

Hebrews 5:11-14: *“About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”*

Becoming “Dull of Hearing”: Who is being warned about being dull of hearing? The people addressed clearly have been redeemed for they have spiritual hearing and a spiritual appetite. But their appetite is for “milk” not the “meat” suitable for mature believers. They have the capacity for spiritual growth but are not realizing that potential by advancing in understanding and practice. Not only are they failing to maintain spiritual progress, but they also seem to be losing ground. Some appear to be drifting backwards toward Judaism. Fear of persecution may be one cause (Hebrews 2:1-4). The danger is that if drift continues, they will reach a point where they doubt God’s Word (Hebrews 3:7-4:13). They have become *“dull of hearing”* in so far as increasingly understanding the truths of God’s Word. They have drifted into a form of spiritual apathy, become lazy in Christian discipline, and consequently are failing to develop spiritually.

By this stage in their Christian life, they should be able to give reasonable explanations of the basics of the faith to all who ask. Instead, they themselves seem to need further explanation of the basics. It appears they need *“milk, not solid food.”* By *“milk”* the author means a focus on the Lord’s finished work done on earth – His birth, life, teaching, death, burial, and resurrection. Understanding these things is vital, but it must not be their pinnacle of understanding. Christians are to constantly grow in wisdom and understanding. By *“solid food”* he means understanding what Christ is doing now as our great high priest in heaven plus knowing and doing what is expected of us. Christian life begins based on Christ’s finished earthly work. We grow in the Christian life based on His ongoing work in heaven.

Even the most mature “adult in Christ” benefits from milk. We can and should continue to learn about and appreciate the work our Lord did on earth. We should contemplate that work with increasing wonder and understanding. But we must not stop there! We are to make spiritual progress toward greater understanding of the complete Christian life, not just its beginning. We can only do that by partaking of the solid food of Christ’s priestly ministry in heaven. Hebrews 13:20-21 will briefly summarize what the Lord in heaven expects of us now. In verse 5:14 the author encourages readers to sharpen their powers of discernment by constant practice so that they can confidently distinguish good from evil. That applies directly to us today.

Hebrews 6:1-3: *“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.”*

Moving Forward in the Faith: We might expect the author’s “dull of hearing and need for milk” complaints in verse 5:11-14, to be followed by fundamental instruction in elementary doctrine. But they have had abundant exposure to elementary doctrine. God’s Word concerning Christ had its beginning in the Old Testament. These Hebrew-Christians know the Old Testament very well. They understand both the Old Testament roots and the salvation work accomplished by Christ. Those are the rudiments of the faith. To learn only the rudiments of any subject is to remain a “child” in understanding. The problem is that, though these people know the foundation, they have not continued to grow in understanding. They need to understand what the living, risen Christ is doing in them and for them at present. The knowledge they have is not moving them toward spiritual maturity. They have stopped learning and growing.

The author says they should build on the foundation they have received, adding constantly to their understanding. They should put what they know and the new things they learn into practice, and become spiritually mature. Don’t continue to be a spiritual infant. He says they should allow Christ’s priesthood to do its work in their

lives. That is likewise a problem for believers today. Christ lives and is active as our heavenly High Priest. All believers are to cooperate with the continuing work of the Holy Spirit and of our Great High Priest in heaven. Continued cooperation with the work of Christ will produce the maturity each believer is expected to achieve. Don't simply look to what Christ achieved in the past. That is foundational. Build on that foundation by cooperating with the current work of our Great High Priest in heaven.

Six Foundational Truths: The author then lists six foundational truths of Christianity. With a little variation in meaning, these truth were also foundational to Judaism. These examples are the kinds of things he has in mind in referring to elementary teachings. Repentance from dead works (often translated as “repentance from works that lead to death”) and faith toward God are the starting point for Christians and Jews. Washings refer to various Jewish rites related to purification. The underlying significance carries over into Christianity as baptism. Purifying a pagan convert is likely the concept behind the practice of baptism by John the Baptist. Baptism became a sacrament of the Christian church as commanded by Jesus.

The laying on of hands is another Jewish custom taken up by the Christian church. In the Christian church it is often a symbol for the imparting of the Holy Spirit. It is also used in connection with healing and special commissioning. The last two items in the list, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, both having to do in the Christian church with the doctrine of last things, were accepted in Judaism by the Pharisees but not by the Sadducees. This suggests the author was a Pharisee.

Pressing On: *“And this we will do if God permits.”* This seems to mean the author intends to press forward with a discussion of the more advanced matters of doctrine to encourage his readers become more mature. But he recognizes God's involvement in this task is necessary if he is to succeed. “If God permits” is not a pious sentiment. It is an acknowledgement that only God can change the course of a man's life. The phrase may very well be an expression of the author's intent to lead his readers to Christian maturity if God permits.

