

Jesus is Better: A Study of Hebrews

A Better Salvation (Hebrews 5:11-6:12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 20, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, I made a claim about the Bible being the most dangerous book in the world. About how reading your Bible is a dangerous task that you best not take lightly. Because it's living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword. Capable of cutting you to the heart – to the deepest recesses of your soul.
 - **And the book of Hebrews is particularly razor-sharp. Because it's full of biblical warnings.** Warning of the danger of *drifting away* from Christ (2:1); of *neglecting* his great salvation (2:3); of *falling away* from the Living God (3:12); of *being hardened* by the deceitfulness of sin (3:13); of *failing* to reach God's promised rest (4:1, 11).
- ❖ And in this morning's text, we come across the sharpest of all the warnings. It cuts the deepest. And raises the most questions. **At first glance, our text seems to suggest that a Christian can lose his or her salvation.** And it appears to teach that, if such a believer were to fall away from the faith, it would be impossible to restore that person again to repentance. You're lost for good. Which is a scary thought that undermines all assurance of salvation.
 - I thought Christians couldn't lose their salvation. Once saved always saved, right? This warning certainly has our attention. **But unfortunately, the meticulous attention we give this text tends to draw us away from the author's intended purpose.** In other words, I think the questions we typically ask of this passage are not the questions the author is trying to answer.
 - **We're so preoccupied with abstract theological questions about eternal security – if Christians can theoretically lose their salvation. But the question the author is raising is far more personal.** He wants to know if you're living out *your* salvation. He wants to know if you're growing in *your* faith. Or if you're stunted. If you've grown spiritually sluggish.
- ❖ If our study of this passage remains in the theoretical – if all our time is spent working out our systematic theology – then we will have seriously missed the point. We will have blunted the edge of this warning text. **The point of this passage is to get you seriously thinking about the state of your own soul.** About if you're spiritually alive and growing. Or if, God forbid, you're a spiritual stillbirth. Because if you're not growing in your faith, then there is something seriously wrong on a spiritual level. That's the warning in our passage.
- ❖ Now if that worries you, if that makes you anxious, to the point that it shakes you out of your spiritual sluggishness and makes you more vigilant to hold fast your confession of faith in Christ – then you're living proof that God's Word is living and active and effective in accomplishing its intended effect.
 - And the opposite response to this biblical warning would prove the same point. If the warning has no effect on you, if you simply shrug it off, then what our text warns is proven true. If the Word of God can't get you to repent, then nothing will. It would be otherwise impossible.

- ❖ Look, I understand if you're still confused (and worried) because this passage seems to undermine all assurance of salvation. But I just want to say that that's clearly not the author's intent. He even says, in chapter 6:11, that his desire is for his readers to *"have the full assurance of hope until the end."* **So clearly he's not trying to instill within you a fear of uncertainty about the sureness of your salvation. He says he wants Christians to have full assurance.** But he knows there's a difference between full assurance and false assurance. And this passage is meant to encourage the former and expose the latter.
 - So in keeping with the intent of the author of Hebrews, let me walk us through the text and highlight three things. First, we'll talk frankly about a kind of spiritual sluggishness that stunts our growth. Second, we'll look more carefully at the warning in our text – one that accomplishes its intended purpose. And lastly, we'll consider an assurance that lasts until the end.

