

## Hebrews 5:11-6:20

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[ 0 : 00 ] We're back in Hebrews 5 this evening, and if you want to open that up, page 1003, that'll be helpful.

I did very badly at school. I know you find that hard to believe, and I knew it would be a job to convince you, so I brought my last report with me this evening.

Here it is. Wellington College, Belfast. Reuben Hunter. Lower Sixth. Summer. 1991.

Subject. English Literature. Grade. U. Effort. One's the best. Five's the worst.

Four. Reuben is a likable and cheerful student, but the study of literature at this level is beyond his natural ability and inclination, and he is not willing to undertake the work required to achieve an acceptable grade.

[ 1 : 05 ] Well, politics, maybe that's going to be a bit better. Grade. E plus. Effort. Three slash four. Reuben largely answered the paper from his general knowledge.

He contributes well in class, but is not prepared to make the effort on his own. Reuben has good ideas, but his essay work is much too superficial.

He lacks any real knowledge of course content. Maybe French for business. That was my third subject. Grade. C slash D. Effort.

Three slash four. Reuben dislikes work, except on his own terms. Number of absences.

17. Times late. 18. Tutor's comments. Reuben's heart was never really in his schoolwork when he returned from Australia, and I think his decision to leave was correct.

[ 2 : 08 ] He added an extra dimension to my tutorial group, and I wish him well. Headmaster, I'm sorry to hear that Reuben is leaving.

I wish him every success in the future. It's the effort marks, really, that say it all, isn't it? I couldn't be bothered. Now, children.

That is not an example to follow. I say that, I tell you that to my own shame. I wasted a huge amount of time. But the point is, what we see this evening is the same problem doing the rounds among the Hebrews.

Look at verse 11. So the author, remember last time the author talked about the priestly ministry of Jesus? Chapter 5, verses 5 to 10. And then he says, about this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Dull, it's the same word translated in 6, verse 12 as sluggish. It has the sense of the kind of willful laziness that I embodied at school. Some of the Hebrews simply can't be bothered to get to grips with the reality and the implications of this theology.

[ 3 : 28 ] They can't be bothered. It doesn't interest them. They can't think that it's important, and so they just don't bother. They're getting an effort grade 4 or maybe even 5.

Now, what the writer says in the previous section is densely packed for sure. It is in some ways hard to explain, even to those of us who might be attentive. How the Psalms point to Christ's priestly calling in the line of this figure, Melchizedek.

It is dense. And the writer explains how Christ was perfected through suffering in order to provide eternal salvation for all who obey him.

It is hard, but it is deeply rich, deeply profound, deeply life-changing theology. But the Hebrews, they're dull of hearing. They're dull of hearing.

They can't be bothered to learn its significance. And because of this, the writer rebukes them. He actually describes them, do you see, verse 12, as infants. It's actually a bit humiliating.

[ 4 : 34 ] 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. For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness since he is a child.

It's quite a put down. These people have been Christians for a while. Now, just to be clear, I know some of you are young Christians and you think, I don't know the full significance of the priesthood of Christ.

Well, that's okay. There's nothing wrong with being a young Christian. It's a great thing to be a young Christian in the same way there's nothing wrong with being a child. It's a great thing to be a child.

But when children grow up and still behave like infants, that's when there's a problem. And the same is true for followers of Jesus. That's the reason for the rebuke. These people have been Christians for a while.

And he expects that by now that they should be teaching others. He's not talking about them being ministers. He's not saying you should be pastors. But you should be able to help other people understand these things, find their way around this bit of the Bible.

[ 5 : 42 ] Instead, he's saying they're still in the creche. They're still on baby food. Still on the basics of the faith. And so he says, verse 13, This is a problem.

It was a problem for them then. And it remains a threat to the church in every age. We think, oh, that's a bit dense. That's a bit hard for me. I'll leave the theology to the theologians.

That's not a good enough attitude. So rather than be dull and apathetic and disengaged, when it comes to Christian truth, our author calls for action in three areas.

He calls for action in three ways. First of all, he says, pursue maturity. Pursue maturity. That is part of what it means for us to be a Christian. Pursue maturity.

By contrast with the immature, there are those who live on solid food. Those who press on to train themselves in doctrine. They have, verse 14, do you see, their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

[ 6 : 50 ] That's the goal, actually, of all theological study. Whether it's listening to preaching, going to adult Sunday school, going to home groups. I hear from time to time people say they don't bother with doctrine.