Hebrews 6:4-6: *“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 warning is one of the most disputed passages in the New Testament. There are several common interpretations. Some say it means genuine regenerated Christians can lose their salvation, but that is the one thing it can't possibly mean. A prime rule in interpretation is to let Scripture interpret Scripture, using the clear portions to understand the obscure or difficult portions. Hebrews 6:13-20, 10:14; John 5:24, 10:26-30; Romans 8:28-39; Jude 24-25; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; Ezekiel 11:19; Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 24:7 and other clear portions of Scripture make it obvious a true believer can never lose salvation. Consider this example: Hebrews 10:14: *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* This verse would have no meaning if a regenerated person could lose salvation. It is interesting the author does not use the Greek word for apostasy, but instead uses a word that means “falling alongside.”

Based on the truth that a true believer cannot lose salvation, a frequent interpretation of 6:6 is that the people addressed are **not** true believers. However, the author's description of the experience of “those,” whom he speaks about, makes this view questionable, at least in so far as external appearances are concerned. It isn't totally clear that regeneration has occurred, but it sure sounds like it. A possible meaning is that one can have the blessings and experiences mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-5 and still not be regenerated or justified. In that case these people would not be externally distinguishable from true believers. Hear the words of our Lord Himself in Matthew 7:22-23 *“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”* The intent of 6:6 may be to warn them to be sure of their salvation. What do we know about the verses so far?

What Do We Know So Far? We know a stern warning is given. It cannot mean true believers can lose their salvation. It could be a warning for the letter's recipients to examine themselves to verify their faith is real. Consider other possibilities.

The pronouns used in this exhortation beginning at 5:11 point to another view. In 5:11-12 the pronoun is “you,” in 6:1 it is “us,” and in 6:4 it is “those.” This change in pronouns is suggestive the warning is a hypothetical case illustrating the folly of drifting toward apostasy. There is no implication any the recipients have fallen into total disbelief. In talking about falling away, the author does not say “you” or “us.” To the contrary a few verses in later in 6:9 the author calls his readers beloved and say that he sees in them the signs of salvation. Describing ones who have fallen away, He says “those.” Has he then given his readers a hypothetical example to illustrate the extreme danger of falling away? There are several examples in the NT of such hypothetical statements being used to make a point (Galatians 3:12, James 2:10, John 9:39). Hebrews 6:9 *“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation”* seems to support the hypothetical example argument of falling away (an interpretation held by Wescott).

If hypothetical, the argument goes something like this: Suppose you fail to go on to maturity. Does this mean you will lose your salvation and fall back into condemnation? If you are truly regenerate, that’s impossible! If it were possible for ones who have experienced enlightenment, have shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted of the goodness of the Word of God to lose their salvation, it would be impossible to get it back. That would disgrace Jesus Christ. It would require Christ to be crucified again, and this could never happen.”

Another Possible Meaning: Still another possible meaning of Heb. 6:6 is that people who are true believers could fall back to the point of beginning to act in a non-Christian manner. Their behavior counters their claim to be Christians. Such people cannot be brought to repentance **while** their thoughts and actions are contrary to being “in Christ.” But, if they come to their senses (like the prodigal son), stop bad behavior, repent evil thoughts and actions, once again their loving Father will restore them.

Israel in the Wilderness and Believers in Danger of Falling Back: The parallel the author has drawn with Israel in the wilderness can create doubt about a believer’s perseverance. Israel’s offenses against God caused them to fall back at Kadesh Barnea from God’s intended path. Consequently they wandered another forty

years in the wilderness before being permitted to enter the Promised Land. But survivors and a new generation did eventually enter.

The right direction at Kadesh Barnea was straight ahead but, because that would require tough fighting, they chose to turn away and fall back into the wilderness. It was a mistake for which they paid dearly. But the question remains, did anyone who was truly regenerate in the Old Testament or New Testament lose their salvation? Scripture's answer is no! Israel suffered for their failure to believe in God's ability to deliver the land to them. But Scripture assures us that not one of those in the hand of God will ever fall out. Ungodly behavior by Christians brings unpleasant consequences. But our Loving Father welcomes prodigals home. Those whom He has regenerated will never fall out of His hand. Persevering in faith is vital. In verses 6:7-8 the author illustrates his warning with an agricultural example.

Hebrews 6:7-8: *“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.⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.”*

What is the Difference: Abundant rain falls on a group of fields at just the right times. In the first field the soil is rich and deep and produces a plentiful crop. A nearby field receives the same rainfall, but the soil is rocky and thin and only thorns and thistles grow. Such a field is in danger of being cursed. The thorns and thistles need to be burned so that their seeds will not blow into the field with the good soil.

