

HEBREWS 21
(Hebrews 5:11-6:8)

A WARNING TO UNSAVED JUDAIZERS
By Ron Harvey
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INTRODUCTION

This book of Hebrews is a book emphasizing the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. And in particular, it is a stern warning to fence-sitting Jews who have heard the gospel (Heb.2:1; 4:2), who have had their intellects enlightened by the gospel (6:4) and who have tasted the gospel (6:5). But they have not fully drunk of the gospel. Perhaps they have even attached themselves to the gospel church and they may have even associated themselves with the Holy Spirit (6:4), but they have not fully committed to Christ and they are contemplating going back to the old days of Judaism.

They are being wooed by the gospel. And it seems that they have been wooed for some length of time because Paul says by now, "they ought to be teachers." (v.11) But after so long a time, they are not hearing better, but they are becoming dull of hearing. (5:11) This is what will happen if you hear the gospel day after day and you fail to cast yourself in with Christ. You cannot sit on the fence forever. Soon you will fall away. You will return to that old life which calls you back.

Now that old way of Judaism was calling these fence-sitters back home. Come on back to your old religion. Come on back to Moses. Come back to the law. Come back to the Levitical Priesthood. Come back to the animal sacrifices. Come back to what you know so well.

Now these fence-sitters are in a dangerous condition. They are straddling the fence of life and death. And that is why the book of Hebrews cries out over and over with a most stern warning.

It says, "Don't fall away." It says, "Hold fast," to your profession. It says, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." (3:12)

The warning is for those who are teetering on the brink of salvation in Christ, but who are not yet fully in Him. They may yet go the way of Christ or they may fall back to their old ways. And how perilous is that position!

Now tonight we are going to evaluate a portion of Scripture that I fear is very misunderstood. And I think it can only be understood by applying the context of the book of Hebrews. And I trust that we have now laid the groundwork to allow us to come to an understanding of this passage.

Now the writer of Hebrews is about to tell his readers something that is quite shocking. And it has to do with this mysterious character called Melchisedec. And it is going to be very hard to understand. He says, Jesus is,

Called of God a high priest after the order of Melchisedec. (5:10)

Now we are going to study this matter of Melchisedec beginning in chapter 7. And we are going to look closely at the priest who was a type of Christ. But let me just summarize at this point.

There is an order of priests that existed before the Levitical priesthood. Now let me ask this question. When did the Levitical priesthood come along?

The Levitical priesthood came with the giving of the law to Israel. But Melchisedec was a priest before all of that. We find Melchisedec mentioned in Genesis 14 where he met with Abraham and gave a blessing to Abraham. And Abraham paid tithes to Melchisedec to show the greatness of Melchisedec's priesthood. And it is only later that God established the Levitical priesthood for Israel.

And in Heb.5:10, Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchisedec. Jesus was not a Levite. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. And therefore, Jesus was not a Levitical priest. Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchisedec and the writer of Hebrews will show that Christ's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood.

He will show that Christ's priesthood was an eternal priesthood. It preceded the Levitical priesthood and it succeeded the Levitical priesthood.

And it effectively put an end to the Levitical priesthood.

Now look at verse 11.

Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered . . .

The difficulty lay in the strong disinclination of man to relinquish that which has long been cherished, which nowhere appears more evident than in connection with religious things. To say that Christ was a High Priest “after the order of Melchisedec” was tantamount to affirming that the Aaronic order was Divinely set aside, and with it, all the ordinances and ceremonies of the Mosaic law. “This was the hardest thing of all for a Hebrew, even a converted one, to bow to, for it meant repudiating everything that was seen, and cleaving to that which was altogether invisible. It meant forsaking that which their fathers had honored for fifteen hundred years, and espousing that which the great majority of their brethren according to the flesh denounced as Satanic.

(A.W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews, pgs. 356,357)

These are hard things to understand, Paul says. And they are particularly hard to those who are unwilling or unable to accept them.

Now let's pause a moment and let me tell you first how this passage has been interpreted by many in the past.

There has been a tendency to interpret this passage as contrasting baby Christians and mature Christians.

It says in verse 12 that some of them were in need of milk when they should have moved on to stronger food like meat. And it is very natural to jump to an easy interpretation of that. It sounds on the face of those words like this is talking about Christian maturity.

And many people interpret this passage in Hebrews like the one in I Corinthians 3:1-3 where Paul does use this analogy to contrast baby Christians with mature Christians.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.

