

Title: Strong Words/Deep Hope
Text: Hebrews 6.1-12
Theme: Warning against falling away
Series: Hebrews #15
Prop Stmt Those who knowingly and deliberately walk away from the gospel can permanently seal their destruction.

This text is one of the most controversial passages in the entire NT and rightly so because it deals with the eternally serious issue of apostasy. Do you know what apostasy is? *Apostasy is the informed and deliberate rejection of the gospel by one who previously claimed to believe.* Therefore, an apostate is *one who has deliberately walked away from the faith.* For most of us, this is more than a topic to discuss and debate. This has profound personal implications because we know people who we fear may fall into this category. Therefore, this is personal and emotional, which often clouds clarity. But we have to wrestle with them.

There is nothing more glorious than the gospel, assuming that you accept it. But that coin has two sides, meaning, there is nothing more catastrophic than rejecting the gospel. BP's oil catastrophe in the gulf is overwhelming in its scope and effect on that region, but it pales against the catastrophic scope of apostasy.

The controversial section is located in verses 4-6 and therefore people tend to just read those verses and argue. However, these verses are part of a flow of warning (5.11-13), encouragement (6.1-3), warning (6.4-8) and encouragement (6.9-12). The warnings are real and so are the encouragements. In this text we have strong words and deep hope.

Read Text:

1. **Spiritual Growth is not an Option** (1-3)

The grammar of verse 1 is clear. "let us leave...and go on to maturity."

He is not suggesting that they move away from the gospel. In fact it is quite the opposite. He is imploring them to build upon the foundation of the gospel. The reason you have a foundation is so that you can build something on it. The foundation is critical and demands careful attention. But you have to build on it.

The phrase, "and go on to maturity" is actually in the passive voice, which means that the AH is making it clear that moving forward is something that is done to us as we yield to God's active influence. We surrender to God's authority and he carries us and drives us, and pushes us to maturity. What he is saying here is that, even though you have never moved beyond the basics – you must and I am going to push you! He then speaks of what the basics are by identifying them in three pairs. These three pairs summarize the foundation on which we have to build.

A. **Repentance and faith** – how the Christian life begins

This is foundational to the foundation. This is the most important truth that you will ever face in all of life – ever. What does “repentance from dead works” mean? Repentance (metaneo – to change your mind, which is evidenced in a change in your life) means to change and go in the opposite direction. So, repentance from dead works means that you stop trusting in yourself. Stop trusting in your works. Stop trusting in your morality or religious activities in order to gain God’s approval because your works are “dead.” They do not count for anything. Repent, turn away from relying upon yourself or your religious efforts in order to curry Gods’ favor and instead, trust in what God has provided for your salvation, your forgiveness, your justification, that is, your redemption. Trust in Christ! Repentance from your works and trust in Christ alone is how the Christian life begins. There is no other way.

B. Washings and laying on of hands – how we live the Christian life

Notice in the footnote of the ESV, the alternative reading for washings is baptisms. The reason for that is because the word baptizo (plural) is the word in the original language of the NT. The reason why some think that it is referring to washings is because it is in the plural, therefore it must have something to do with how the NT fulfills the OT levitical system. When I look at the first couplet, it is obvious that it speaks to how the Christian life begins and the last couplet speaks to how the Christian life ends. It seems to me that this would probably have something to do with how the Christian life is lived. And since the AH speaks of the importance of the local church in our development, discernment, discipleship, discipline and perseverance, then I am inclined to think that when the AH put down baptisms, he meant baptisms. So, what would those be?

a. baptisms (Spirit and water)

In the NT, we read of two different baptisms that are actually related. The baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12.13) takes place at the moment of conversion. Water baptism by immersion is the God-ordained means to publicly identify ourselves with a local church as a follower of Christ and as a committed member of his flock. So, “washings” or (better yet) “baptisms” speaks of our introduction into the family of believers. What about the laying on of hands?

b. laying on of hands – how the church functions

Once again, this is not very complicated. Laying on of hands refers to the setting apart of a person for a specific ministry. This is to be done formally for elders and deacons. Elders and deacons are part of the organizing and functioning aspect of church life. Therefore, the laying on of hands speaks to how the local church functions through the leadership. Do you understand what this is saying? Life together in a local church is how we live the Christian life. Growth and maturity is designed by God to be congregational. The AH is saying that this is a basic, foundational, and elementary truth of the Christian life. Do you see why the elders place such importance upon church membership and

congregational involvement? If you do not have this figured out, you are not even potty-trained spiritually, much less in kindergarten.