A Sluggishness That Stunts

- ❖ Let's start by considering a sluggishness that stunts our spiritual growth. That's the point the author raises in chapter 5:11. **Here he basically interrupts his own flow of thought.** In the prior verses, he had been arguing that Jesus is a better high priest. Because he offered, once for all, a better sacrifice for sins. And by v10, he's arguing that Jesus was designated a high priest after the more superior order of Melchizedek. A point he'll return to in chapter 7.
 - But in v11, he interrupts himself to express disappointment that these concepts are so difficult for his readers to grasp and that he has to spend time convincing them *not* to revert back to Judaism and to simply trust in Jesus. Look at v11, *"About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."*
- ❖ The author wishes he could speak more about Jesus's high priestly ministry. **But he's unable to because they've become dull of hearing.** The same word is translated as sluggish in chapter 6:12. They've grown spiritually sluggish. Which means they're *not* growing.
 - So Jesus's high priestly ministry after the order of Melchizedek is hard to explain – not because it's too complex a doctrine. Not because they're intellectually incapable. It's because they've become *"dull of hearing."* Or as the NIV helpfully puts it, they *"no longer try to understand."* They've grown spiritually apathetic. They're sluggish.
 - **The author says that, by this time, his readers should be mature enough in the faith to be teachers of these basic truths.** Yet apparently they still *"need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God."*
- ❖ Now there's no suggestion that every member of the church ought to be teachers in a formal sense. Not every believer has the spiritual gift of teaching or is called to a teaching office in the church. **But the point here is that every member should at least be able to convey the basic elements of the faith to others.** That's a sign of spiritual growth and maturity.
 - Now I'm sure you're wondering what are these *"basic principles of the oracles of God"* that any growing Christian should be able to explain. The author spells out, in chapter 6:1-2, the foundational teachings that we shouldn't have to keep relearning.

- ❖ Notice three related pairs of doctrines. And how they all fit under the blanket term “*the elementary doctrine of Christ*.” Meaning they all relate to the unique person and work of Christ. Their immature grasp of Christ explains why the book of Hebrews was necessary in the first place – with its particular emphasis arguing for the superiority of Christ.
- ❖ **The first pair of doctrines are “repentance from dead works” (that is, sinful works; works that lead to death) and “faith towards God.”** This is basic teaching. Every Christian should know – and should be able to explain – that you only become a Christian by repenting (turning away) from your sins and turning towards God through faith in Jesus and what he accomplished in his death and resurrection. **Repentance and faith are distinct actions but never separated. They’re two sides of the same coin.** You can’t have one without the other. You might claim to trust in Jesus, but if you refuse to repent of any cherished sin in your life, then you don’t have real faith. That’s not a faith that saves.
 - The second pair of doctrines are not as clear. **They have to do with “instruction about washing and the laying on of hands.”** Some translations say instructions about baptism, but it’s not using the well-known Greek word for baptism. So some commentators think the author is talking about basic teachings that distinguish Christianity from Judaism. These are certain things those with a Jewish background have to understand before they become Christian. Like how OT ritual washings don’t actually cleanse you from sin. And when the priest lays his hands on the sacrifice to symbolically transfer the sins of the people onto the animal – that doesn’t actually remove sins from you. Those who now trust in Jesus as their Great High Priest have to turn away (repent) from these ritualistic practices. Don’t revert back.
 - The third pair is more straightforward. **It has to do with “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.”** We’re talking about the Christian’s hope of a future physical resurrection where we receive glorified resurrection bodies like Jesus’s. And about our hope of escaping the judgment after death that will determine our eternity. We believe we’ll be judged worthy to enter eternal glory – but only because we’ve repented and trusted in Christ.
- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, you don’t need to be a theology expert.** You don’t have to be able to preach a sermon or teach a Bible study. But if you’ve been a Christian for a few years by now and you still don’t understand (or can’t explain) the difference between repentance and faith and why you need both; if you’re still relying on human works and rituals to be cleansed of your sins; if you don’t understand that your future hope is *not* to live in the clouds but to be bodily resurrected, to pass through God’s judgment, and to enjoy eternity on a new and renewed earth – **if you have to keep relearning these things and you’re still incapable of teaching them to others, then something is terribly wrong.**
- ❖ Now when v1 exhorts us to “*leave the elementary doctrine of Christ*,” it doesn’t mean to abandon it. **It doesn’t mean you *don’t* need to rehearse the truths of the gospel on a regular basis.** Like I stated a few weeks ago, you will never graduate from the gospel. Christians need to hear the gospel preached to them all the time.

