



December 12, 2017

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

Hebrews chapters 5 and 6 are in the midst of a long section on Jesus as High Priest. This is another case of presenting Jesus as superior to Judaism in that Jesus is a far superior high priest. We can understand how this would be meaningful to Jewish Christians who are tempted to return to Judaism. But how does Jesus as High Priest apply to our lives? One of the values of studying Hebrews is that we are called to pay attention to our Jewish roots. In drifting from those roots, we may be missing some important foundational elements of Christian faith. Jews of this time were very aware that they needed priests and a high priest to mediate between them and God. They would never dare to attempt to draw near to God themselves. This is a far cry from the popular notion of God as highly approachable. It is often taught that God welcomes all with love and open arms. God is nothing if not welcoming.

We should celebrate that we no longer need to offer sacrifices through priests. That we do have intimate access to God on a much more significant level than even the high priest had in Judaism. But if we forget that priests and sacrifices were necessary, we lose sight of what Jesus has accomplished for us as High Priest. We take for granted the welcome that is only through His blood. Indeed, if we stress God's inclusive and welcoming nature, we might preach a Christianity without Jesus as High Priest because that role is not necessary. And we may well be setting people up to be like the man at the wedding banquet in Matthew 22 who arrives without wedding clothes. We absolutely need Jesus as our High Priest who has not only provided the sacrifice for our sins, but clothes us with His righteousness to be in the presence of His Holy Father.

The author of Hebrews has more to say about Jesus as High Priest, particularly as High Priest on the order of Melchizedek. But the rest of chapters 5 and 6 consists of two tangents before there is further explanation of Melchizedek. The first tangent is a chastisement of the readers and their lack of maturity in their faith. The image is of a child who should have progressed to solid food, but still needs or wants only milk instead. In this case, solid food is further teaching on the nature of Christ's high priesthood being after the order of Melchizedek. And for some reason, the author anticipates that this will be difficult to teach them because they have become dull of hearing.

The word *dull* appears again in 6:12 translated as *sluggish*, bracketing this section of Hebrews. There it is contrasted with *earnestness* (*desire each of you to show the same earnestness*). The literal meaning of *dull* or *sluggish* has the idea of moving slowly, taking it easy and not pushing yourself. The word for *earnestness* has the opposite idea of being in a hurry, there is an urgency and a sense of importance. It is translated in other verses as zeal or diligence. This emphasis on the slowness of their hearing should recall how much Jesus stressed the importance of hearing (Luke 8:18). We should be asking ourselves how our hearing of the word of God would be characterized. Are we dull, are we taking it easy and not pushing ourselves? Or are we earnest, putting forth effort and acting as if it is important? This has a huge impact on our spiritual wellbeing.

And let's take note of what solid food is needed for, the training of their (and our) powers of discernment, the ability to distinguish good from evil. The picture is of a believer who has taken in the initial milk of the word and is on the path of discipleship. However, lacking the solid food of maturing in this discernment, they are susceptible to temptation that will lead them off the path

because they do not recognize the evil from the good (like being tempted to return to Judaism). This passage raised a significant question for me. Do we really believe that if we do not pay diligent attention to the Word of God that we will not be able to distinguish good from evil? Don't we rather think that good and evil are pretty evident to all except those people who are really messed up or rebellious toward God? Do we really expect that the Word of God will change our perception of what is good and evil? Or do we expect Scripture to teach and reinforce what we already believe to be good and evil? I think we do more of the latter. And all too often we either ignore Scripture or seek to bend its meaning to align with our present understandings rather than allowing it to inform and alter our present understanding.

The author is going to move on to mature teachings and no longer focus on the elemental doctrine of Christ, but then we have another tangent about those who have fallen away. This is one of the most contentious passages related to the doctrine of the security of salvation. It is also very disturbing. The description in 6:4,5 does not fit people who never really had any experience of a relationship with Christ because they had a very shallow and inadequate understanding of the gospel. These are people who have experienced what Christians experience when coming to Christ. And we all know people who we would absolutely have viewed as Christians, even committed Christians, who are not only not pursuing a sanctified life, but presently disavow Christian faith saying that they no longer believe what they used to believe about Jesus and God. Is it really impossible for these people to be restored to repentance? I certainly hope not and I do not believe this passage is teaching that.

The key is remembering the context of this statement about repentance, the desire to move on to mature teaching and leave behind the elementary doctrine of Christ. One objection to this would be the perception that the elementary doctrine of Christ needs to be the focus to restore those who have fallen away from the faith. The author is saying that this is not possible since they have already experienced everything that the elementary teachings are supposed to help them experience. It is not possible for them to be restored to repentance through the elementary teachings. But that does not mean they can never be restored to repentance through some other means. And verse 8 provides hope in that the ground is close to being cursed instead of being cursed.

The author assures them that they are not like those who have fallen away, although it is quite likely that this is meant as a warning of where sluggish hearing could lead them. There is the encouragement/exhortation to show earnestness in order to have an assurance of hope and through faith and patience to inherit the promises of that hope. The passage on Abraham and God's oath is another example of the comforting truth in Hebrews that though we do have to combine things like faith, patience and perseverance with the work of Christ, God through Christ is actively helping us to have them.

A Christmas theme from O Holy Night is the "thrill of hope". The readers of Hebrews are in danger of losing their grasp on the thrill of hope in Jesus Christ. Maybe you also have places in your life where you feel like hope is slipping away from you, where you are losing your grasp on that hope in the midst of difficult circumstances. Bring that to your High Priest, that you may receive mercy and find grace in your time of need.

May hope abound for you this Christmas,
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