They don't bother with theology because it isn't practical. The author of the Hebrews tells us that the doctrine of Christ's priestly work is the solid food that we need in order to be able to distinguish good from evil.

How much more practical do you want than that? The ability to make good decisions and not bad ones. The wisdom to know what is right and wrong in a complicated world. How much more practical can you get than that?

When we look around in our culture and we see all the decisions that people are making that are leading in bad directions, how much more practical would it be for them to be able to distinguish good from evil in order to make good decisions, wise decisions?

Certain ethical decisions require maturity. They require practice, constant practice in order to get them right. We know that. I'm not talking about whether or not you can kill your mom to get the inheritance.

[ 8 : 00 ] We all know the answer to that. Even the dumbest kid in the class, even back when I was at school, I would have known that that was wrong. But what does it take to discern the difference between pride, which is a sin, and confidence, which isn't a sin?

Can you tell the difference between giving encouragement, which is a good thing, and flattery, which is a bad thing? What about the sin of fear of man or the virtue of humility?

You can't make these kind of distinctions without maturity. Therefore, what does he say? He's saying these are the basic principles of the oracles of God that he's just spoken about in chapter 5, verse 12.

He lists several things, but they all come under the heading of the basics. It's possible that these things actually were the content covered in a course for new believers. Repentance from the dead works of our own self-salvation project.

Faith in God. Baptism in the laying on of hands. That act which was initiating them into the body of Christ in the realm of the Holy Spirit. Teaching about the last days.

[ 9 : 30 ] These are the basics, he's saying. These are the foundations of the faith. And the author wants us to go further than these things. Not just grasping the significance of these things, but to go further.

Not that we go somewhere else. Going further doesn't mean that we go somewhere else, but that we build on that foundation. No builder stops at the foundation of a building, does he?

He doesn't build the foundation and go, there we are. Job done. Let's go. If he did, you'd think he was a cowboy. He keeps going. Good builder keeps going.

Not to build another foundation, but to build up higher on the one that is already there. And this is what we are to do with our doctrine. We get the basics in place in order to build on them.

And we are, verse 3, chapter 6, verse 3, We are to give ourselves to this as long as God enables us. We will do this if God permits. Is it in your mind to keep going and growing as a Christian?

[10:40] Are you committed to pursuing maturity as a Christian? Some of you have been Christians for years, and there's a danger that you've settled in with every day with Jesus or two ways to live, and that's enough.

Yeah, you believe that Jesus died for your sins, but you don't think you need to know any more than that. You say, well, I have a simple faith, and that's enough for me. The problem with that is that what do you do when the tricky questions that our culture brings come our way?

We say, I'm settling in at the foundation. That's enough. And then a tricky question comes in. You have to scabble around online for something that sounds faintly credible, and it may or may not be right or true or biblical.

What about the tricky ethical questions that come up in our life or in the lives of our friends? If we've stopped at the foundation, we don't know what to do. We don't have an answer. And at best, we just come over as dumb, a bit foolish.

At worst, we get washed away completely because we haven't got the maturity that we need to be able to stand in the face of the difficulties. Now, we heard this morning from Matthew 18 that we have to come to Jesus as children.

[11:59] We have to humble ourselves to do that, but we don't stay there. We need to pursue maturity in the faith. We need to feed on the solid food of biblical doctrine that will get us there.

In fact, some of the things that we were talking about this morning, embracing true biblical humility, embracing the qualities of a child is actually how we grow because we're always humbling ourselves.

We never think that we're mature enough. Being more and more open to God's work in our lives, more and more receptive to Him through His Word and through the theology that in the history of the church we have at our disposal.

Get theology on your agenda. I ask you to do that. Get it on your agenda. There are plenty of books on the bookstall that will put some solids in your spiritual diet. You might say, well, I'm not really a reader.

Well, become a reader. Get audio books for your commute. I'm too busy, you say. No, you're not. You've got the same number of hours in the day as everyone else. Just use them a bit better.

[13:07] Prioritize them differently. Fifteen minutes a day, you can read Calvin's Institutes in three months. If you're an average speed reader, you can read Calvin in three months. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes a day.

You don't need to do that much, but I'm just saying, you can cover a lot in actually quite a short space of time if you're focused. Now, don't do this as an end in itself.