- ❖ **But our author's point is that we should all be maturing to a point where these foundational gospel truths don't need to be relearned, over and over again, without understanding.** At some point, they should become part of your core convictions. And you know they are if you're able to teach them to others.
 - So is that something you can do? **Can you teach these doctrines to others?** Now if you're a new believer, it's okay if you don't know how to explain the importance of repentance and faith or our hope in the resurrection. **You need to be disciplined in these foundational truths.** Which is the point of our Sunday School classes and community groups. That's where you can grow. So get involved if you aren't already.
 - And don't feel bad if you still have to learn these things. **There's nothing wrong with a 3-month old who can only drink milk.** Infants can't digest solid food. That's understandable. But if a 23-year-old is only drinking milk at every meal – if he's still sucking on a bottle – then we've got a problem.
- ❖ That's the author's point. **His readers are still like babies who can only digest milk. When they should be at a point by now to enjoy solid food.** To handle discussions on the high priestly ministry of Christ. But they haven't grown spiritually. Instead they've grown sluggish. Dull in hearing. Which means they're "*unskilled in the word of righteousness*," and they lack the power of discernment to distinguish between good and evil. That's why they're even willing to entertain the thought of reverting back to Judaism and the old covenant.
- ❖ Now keep in mind that all the warnings issued in Hebrews have had the highest of stakes in mind. **Apostasy has been on the line.** Drifting away or falling away from Christ. **So let's not blunt the edge of these warnings and assume the author had in mind a permanent state of spiritual infancy that a Christian can simply remain in.**
 - No, there's no such thing. His point is that if you remain on milk – if you never advance to digesting solid food – it doesn't mean you remain a baby Christian all your life. No, it proves you aren't a Christian. You aren't spiritually alive. **Because a spiritually-alive person will spiritually grow from a baby, to a child, to an adolescent, to an adult.** That's the natural progression. To be stunted by a spiritual sluggishness just proves that you're not spiritually alive. You're a spiritual stillbirth.

A Warning That Accomplishes

- ❖ Friends, I realize that's a sharp word. But that's what our author is saying to his original audience. **Now the reason he's willing to call them out in this way is because he's confident his warning will accomplish its intended effect.** Look at v4. He was exhorting them to move beyond milk, and he says, "*And this we will do if God permits.*" **So he acknowledges that a spiritual breakthrough and any spiritual growth is ultimately going to be a work of God.** A gift of grace. And he recognizes that warnings are an effective (and gracious) means by which God effects spiritual growth in our lives. **So let's move on to our second point and consider a warning that accomplishes its intended purpose.**

- ❖ That sharpest of all warnings is in vv4-6. Listen to it again, “*4For 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, 5and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6and 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.*”
 - Now let’s first tackle what *is* clear about this text. **What is clear is that – for whoever the author is warning – if they fall away from Christ now, there will be no opportunity in the future for them to repent.** He says it’s impossible.
- ❖ Now *why* it’s impossible is not as clear. I would argue that repentance would be impossible *not* because God, at some point, would refuse to forgive a repentant person. Not because he has a one-strike policy that says if you fall away once, you’re gone for good. No, repentance would be impossible because such a person in such a situation would never seek it again.
 - **We have to remember that Hebrews is *not* a systematic theology book. If anything, it’s more like a sermon.** So we shouldn’t read everything through the lens of a theologian making precise theological claims. But rather from the lens of a pastor issuing pastoral warnings to his people.
- ❖ Remember, he’s writing to those who were growing weary of persecution and the hardships of the Christian life. They were tempted to fall away from Christ and choose a more comfortable path. **So the author’s warning is that they’re facing an existential crossroad. If you reject Christ now, there’s no turning back.** No future repentance. Not because God will reject you if you tried. But because you’ll have no desire anymore. His point is that someone who has experienced everything described in vv4-5 yet still falls away from Jesus – will have hardened his or her heart to the point of no return. That’s why it’s impossible, at least from a human perspective.
- ❖ Now what’s also not as clear is the spiritual state of those he’s describing in vv4-5. “*In the case of those.*” **Is he describing Christians or are they “almost Christians”?** Those who have associated themselves with Christians but have yet to be converted themselves? That’s where interpretations diverge. That’s where it gets debatable.
 - **There are good arguments for either interpretation, but I’m more convinced that the reading that assumes *he assumes his audience are Christians* has the stronger argument.** It’s the plain reading of the text. If you’re just reading in context – and putting your theological constructs aside – I think you would conclude that what’s being described in vv4-5 is a normal Christian experience.
- ❖ “*Those who have once been enlightened.*” The word “*once*” would suggest that he’s describing a decisive event. And the same word for “*enlightened*” is used again in chapter 10:32. There it clearly refers to a conversion experience, and it’s addressed to the same audience. So in context, we should assume that he assumes he’s writing to believers.