I Cor.3:1-3

But this book of Hebrews is not talking about Christian maturity. But what it is talking about is fence-sitting Jews who are back-peddling away from Christ and back in Judaism. They are losing their confidence in Christ in favor of Moses. They are ready to prefer the high priest Aaron to the great High Priest, Jesus Christ.

And so, I would like for you to consider that in this context, Paul is contrasting those fence-sitting Jews who perhaps are ready to apostasize and leave Christ to those who are really saved.

And if this be the interpretation, then he is contrasting people who are lost to people who are saved. He is contrasting the state of affairs under Judaism to the state of affairs under Christ.

Now we are going to take a very close look at this section of Scripture. But let me first read to you from a couple of other sources so that you don't think this is just something I have dreamed up.

Consider A.W. Pink on this passage.

“As we have repeated so often in the course of this series of articles, the theme of our Epistle is the immeasurable superiority of Christianity over Judaism. Unless the interpreter keeps this steadily in mind as he proceeds from chapter to chapter, and from passage to passage, he is certain to err. This is the key which unlocks every section, and if attempt be made to open up any portion without it, the effect can only be strained and forced. The importance of this consideration cannot be overestimated, and several striking exemplifications of it have already been before us in our survey of the previous chapters. Here too it will again stand us in good stead, if we but use it. The apostle is not contrasting two different stages of Christianity, an infantile and a mature; rather he is opposing, once more, the substance over against the shadows. He continues to press upon the Hebrews their need of forsaking the visible for the invisible,

the typical for the antitypical.”

(A.W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews, pgs. 272,273)

And then there is the more contemporary John MacArthur.

“Now then, as we come to this passage, it is not comparing Christians with Christians. It is not even in 5:11-14, where it talks about babes. It is not referring to Christians. It is referring to those in Judaism. They are the babes, the mature ones are the Christians. That is the constant analogy of the book of Hebrews.”

“Now, all the way through the book of Hebrews, we find that Jesus Christ is presented as superior to everything in the Old Covenant. In fact, it begins by saying, ‘Jesus is superior to angels.’ And then it says, ‘He’s superior to prophets,’ to Moses, to Joshua, to Aaron, to sacrifices, to the priesthood that Aaron had.’ Superior to everything. And that is the point of the book.”

Now, the basic question of this passage is whether you are a Jew still holding on to Judaism, or a Christian. A babe is a Jew in Judaism. A mature man is a Christian. That’s the issue of the passage. What he is really saying here is . . . ‘Let us go on to perfection. Let us go on to maturity.’ He’s not saying, ‘All right, you baby Christians. Grow up.’ He is saying to Jews holding on to the ABC’s of God’s revelation, let’s go on to the full revelation, which is Christ Jesus. So, he’s inviting them to be saved.

(John MacArthur, Sermon: If They Fall Away)

So, it seems that those who are called babes here are those Jews that are still clinging to the picture books of religion. Oh how they loved the pictures. They couldn’t read yet, because they were still babes. But they loved the pictures. Oh how they loved the priests in their golden garments. How they loved to turn the page and see the golden sensor and the brazen altar and the bowl of incense. How they loved the fancy rituals which were only the pictures of Christ. But they had not grown up. Their picture-book religion had not blossomed into true religion for they were stuck in childhood.

Look in Heb.5:12.

Ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God.

Are they ready for instruction about Melchisedec? Are they ready for hard instruction about the putting aside of the Old Covenant in favor of the New? Are they ready to hear that the old rituals are done away in Christ?

No, they are stuck in ignorance. They need to be taught the ABC's of religion. To put it another way,

You are become such as have need of milk. (v.12)

Now notice here, they are not said to be feeding on milk as in the I Corinthians passage. They are in need of it. They need the rudimentary elements of the gospel preached to them before they can go on to harder things like Melchisedec's priesthood.

Now the persons whom Paul is talking about in this passage are described in several ways. So let's see how they are described and then see if that helps us identify them.

1. They are dull of hearing. (v.11)

Now the first thing it says about these people, whoever they are, is that they are dull of hearing. The greek word translated dull here is "nothos." And it means literally an illegitimate son. They have ears that are illegitimate. They are not the ears of real sons. They are the ears of illegitimate sons. Another shade of meaning of nothos is that their ears had no affinity for the speaker. They had "no affinity" ears.

