

Message Ten: The Third Warning

Hebrews 5:11-6:20 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 10

By *Escape the Mustard Tree*

Introduction

We just watched the author name Melchizedek for the first time in this letter, then immediately pull back. He tells his readers there is much more he wants to say — and then tells them, bluntly, that he can't, not because the subject is thin, but because they aren't ready to receive it. What follows is the most sobering warning in the entire letter, and also, by its end, one of its most reassuring passages. Stay with it. The severity and the comfort both belong to the same argument, and neither makes sense without the other.

I. Dull of Hearing

"of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Hebrews 5:11-12).

Notice the word "become." These readers were not born unable to receive this teaching — they *became* dull, sluggish, slow to let it in. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). The very thing that produces faith is the thing they had stopped letting reach them, specifically regarding the material surrounding Melchizedek. This is not a general accusation of spiritual failure. It's a precise diagnosis: they had, at some point, stopped growing in this one particular direction.

II. Milk and Meat

"For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:13-14).

Milk is for those who have not yet grown past elementary things. Solid food — meat — is for those whose senses have been trained, through practice, to discern good from evil. Notice that word "practice." Discernment here is not a gift you receive passively; it's a muscle built through repeated use of the word of righteousness. And notice the word "mature" in verse fourteen — it shares its root with the very word used of Christ back in chapter five: "having been perfected" (Hebrews 5:9), and with the cry from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Maturity, like Christ's own perfecting, isn't about becoming flawless. It's about being brought, through use and practice, all the way to the goal you were meant to reach.

III. Leaving the Foundation, Not Abandoning It

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits" (Hebrews 6:1-3).

Six items are listed — repentance, faith, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection, judgment — and then set aside, not because they're unimportant, but because a foundation is meant to be built on, not endlessly re-poured. Notice how the sentence actually reads once you strip out the long list in the middle: "let us go on to perfection... and this we will do if God permits." That's a startling admission. Going on to maturity is not automatic. It's conditioned on something — and the very next verses tell us exactly what's at stake in that condition.

IV. It Is Impossible

Here is the heart of the warning: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Read the description carefully before deciding who it's about. Once enlightened. Tasted the heavenly gift. Made partakers of the Holy Spirit. Tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. There is no honest way to read that list as describing someone who was never regenerate — every phrase describes a real, substantial, personal experience of God's grace. And notice the word "again" — "crucify again for themselves the Son of God." You cannot crucify Him again unless you were already, at some point, identified with Him. This passage is not describing the lost coming to faith. It's describing believers who reached a mature understanding of what lies ahead and then walked away from it.

This is exactly the pattern we already traced in the wilderness generation. Israel was absolutely redeemed. They tasted the good word of God and the actual fruit of the land at Kadesh Barnea. Then they fell away through unbelief. And when they later repented — changed their minds and tried to go up into the land after all — God did not change His. The door back to that specific inheritance stayed shut, permanently, even though their redemption at the Red Sea was never once revoked. "Repentance" here is a change of mind, and the passage is telling you whose mind will not change: not the wanderer's, but God's.

Why would this be worse than never reaching maturity at all? Because someone who has indeed tasted the powers of the age to come and then treats that grace as disposable has, in effect, subjected the Son to the same contempt He bore at Calvary — treating His inheritance and His invitation as beneath serious regard. That is precisely why God does not automatically permit

everyone to press on to this level of understanding. The stakes of falling away after reaching it are categorically worse than the stakes of never having reached it in the first place.

V. Two Kinds of Ground

The warning closes with an illustration from nature: "For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned" (Hebrews 6:7-8).

God has always required fruit from His people. "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion" was the mandate given at creation (Genesis 1:28), repeated to Noah (Genesis 9:1). Jesus cursed a fig tree that had every appearance of health but no fruit (Matthew 21:19) — a living picture of the nation of Israel who *looked* flourishing while producing nothing God was actually looking for. Notice what's identical between the two plots of ground in Hebrews 6: both receive the same rain, the same grace, the same opportunity. The only difference is what each one produces — and that difference determines whether the ground is blessed or burned, exactly as every believer's work will one day be tested by fire at the judgment seat (1 Corinthians 3:12-13).

VI. Better Things

Then, remarkably, right after the sternest words in the letter so far, the tone turns: "But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:9-12).

Notice "sluggish" in verse 12 — the identical word translated "dull" back in 5:11. The whole passage, from the rebuke to the reassurance, is one continuous unit built around a single danger: spiritual sluggishness. And notice how the author grounds his confidence — not in wishful thinking, but in the concrete, ongoing evidence of his readers' actual love and service. The warning was never meant to produce despair. It was meant to produce diligence in people already bearing real fruit but who had begun to let lethargy and deafness creep in.

VII. An Anchor That Cannot Fail

The chapter closes by returning to Abraham's own patient wait for the promise, and then to the ground of our hope: "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and

which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 6:17-20).

The passage that opened by admitting it couldn't yet explain Melchizedek closes by naming him again — and this time, the name isn't withheld. It's the anchor. The very thing they were too dull to receive is precisely what secures their hope, if only they will press on far enough to take hold of it.

VIII. Applying the Third Warning

This is the most severe passage this series has walked through, and it deserves to be felt as severe. But its purpose was never to leave you afraid to move. Keep the line this whole series has drawn from the start: this warning threatens a forfeited reward and a closed door to a specific inheritance, never the loss of the free gift you already possess in Christ.

So take an honest inventory. Are you still living on milk, content with elementary things, or are you exercising your senses through practiced obedience to discern good from evil? Is your ground producing useful fruit, or thorns that profit no one? And whatever the answer, remember where this warning ends — not in dread, but at an anchor, sure and steadfast, already fastened on the other side of the veil by a forerunner who has gone ahead of you.

Looking Ahead

Next, having heeded the sternest of the letter's five warnings, we move at last into the extended treatment of the man himself — Melchizedek — in Hebrews chapter seven.