- ❖ “[Those] *who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit.*” Again, a plain reading would suggest a Christian. The “*heavenly gift*” probably refers to the salvation or new life that comes from above. And while some point to the verb “*tasted*” as evidence that we’re describing those who were only exposed to salvation but didn’t embrace it – that same verb was used earlier in chapter 2:9 of Jesus *tasting* death. **Clearly the verb doesn’t imply a partial experience.** If Jesus didn’t just partially die when he tasted death, then these people didn’t just partially experience the heavenly gift. They must have fully embraced it.
 - And the same could be said about having “*shared in the Holy Spirit.*” That word for *share* or *partake* was used in chapter 2:14 to describe Jesus *sharing* or *partaking* of our flesh and blood. Which, again, was *not* a partial experience. So we’d assume that the author assumes he’s writing to those who have received the Holy Spirit.
 - And keep reading in v5, “[those who] *have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.*” Again, *have tasted* would suggest a full experience of the Word’s goodness and the powers of the age to come. Not just a partial or tangential one.
- ❖ More could be said and counterarguments could be raised. **But, again, my point is that a plain reading of the text, in the context of the entire book, would suggest that our author is issuing this warning to those whom he assumes to be Christians.** He’s warning that anyone in their position who has experienced so much of the Christian life – if they fall away from Jesus – there’s no turning back. There’s no possibility that they’re going to repent.
 - Now we’re not left to completely speculate as to why. The author goes on to say, in v6, that they won’t repent, “*since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*” **In other words, if you deny the Son of God, then you’re denying that his death on the cross is able to save.** Your actions are holding him up to contempt – lifting him back up to public shame.
- ❖ Now you might still be wondering if the author thinks Christians can lose their salvation. Or if once saved always saved. **Well, based on the context of the book, I’d say he *does* believe in eternal security.** He already said that, by dying, Jesus tasted death for us (2:9) and that he made propitiation for the sins of God’s people (2:17). It’s done! And in subsequent chapters, he speaks of Jesus being able to save us to the uttermost (7:25). And how “*by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*” (10:14) **Bottomline, the author describes the salvation Jesus accomplished as complete and all-sufficient.** So yes, Christians can be confident that Jesus will save us to the uttermost.
 - But again, Hebrews is *not* a theology book trying to tackle the topic of eternal security. It’s a sermonic letter trying to warn about the dangers of falling away (apostasy). **And our author understands that the biblical warnings themselves are a means by which God keeps us on the straight and narrow.** Hearing and heeding biblical warnings help Christians persevere in the faith.