Don't do it so you can say that you've done it. Do it to get to know God better. Do it so that there is biblical doctrine sinking down into your bones. So that you are growing.

Theologically, you are growing. Now, if the desire to grow and be equipped to discern good and evil wasn't motivation enough, if that isn't motivation enough for you, the author then raises the stakes. Here's the thing. He says, if we choose to be dull of hearing, that reluctance, that reluctance to learn and to grow, to pursue maturity, might be a symptom of a deeper problem. So he urges us, secondly, point number one, pursue maturity.

[14:11] Point number two, beware apostasy. Chapter six, verses four to eight. If you're not interested in growing up in the faith, you don't just stand still. You go backwards.

Verse four, 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 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come 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.

What the author is saying here is that remaining in the foundational doctrines without pressing on creates the temptation towards apostasy, towards walking away completely.

The four, at the beginning of verse four, makes that connection. Now, the Bible makes it clear that it is impossible for those who have been elected by God before the foundation of the world to lose their salvation.

The main reason why that's the case, the main reason for this, is that salvation isn't a possession like a set of car keys that we can misplace, as if we owned it. It's not that we own our salvation, Christ owns us.

[15:30] That's a more biblical way to say it. We have been purchased by his blood. He owns us. He has taken possession of us as his dearly loved children. But it is possible to belong to the church, but not to belong to Christ.

And that is what our author is describing here. The language is very descriptive, isn't it? It can sound like these are genuine believers, so we need to drill down a bit.

He describes them as those who have been enlightened. The church fathers thought that this was a reference to those who have been baptized. In the early church, when people came to faith, they were prepared for baptism with classes for up to a year.

So he's describing people who have been taught the gospel message and have affirmed their trust in it, but for whom it has all just been external. It has all been put on on the outside. They've tasted the heavenly gift.

This is the gift of Christ offered in the gospel. They've tasted it, but they didn't let it nourish them. They were impressed by Christ, but they weren't brought to him. In the end, in the end, they kept Christ at arm's length.

[16:39] Shared in the Holy Spirit. That sounds like conversion. But the Spirit is at work in all manner of ways apart from salvation. It is possible to be used by the Spirit, but not to possess the Spirit.

Think of Saul. Think of Judas Iscariot. Used by God, but not ultimately belonging to him. Being used by God does not necessarily equate to the life and reality of being possessed by the Spirit.

They've tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come. You can enjoy the Bible. You can appreciate its literature.

You can love the church community, the community of the Spirit, the community of the last days, the community in which Jesus is at work. You can enjoy and appreciate all of that.

You can belong to the visible church, but not in the end belong to Christ. The sort of people the author is describing here are those, if we return to that list of basics, who have received the third on the list without the first two.

[17:45] They have received the external mark without the internal reality.

And the truth is that the church will always have people like that in it. People who are Christian in name only. Well, who are these people?

Well, I think perhaps two distinctions about the nature of the church might help us here as we think about this. First, we need to distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church. The invisible church is God's elect, those whom God has chosen for salvation.

The visible church is the professing church in history marked out by baptism, the preaching of the Word, and the Lord's Supper. When someone falls away, they fall away from the visible church, not the invisible church.

You can't fall away from the invisible church. If you are in the invisible church, God has elected you for salvation, you can't fall away. Another way to think about this is to distinguish between the church on mission and the church in glory.

[18:52] Now, these aren't two different churches. The church on mission is the church in the world with all her imperfections. The church in glory is the church at the end of time.

The bride of Christ with every blemish removed. The church on mission is what we can see with our eyes now. The church in glory is that church at the end with all of the imperfections taken away.

So this is why it is possible for a real warning to be given to real people in the real church, but to know that the real people of God, the elect, will never fall away.

And the way you show yourself as genuine, according to the author, the way you avoid apostasy, is by continuing to grow up to maturity. To be mundane for a moment.

It's a bit like riding a bike. If you stop moving on a bike, you fall over. As long as you're moving, you're okay.

[ 20 : 01 ] But when you stop, there's only so long that you can stay there. I know some of you are going to say, Oh, well, actually, you can do this thing where you balance, and you can stay there for ages. There's a guy online who's done it for three days or something like that.

There will come a point where you eventually fall over. Once you stop, that's when you fall. And so the point is, keep going and keep growing.

