

## *Faith, Hope & Patience in the Promise*

Hebrews 5:11 – 6:20

March 6, 2016

Before I begin my message this morning I would like to take a moment and personally thank all the people that have put so much time into *The Grove*, getting it started, countless hours of work, inviting others to come out and participate. This past week I was at a pastors conference in Lake Placid, Florida where I discovered two things: 1) Lake Placid, Florida at the end of February and the beginning of March is much nicer than Lake Placid, New York is at the end of Feb. and the beginning of March, and 2) most importantly, I received very strong affirmation of where God has led us as a church – that it is much more than just what we do within these walls, usually on a Sunday morning – that it is about going out there where God calls us to help bring his kingdom into the kingdom of this world. One of the speakers compared God’s vision of the church today to be similar to Hartfield – Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, GA, which has now become the busiest airport in the world. More than 250,000 people pass through Hartfield – Jackson International Airport every single day. But now if all 250,000 people were at the airport at one time, and all the planes were lined up at the gates, they would have one big problem on their hands, which is what they do when flights start getting cancelled because of bad weather around the country. Then the airport isn’t functioning the way it is supposed to function. Airports are not designed to function as the destination, they are designed to function as hubs – bringing people in and sending them out. How many of you when you go on vacation say I am going to the Hartfield – Jackson International Airport? When the airport becomes the destination, there is a problem. It is the same as the church. God’s original design for the church was never to be the destination, it was designed to be a hub in helping Him to establish the kingdom of God here on earth. The church is supposed to be a place where people come in and are sent back out. When church becomes the destination – we have a problem.

While it is good to have had some time off and to get away, it is also good to be back. While I was vacationing in Naples, Florida I was reminded once again of the affluence of so many people in America. At the same time I just briefly followed the news about the Presidential debates and the primaries. Then I heard of the tragic mass shooting at Hesston, followed the next day by one in the state of Washington which claimed five lives, all a reminder that we really are a so called “Christian” nation in name only, or “minimally Christian” at best. That is really what the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is addressing in our passage this morning.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this series the author of this *Letter to the Hebrews* is unknown, but the more I read it the more I am inclined to think, like many others in the past, that the author is the apostle Paul. There are so many similar thoughts and ideas as expressed in his other letters.

Whether Paul or someone else, what the author is writing about here is the lack of maturity or the lack of Christian spiritual growth among the earliest Jewish Christians, which when you think about it, is rather hard to believe, that here they are, probably only one generation removed from Jesus’ death and resurrection and they are already drifting or wavering in their faith. Many were not growing in their Christian faith. They were still spiritually immature. The writer says they were only able to take in milk (as in baby milk or infant formula), not solid food.

What is some of the evidence that they had not matured? First and foremost, it says that they were “unskilled in the word of righteousness” and “unable to discern or distinguish between good and evil.” Two thousand years later it is no different in our day. We have an extremely hard time today discerning between good and evil. For some reason we want to think that as a people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have progressed. Is that really the case? All we need to do is watch the news and witness the events that take place each and every day to find proof that is not the case.

The *Peacemakers* Sunday school class is currently reading a very good book by Dallas Willard entitled Renovation of the Heart which is all about Christian spiritual growth. The first step to Christian spiritual growth is to recognize our spiritual condition without Christ. Yes, God created us human beings in his image, that which represents good, but something went drastically wrong very quickly. Ever since Adam & Eve in the Garden and their first sin, the effect of that sin has been passed on to us. Dallas Willard calls it “Radical Evil in the Ruined Soul.” That radical evil is described in Psalm 14:2-3, where it says, *The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse, there is no one who does good, no, not one.*

Dallas Willard writes, “one of the greatest obstacles to effective Christian spiritual growth today is the simple failure to understand and acknowledge the reality of the human situation as it affects both non-Christians and Christians alike. We must start from where we really are.” The starting place for Christians today is no different than the starting place for Christians at the time the writer was writing this *Letter to the Hebrews*, or at any time in between. We must start by recognizing the radical evil which is in every one of us, evil being synonymous with sin or anything that goes against the will of God.

Dallas Willard rightfully points out that for the most part sin has become a non-category in our world today. Or it’s over there, as in the radical extremists like ISIS. In America we have tried to educate and theraputicize evil out of existence. If we can just educate people enough or counsel them enough then we can eliminate evil. Not taking anything away from the value of higher education or the need for counseling in many people’s lives at some point, but all the education and the counseling doesn’t really change people’s hearts. Only Jesus can change people’s hearts. All we have is smarter people committing very heinous acts and people who want to blame everybody and everything except themselves for the acts that they do. We are afraid to call sin, sin. Willard writes, “evil, which is synonymous with sin, is a non-category today. It is impolite and politically incorrect to speak seriously about it. . . The ruined soul must be able to hear or and recognize its own ruin before it can find out how to enter a different path, the path of eternal life that naturally leads into spiritual formation in Christlikeness.”