- ❖ He obviously doesn't have absolute knowledge of whether or not all in his audience are genuinely saved. He doesn't presume to know their hearts. He just cares about their hearts and hopes to cut them to heart. As someone who gives sermons, I get what he's trying to do. **Just as I will often preach to you all addressing you as Christians – without having absolute certainty that all of you are saved – our author is “preaching” to his audience as Christians.** And he's trusting that his warnings will be effective to help them persevere. But, of course, if any of them do, one day, fall away, they would be proving by their apostasy to have never been saved in the first place.
- ❖ The same would apply to us. If I'm a faithful preacher, then I'm going to clearly voice the warnings of Scripture whenever they show up in the text we're in. **And I'm going to trust that the God-ordained act of me issuing those warnings and the God-ordained act of you heeding them is the God-ordained means by which you, as a Christian, are kept from falling away from Christ.**
 - But, God forbid, any of you do fall away down the road. That won't prove Christians can lose their salvation. That Jesus tried but was unable to save you to the uttermost. **No, in such a case, the fact that the biblical warnings were ineffective for you and didn't keep you from falling away – would prove that you were never saved in the first place.** As the Lord taught, you shall know them by their fruits (Mt 7:20).
- ❖ Our author probably had Jesus's teaching in mind when he wrote vv7-8. He uses a similar metaphor. *“⁷For 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. ⁸But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”*
 - Brothers and sisters, take that warning to heart. **If the rains of biblical warnings fall on you and *don't* produce the good fruit of repentance and faith, then that's revealing.** It might mean that you're near to being cursed and burned in judgment on the last day. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:31)

An Assurance That Lasts

- ❖ But, friends, that doesn't have to be your fate. There's a better future available to you. That's the same thing our author says in vv9-12. Even though he just issued the sharpest of warnings, he's hopeful for his audience that the Word will have its intended effect and result in better things, things pertaining to salvation. That's the assurance they can enjoy. This leads to our final point. **Let's consider an assurance that lasts until the end.**
 - Look at v9, *“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.”* Throughout Hebrews, the author frequently addresses his readers as “*brothers*.” That's a common designation. But v9 is the only place in the book where he calls them “*beloved*.” I think that's significant. **Despite the strong admonition and warning he just issued, he specifically wants to remind his readers that they are loved by God.** He's confident, that in their case, his warnings will be heeded and they will be saved on the last day.

- ❖ The author explains in v10 why he's so confident. **Notice his appeal to God's justice and their track record of producing good fruit.** *"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."*
 - **Our author recognizes that his readers have demonstrated genuine love for God – in the past and continuing into the present – as evidenced by their service to the saints.** Later in chapter 10, he mentions how they ministered to fellow believers who were imprisoned for their faith. Visiting them in prison even though that act of compassion put a target on their backs (10:32-34). That's an example of the kind of useful crop that God's Word produces in his beloved people. **So the point is that he knows God is faithful and just to bless and not curse those who produce good fruits.** Those who rightly respond to his Word with love and good deeds.
- ❖ And then he goes on in v11 to explain why he issued his warnings. **He wants his readers to recover the same earnestness that they had shown earlier, so that they can enjoy the full assurance of hope until the last day.** Look at v11, *"¹¹And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹²so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."*
 - That right there explains the purpose behind all these warnings in Hebrews. **They're issued – not for you to grow insecure and uncertain about your salvation – but to wake you up in case you've fallen into a spiritual stupor.** To stir you up if you happen to have grown spiritually sluggish.
 - If that's your reaction – if these warnings make you more earnest to hold onto Jesus and more vigilant to imitate the faith of others who have gone before, who set a good example – if that's your response, then praise God. That's how his beloved are expected to respond.
- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, I do want you to enjoy the assurance of salvation.** The full assurance of hope that lasts until the end. But that assurance doesn't just come automatically. Don't expect to enjoy it if you've become sluggish in your faith. If you're not earnest to strive to enter God's promised rest. But I don't want to leave you with the assumption that only strong Christians with strong faith can enjoy the assurance of salvation.
 - I want to make clear that even those who struggle with weak faith can be assured of their salvation. **Because no one is saved by the strength of their faith but by the strength of whatever or whoever their faith is in.** That means the Christian with a stronger faith doesn't have a stronger or better Savior than you. You're both being held by the same Jesus. And he is equally mighty to save.
 - **If Jesus is your Savior, you're in good hands even if yours are feeble and weak.** Weak faith in a strong Savior is better than having the strongest, surest faith in an inferior, weak savior. That's been the theme of Hebrews. Jesus is better. So you can have that full assurance if your hope is in him.