Now this sounds very much like what Jesus said in John 10:27 when he said, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And he told his Jewish audience, "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you." (John 10:26)

And so in Hebrews 5:11, whoever Paul is talking about, he says they are "dull of hearing."

Look in Matthew 13:13-16. Here we have a contrast between those who do not hear and those who do.

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

Matthew 13:13-16

Now you see the same phrase here in Matthew which is translated again, "dull of hearing." This is a different greek word than the one in Hebrews, but with the same idea. The greek word here is "bareos" which means weighty or burdensome. And the idea is that they were burdened in their ears.

Example: Now there is a condition known as tinsinitis. And it is commonly known as ringing in the ears. I have this condition and my ears ring continually. And it makes hearing difficult. You might say that I am burdened in my ears.

And in this passage in Matthew they are clearly people who had no capacity to hear. They were burdened in their ears by depravity and by spiritual death.

So we see first that Paul is speaking of people who are dull of hearing.

2. They need to be taught. (v.12)

These people are people who are unlearned in the things of Christ. They had been hanging around the gospel for a good, long while, yet, they haven't learned much. They are still back at square one. They have made no progress.

In fact, look what it is that they need to be taught.

3. You need the elemental truths about God. (12)

You have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God.

Paul is ready to begin teaching about heavy matters – Melchisedec and the priesthood of Christ. But he hesitates, because there are those who still need to be taught the A,B,C's of true religion. Paul puts it another way - you need baby food.

4. They are unskilled in the word of righteousness (the gospel) (v.13)

They have hung around and been exposed to the gospel of Christ, but they are unskilled in it. This is always true of unbelievers, but not so much of believers. Believers have the skill of the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. But those stuck in Judaism, are stuck in the mud with no one to help them. They are unskilled in the gospel.

5. They are babes. (v.13)

Now when it says he is a babe. This is not a declaration that he is a child of God. It is not saying he is a baby Christian. It is saying that he has not come into the maturity of knowing Christ. He has not been saved. He has not come unto perfection. That is, he has not rightly understood his Judaism. It has not pointed him to the substance which is Christ. And so, he is a babe. This is an analogy. He needs the milk of the word like a baby needs milk. He needs the basics. And I would say, it means he needs to hear - Christ died for you. He needs to hear - Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved – that kind of instruction.

5. They cannot discern good from evil. (v.14)

In this verse, those who do know Christ are said to be full age. They have come to that maturity of knowing Christ and by so doing they are able to discern good and evil. But, those who are still contemplating the animal sacrifices and the Aaronic Priesthood are way back in babyhood and they cannot discern good from evil. This sounds very much like the difference between the regenerate and the unregenerate.

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for

they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual, judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

(I Cor. 2:14, 15)

6. They may still put Christ to shame. (v.6)
7. They are warned that they may be burned. (v.8)
8. They are contrasted with true believers. (v.9)

Beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation . . .

They may prove themselves to be unsaved. They may be rejected and burned. But we are persuaded better of you.

9. They still are in such a state that they may fall away. (v.6)

Now, those who are saved; those who are in Christ; those who have been regenerated; those who have left their former lives behind and pitched in with Christ; they shall never fall away.

And why will they never fall away? It is because God has saved them; because God will continue to save them; because God will keep them.

To suggest that one of God's sheep will ever fall away unto perdition is nothing short of heresy. It is calling God a failure. It is calling Christ a liar. Because Jesus said, "Of all that he giveth me I should lose nothing."

And yet here, these that need the milk, these who are called babes, these who have tasted of the word of God, nevertheless are warned that if they fall away they will be burned. Some of these Jews may finally come off the fence and join Christ wholeheartedly and if they do, they will prove themselves to be the elect of God. But some of them may ride the fence too long. They may actually fall back into Judaism. And they will prove themselves to be lost indeed. For if you reject the substance in favor of the type then the type is nothing but an empty ritual.

Example: What good would it do to put your confidence in a sacrificed lamb, and then reject the one whom the lamb pictured?

And this is how these Hebrews were tempted. They were tempted to cave in to peer pressure and go back. They were tempted to say, "It is a little too hard to be a Christian. The persecution is too much." Our family and our Jewish friends are forsaking us because we are considering Christ.

And Paul is warning them to stay with Christ.