This illustration closely resembles Jesus' parable of the four soils representing four different heart conditions. All the “heart soils” received the same gospel seed but with widely different results. The seed of the gospel failed to penetrate the hard soil of the walkways through the fields. The birds ate the seed. On the warm rocky shallow soil the seeds quickly germinated but just as quickly died from lack of moisture and too much heat. In soil where there were many thorns and weeds, the gospel seed germinates and begins to grow but is eventually crowded out by the more hardy thorns and weeds. The fourth soil is deep and fruitful. The gospel seed prospers and produces a bountiful crop. The Word falls in the same way on ears that hear and

reject it as it does on ears that hear and accept it. The warning of woe is to those who hear repeatedly and end up rejecting the call. Caleb and Joshua had heart soil that was deep and fruitful. They were faithful to the end.

Hebrews 6:9-12: *“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. 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.”*

Hope for the Author’s Readers: The author regards those to whom he is writing as genuine believers. He warns them not that they are at risk of losing their salvation, but that they are missing out on “benefits which accompany salvation.”

The expression *“though we speak in this way”* followed as it is by *“yet in your case, beloved”* seems to indicate the severe warning and penalty of 6:4-6 is indeed a hypothetical example used to get their attention. To put the warning in context, the author addresses his readers as “beloved” and assures them he expects them to persevere in their faith –that is, in their trust in the Lord Jesus. *“Things that belong to salvation”* is a characteristic way of describing the new Covenant in Christ in comparison with the Old Covenant.

The work they have done is good and will not be overlooked, but it is not the cause of their regeneration. However, that work, and their love is clear evidence regeneration occurred. The spiritual fruit of love (agape) focuses them on the person of Christ. Their love for Christ reveals and expresses itself in obedience including the help they give to others which they are continuing to do. The author desires them to keep on showing the same earnestness, producing in them full assurance of hope until the end. He wants them to be energetic and fruitful, not sluggish and dull. Success comes through imitating those, who through faith and patience, inherit the promises (this seems an anticipation of chapter 11).

Some things in life are analogous to riding bicycles. You must keep in balanced motion to remain stable. Otherwise you topple over. If you stop without an alternate way to keep upright, you will topple over. As Christians, we are to be constantly moving forward in sanctification, increasing in understanding, and fulfilling our obligations in the faith toward God and others. The people of God are the body of Christ. All are needed to perform their function in the body. Cells in the body are joined together, each dependent on all the others.

The author in the next section turns to the certainty of God's Promises. Christ is the ultimate hope for believers. He is the sure and certain anchor for our souls. The author points out three realities that are the basis for a believer's assurance of salvation – God's promise (6:13-15), God's oath (6:16-18), and God's Son (6:19-20).

Hebrews 6:13-16: *“For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.”*

God's Covenant with Abraham: In ancient Hebrew culture, it was customary to seal a promise with an oath. Generally, a person swore by something greater than himself, usually that was God. When a Hebrew swore an “oath before Lord,” it was absolutely binding and hence final. It and brought an end to any dispute.

God made a covenant with Abraham which we call the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant was expressed by God to Abraham not once but several times. On one occasion, God added His oath as confirmation. That occasion (Genesis 22:15-18) was when Abraham displayed unfaltering trust in God by being willing to sacrifice Isaac. To confirm the covenant with Abraham, God having no one or anything greater than Himself by which to swear, swore by Himself. The phrase “obtained the promise” does not mean Abraham received the full range of God's promise during his life,. It means Abraham received God's guarantee.

Hebrews 6:17-18: *“So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it*

with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”

God’s Word is always true, but to make His promise more convincing to Abraham and his heirs, God confirmed His promise with an oath. The two unchangeable things mentioned are God’s Word (that is the promise itself) reinforced and guaranteed by God’s oath. The Scriptural principle of having two witnesses to establish legal proof underlies this argument. The promise made to Abraham culminated in Jesus. In Christ, our hope is secure.

Hebrews 6:19-20: *“ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”*

A Steadfast Anchor for Our Soul: Remember the author’s deep concern that his readers may drift from Christianity. In these verses he says there is a perfect anchor for their (and our) souls. A ship’s anchor, firmly grounded, enables a ship to ride out a gale. The security of the anchor depends on the firmness of the unseen ground it grips. The anchor for a believer’s soul is hope in Christ.

Christ is the “unseen firm ground” on which a believer’s anchor rests and grasps firmly. Christ is eternally stable, and He is presently in the heavenly holy of holies, the inner place behind the curtain. That is an eternally stable region. The storms of life do not disturb the tranquility of heaven. Christ, the firm holding ground in which the anchor for our soul rests, sits at the right hand of the Father. Believers are shielded from ultimate drifting away from the faith, but they may for a time drift into dullness and apathy. Because He is our savior and the anchor of our soul, we have direct access to Jesus in the Holy of Holies. He has gone before us and has *“become a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*

What is Next? Christ’s superior priesthood.