Keep up the spiritual momentum. And the sharp edge of this warning comes in verses 7 and 8. You see, refusing to grow and so falling away is not like falling off a bike.

Fall off a bike, you might scratch your knee, your elbow, you might cut your head, something like that. But here, consequences are dire. We are told that those who have received all these blessings from Christ, but then fall away, treat them with contempt.

Verse 6. You don't keep pursuing maturity. You eventually fall away. And to do that is to treat him with contempt.

[ 21 : 03 ] One commentator says this, He's saying this.

If you've publicly partaken in the church, if you've said, Yeah, I'm a Christian and I'm part of this community of people, and then you walk away and spurn it, you make a mockery of Jesus.

And so all is left. It's absolutely chilling. Verse 7. All is left is judgment. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.

But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. Saying, As land, if you receive the blessing of rain, but then decide to grow thorns with it, all that is left is burning.

It's the starkest of warnings. If you've experienced the blessings of God in these ways, meet them with faith. Receive them with faith.

[ 22 : 27 ] When you hear the voice of God, don't harden your heart as the wilderness generation did. They're probably the ones that are in view here. When he calls you to grow up, go and get some solid food and be nourished.

When he calls you in this way to pursue maturity, go and pursue maturity. Do what he is telling you. Now, be sensible about it. If you haven't eaten a big meal for a while, don't overload your plate.

Don't buy a systematic theology and resolve to read it before the summer. Eat according to the size of your appetite. Otherwise, you'll make yourself sick. Might just be that you need to start to read your Bible every day.

Might just be that you decide you're going to get along to adult Sunday school each week. As a staff team and our staff meeting each week, we're currently reading through the Westminster Larger Catechism.

And it is hugely helpful. It's very short, simple, pithy, but very profound. Grab a copy on the bookstall.

[ 23 : 34 ] decide to make it. Decide to make it part of your quiet time. Start where you can. And like all growing children, your appetite will increase as you grow. Now, hear this.

The stark warning is stark indeed, but it isn't the last word. It isn't the last word. The author follows it with a word of comfort. I want us to see this. We are to pursue maturity, and we are to beware apostasy, but we're also, thirdly, to know security.

We are to know security. verses 9 to 20. If Christians come away in despair from Hebrews 6, they have misread the text. If you're panicking at this moment, you have misread the text.

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

Now, it's clear that this apostasy that he's talking about here hasn't happened among his readers.

They are laboring for the Lord. Verse 10. They are loving his name, and they are loving his people.

[ 24 : 47 ] So whilst the warning stands, and the warning is real, there is great comfort for those who display the qualities, verse 9, that belong to salvation. What are those qualities?

What is it? So he's saying, though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things. We feel confident that you are not going to apostatize because we see the things that belong to salvation.

What are they? Full assurance of hope until the end. Verse 11. Faithful and patient inheritance of God's promises. Verse 12.

The unchangeable character of God's purposes to save. Verse 17. 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.

Strong encouragement for those who have fled to him for refuge. Verse 18. Assurance, steadfast, anchor for the soul. Verse 19. And a certain hope in Christ's work on our behalf in the presence of God.

[ 25 : 55 ] People talk about Hebrews 6 as an apostasy passage. But when we think on that list, faithful and patient inheritance of God's promises. The unchangeable character of God's purpose to save.

The great encouragement that there is for those who have fled to Christ for refuge. The fact that he is a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul. We think on those things it feels more like a chapter on our security than it does about apostasy.

The everlasting security of the one who puts their trust in Christ. If you have genuinely put your faith in Jesus, you're not left to wonder or to worry. You are secure. You are secure.

And the strength of our comfort here is based squarely on the unchanging character of God. That is why we can say these things. That's why we can trust his word. That's why we can trust his promise.

That is our refuge. If your salvation depended on you, you'd be lost. And there would be nothing of comfort in this chapter. But don't look at yourself.

[ 27 : 00 ] Look away. Look away from your sins and away from your doubts and away from your struggles. And don't second guess your motives. Look away from yourself. And look instead to a hill outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Look to the hill where Christ was crucified. to accomplish God's unchanging purposes and salvation. He is our hope. He is himself assurance, steadfast anchor for our souls.

You might say, well, I want to know though that I'm part of that salvation. Well then, look away to that hill. Look to Christ. Because when you do that, you will see him.

and when you see him, your heart will swell and your assurance will rise. Let's pray together.