So let's review. They are people who are dull of hearing, need to be taught, who are stuck in the ABC's of religion, who are unskilled in the gospel, who are babes, who cannot discern good from evil, who may yet put Christ to shame, who may yet be burned at the last judgment, who may yet fall away and who are contrasted with true believers.

It is these same people who have had a mild association with the gospel and with the Holy Spirit.

10. They have had a mild association with the gospel. (6: 4, 5)

Do those who are non-elect ever come into contact with the gospel? The answer is obviously yes. The gospel is preached universally. The gospel is opened up for all to hear. And therefore, even the non-elect have some association with the gospel.

And do the non-elect have any participation with the Holy Spirit? Is there a work of the Holy Spirit with the non-elect. And the answer is yes. The Holy Spirit of God is capable of enlightening even the non-elect. I want to give you three examples from the book of Romans:

Example 1

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

Romans 1:18, 19

Now in these verses it is very clear that God enlightens the minds of even those who are objects of his wrath. And in some sense, it can be said that they knew God.

Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful . . .

Romans 1:21

Example 2

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another . . .

Romans 2:14, 15

God is speaking here of men according to nature, that is, not men according to God's grace, not renewed men, but natural men. And the law of God is written in their hearts.

Listen to Pink here:

In his natural heart there is written "the work of the law" – by whom but by the finger of God! Except for this, man would be destitute of moral light, for the Fall robbed him of all light.

(A.W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, pg. 299)

Example 3

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thou boast of God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness.

These were Jews who were enlightened by their association with God and with the law of God, but were lost nevertheless.

So let's not be confused when we read about these Jews in Hebrews 6 that:

- a. They were once enlightened – they had gained some intellectual knowledge. (v.4)

- b. They had tasted the heavenly gift – they have tasted but not drunk. (v.4)
- c. they were partakers of the Holy Ghost. (v.4)
- d. They had tasted the word of God. (v.5)
- e. They had tasted of the powers of the world to come. (v.5)

They had put their lips to the glass of God's grace in Christ and had tasted. They had touched their tongues to the sweet nectar of God's Word. They had dipped their fingers in the power of the Holy Spirit by association with the church and they tasted even of the Holy Spirit.

But it is just a taste, just a sampling. They may yet fall away because they have not drunk in full.

Christ said, *"This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. Drink ye all of it."*

Matthew 26:27, 28)

But these Hebrews were only sipping and tasting of Christ.

No one can share in Christ's kingdom by simply tasting. You must drink in full.

Now there is much more that I have to say about this hard passage and we will wait until Sunday morning to look in more detail. But let's make some observations in general from our text:

1. This is a parenthetical section interrupting the writer's discussion of Melchisedec. You see in 5:10 that he mentions Melchisedec and he resumes this discussion in chapter 7. But this parenthesis, is designed to warn some Jews in the church that they will have difficulty understanding. Why will they have difficulty? Because they are clinging to the types instead of the substance. They are clinging to the babyhood of Judaism instead of perfection in Christ. They are ready to fall away from Christ and they will have difficulty accepting that the Old Covenant is done away and the New Covenant is installed.
2. This is not a discussion of Christian maturity. It is not a contrast of the carnal Christian and the spiritual Christian. It is a contrast of those clinging to Judaism and those who have gone on to the reality which is Christ.

3. This passage does not teach that Christians can fall away from Christ. Those who are born again can never be unborn. Those who have been renewed in Christ cannot be unrenewed. Those who have been called by God cannot be recalled like a defective automobile. If God has set his love upon me, then he will not change his mind and take his love away. If God has saved me, then he will keep me. If God has given me to Christ, then Christ will not let me be taken from his hand. This much we know.

So, when it says, "If they shall fall away," it is not talking about the truly saved. But it is talking about those Jews who are yet to fully disengage from the types in favor of the antitype. It is talking about the Jews who have not yet decided that the sacrifice of Christ is better than the sacrifice of a goat. It is talking about those Jews who yet prefer the law of Moses to the law of Christ. It is talking about those Jews who will never be able to view Melchisedec as a better priest than Aaron.

This whole discussion of Melchisedec may drive them away. It may cause them to fall away because they are not ready to leave that old Jewish system behind.

4. These Jews who are hanging around the church and hanging around the gospel and hanging around the Holy Spirit but who are not fully committing to Christ are separated from this thing called salvation. Whatever they have is only a taste of God's goodness and not the things that accompany salvation.

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation . . . (v.9)