses (19-20), the author redirects the focus to Yeshua as high priest, saying that our hope is made sure and steadfast through Yeshua’s entrance into the holy place (“within the veil”). And in the next chapter he will address what it means to be a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.