C. **Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment** – the end of life as we know it

These are important doctrinal and practical matters that must be taught, and must be built on. This text reminds us of what the foundation is, so that we can know it, teach it, and build on it. Verse 3 makes it clear that the AH is confident that his readers will. But, the hope of maturity does not eliminate the need of and the reality of the warning. Just because someone believes you will be a doctor, does not make you a doctor.

2. **Apostasy is real and permanent** (4-8)

What if you start, but don't finish? That is the question that is being asked all throughout this book. This warning simply elevates the issue to its proper place. This is a serious issue. It is so serious that many have attempted to soften it, but the analogy in verses 7-8 make it clear that salvation is in view.

Let's start there, because I believe that in order to understand this warning passage we need to keep in mind two things that inform these verses; 1) The exodus generation and 2) the parable that Christ gave of the sower. Echoes of the exodus generation reverberate throughout these verses as you will see. Their experiences help us understand this text. The parable that Christ gave of the sower and the 4 different types of soil, was the first recorded parable of Christ. He said in Mark 4.13 that if you don't understand this one, the rest will not make sense. In that parable, only one type of soil brought forth lasting results. Two of the soils showed initial promise, but in time proved to be worthless.

When you look at the grammar of these verses, you can isolate the main idea. So, does the text say that *it is impossible for some people to repent*? Emphatically yes! Just as it is "impossible for God to lie" (6.18), "impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10.4) and "impossible to please" God without faith (11.6), "it is impossible ...to restore them again to repentance..." The same word is used in all of those passages. He is not saying that it is simply difficult or unusual. He is saying that *one who has deliberately walked away from the faith* is in danger of crossing the line of apostasy and when that happens cannot be restored. This rejection is the evidence that they never truly believed in the first place. Who are the "them"?

They are described by five parallel phrases that could describe the exodus generation, King Saul and Judas Iscariot. They could also describe some people that we know who have walked away from Christianity even after showing some initial zeal.

- "those who have once been enlightened"
- "who have tasted the heavenly gift"
- "have shared in the Holy Spirit"
- "tasted the goodness of the word of God"
- "and [tasted] the powers of the age to come"

The presence of the adverb “once” in first phrase indicates that it is to be understood as influencing the rest of the phrases. Does that make sense? In other words, we should understand all of these phrases as being “once” and not continuing. “Who *once* tasted the heavenly gift, who *once* shared in the Holy Spirit”, etc. all of which emphasizes the point that starting well and finishing well are not necessarily connected. Let’s go through these.

“those who have once been enlightened”

Enlightened has an external and an internal aspect to it. This is seen in 10.26 and 32. 10.26 speaks of the external enlightening, when you received “the knowledge of truth”, that is when you person was exposed to the gospel, but did not respond in faith. The person who hears the gospel but does not respond in faith, but instead goes on deliberately sinning, has no hope because he has rejected the only means by which he can be saved. 10.32 speaks of the person who was “enlightened” and time revealed that this was indeed an internal reality. The children of Israel were enlightened in that they experienced the Shekinah glory of God and the revelation of his law. But, most of them did not believe with their hearts. They only believed with their stomachs – know what I mean?

In this context (Hebrews) and in our setting, this refers to the person who has been exposed to the gospel and has been moved to some degree by it, but when the trials, or the temptations come, they discard it because they found that it either gets in the way, or they have found something “better”.

“who have tasted the heavenly gift”

“Tasted the heavenly gift” means to understand and experience (at least to some measure) God’s grace. The children of Israel daily tasted God’s grace to them in the form of manna. Manna (Ex. 16.4) is an undeserved gift from God to the grumbling Israelites. Everyday (except on Saturdays), for 40 years, the children of Israel went outside and gathered food that they did not plant, grow, harvest or purchase. They tasted the heavenly gift, literally. And yet, they rebelled and refused to believe God’s Word.

In this context (Hebrews) and in our setting, this refers to the person who has understood God’s grace and even experienced his undeserved favor in the form of blessings of job, health, education, finances, etc, or even saw the evidences of God’s favor in the lives of others but still walked away.

“have shared in the Holy Spirit”

Who have shared in the Holy Spirit can certainly describe a person’s conversion experience, but (like the 1st phrase) can also describe someone who has been part of and surrounded by evidences of the Spirit’s work. In Numbers 11, Moses appointed 70 elders to help him minister to the people. These 70 received some of the Spirit that was resting on Moses and the evidence of this was seen in that they prophesied. But, even though

these 70 “shared in the Holy Spirit” in that regard, they were still part of the unbelieving generation who responded in unbelief and disobedience to the report of the 12 spies just two chapters later! This means that a person can be so surrounded with evidences of the Spirit’s activity that it is unmistakable, but still walk away, because they did not get what they wanted. They never believed with the heart. They went along with it for a while because they were using the gospel and the church for their own purposes. Like the children of Israel, it seemed like a good way to get out of Egypt, or to get out of danger, or to improve your life, but in the end, they never really trusted in Christ alone.

The fourth and fifth phrases go together because the word of God and the works of power go hand in hand. The original audience of this book had 1,400 years of history to draw upon and see clear and compelling and irrefutable evidence of God’s promises and God’s power. Their very existence as a people is owed to the word and works of God.

The people who have experienced these things “and then have fallen away” the text says that it is impossible “to restore them again to repentance” because “they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” I take this to mean that it is impossible to restore them to repentance because like the exodus generation who were finally and permanently shut out of the promised land, there are people who over and over and over tell God (in spite of all that they have seen) to get out of their face and off their back, who view the gospel and the church as “been there, done that and now I don’t care” sort of a thing, that God will allow their firm decision to stand and confirms their obstinate rebellion. This is the finality of apostasy. A person who repeatedly demands for God to leave him alone, will one day find out that God will answer that prayer – forever. This is tantamount to crucifying Christ all over again. That is, this is the rejection of the only means of their rescue and shows that in their heart of hearts they actually hold the King of glory in contempt.

Verses 7-8 supports this view with this illustration. Your life is like the soil. If after what you have heard (rain) a useful crop is produced, then it is clear that you have taken this warning to heart. If, you blow this off, like you have other warnings, evidenced by thorns and thistles (attitude and behavior consistent with an unbeliever), then you are near to be cursed “and its end is to be burned.” This is not a pruning or purifying action that is in view, this is final judgment. Now, go back with me to 3.12. It therefore seems to me that the AH has identified some tendencies within the congregation that concern him so deeply that he is fearful that some of them are coming dangerously close to apostasy and he is compelled to warn them. *How can I be assured that I will not apostatize?*

3. **Press on Pilgrim.** (9-12)

Verse 9 turns a corner. The warnings give way to encouragement. While the AH has to warn his readers of the reality of apostasy, he warmly (“beloved”) speaks with both confidence and desire for them.

We’ll pick it up here next week. But these verses really capture a couple of very important truths: 1) The importance of faithfulness and 2) The influence of your

faithfulness. Faithfulness reflects your ongoing belief in God's promises. At the same time, the encouraging affect of your faithfulness can never be overstated.

Some of you have doubts about your own life. What do you do? Go back and look at the foundational truths again. Look at who Christ is. Look again at what he has done for you. Do you believe that? Have you repented and trusted in Christ? Ok. Have you obeyed Christ and been baptized and identified yourself with a local church, making yourself accountable to a congregation? Our faith is not in our faith, it is in Christ. That is sufficient. If you trust Christ, bank on it. Like the AH, I am confident that you will and I long to see you faithfully taking God's promises so that as you taste them you will see that he is good, and in so doing I long for you to see the doubts fall away.

A. Our confidence (9-10)

Their work, their love, and faithfulness ("as you still do") all reflect their perseverance. He is confident in God's

B. Our desire (11-12)