The first step to becoming spiritually mature, to moving from spiritual milk to solid food, is the ability to discern and distinguish between good and evil, between God’s ways and our ways, and to recognize that evil lies within all of us. That is what repentance or regeneration is all about. That is the first step of Christian spiritual growth. The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* then goes on, *Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment* Hebrews 6:1-2 (ESV).

There are some different thoughts to the interpretation of the second part of our passage this morning. Was the writer talking about the foundations of the Jewish faith, since he was writing primarily to Jewish Christians or was he writing about the foundations of their new Christian faith? Either one might fit, but most think he was writing of their new Christian faith.

Both the Jewish life and the Christian life begin with repentance – the recognition and the acknowledgement of the sin that lies within each of us, and the intent to turn from it and to turn to God. The difference between the two is that Christians turn to Jesus, the only one who can take away those sins.

The Christian faith looks not only to God, the Father, but also to his Son, Jesus Christ as the only source of salvation and new life. The Christian looks not to his or her own good works or achievements for salvation, but only to the grace of God found in Jesus Christ. He or she looks to God and Jesus and to Him alone, as the guide of his or her life, as well as the Savior of his or her soul.

While the Jewish people participated in ceremonial washings whenever they entered their houses, the synagogues, or the temple, over and over again, for the Christian there was and is only one ceremonial washing and that is the act of baptism, practiced following the command of Jesus. That act was meant to be a sign that the act of rebirth or regeneration had already started in the individual. As long as the individual clearly understood what he or she was doing and that the Holy Spirit was working in his or her life, that one act was meant to be for all time. In the early church it was always accompanied by the laying on of hands which was a sign of the transference of blessing – that the Holy Spirit was conveyed to that person being baptized, similar to that of Jesus' own baptism where it says the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove.

All the new Christians believed in the resurrection from the dead after the clear teaching and example of Jesus. From its beginning, Christianity has been a religion of immortality, one which points to a life after our life here on earth. Like the Jewish faith, the Christian faith has always believed in eternal judgment. In the end every single one of us is going to have to face God and account for everything we did during our life, "today." The difference between Judaism and Christianity, and other religions that believe in judgment and eternal life and Christianity, is that those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ are judged not on their own actions and works, but on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Those six things listed there, were and still are the basics of the Christian faith, as well as the starting points of the Jewish faith that were pointing towards something more complete – pointing towards Jesus. The difference between those who think that the author must have been addressing the Jews who had not become Christians yet and those who believed he was addressing the early Jewish Christians, is whether or not one believes that a Christian can fall away from his or her faith once he or she begins.

I for one believe that one can fall away, and the author of this *Letter to the Hebrews* seems to believe that too, because he says so in 6:6, which if you are counting, is now the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time he has given that warning in the first six chapters of this letter. And once again, his thoughts seem to align very closely with the apostle Paul,

*For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. <sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. <sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*

*<sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” <sup>8</sup> We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. <sup>9</sup> We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. <sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.*

*<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! 1 Cor. 10:1-13 (NIV)*

Is it easy to “fall away”? I don’t think so. Is it impossible? No! The author here warns about coming back and how difficult it is when one does fall away, or in the case of those Jews who had gotten so close but never took that final step. They had been enlightened, they had tasted the heavenly gift and the goodness of the word of God but they had never fully eaten of it. They had shared in the Holy Spirit but they never had the Holy Spirit fully within them. And for those who had taken the step, but fell away, the author says it is like crucifying Jesus, the Son of God all over again. Think of that the next time you sin, or you commit that same sin over and over again. It’s like crucifying Jesus, the Son of God, over and over again. That’s rather sobering, isn’t it? Though it’s not without hope:

*<sup>9</sup> Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, <sup>12</sup> so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

*<sup>13</sup> For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” <sup>15</sup> And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise... <sup>19</sup> We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*

Hebrews 6:9-20 (ESV)

When the author uses the word “brethren” in verse 9, we now know that he is writing to the early Christians, because that is the word that was used to refer to brothers and sisters in Christ.

And here is one very key sentence in our Scripture passage this morning: *And this we will do if God permits* (v. 3).

Thankfully our hope doesn't rest in ourselves and our ability to keep the promise(s) we have made to God, it rests in His promises. God made more than one promise to Abraham. In Genesis, chapter 12, it tells us that God made the promise to Abram, who would become Abraham, that he would lead him from the land of Ur, into the unknown, and eventually to the Promised Land. In Genesis, chapter 17, God promised Abraham many descendants who would be a blessing to him. But, the promise in which God swore with an oath to keep comes in Genesis, chapter 22 (v. 16-18), which is best translated that "God made a promise to Abraham, and in the end He actually made a promise which He confirmed with an oath."

Abraham had to wait for the promise. It was some twenty five years after he left Ur that His Son Isaac was born to him and Sarah, well beyond their child bearing years. The wandering had been long, but Abraham never wavered from his hope and trust in the promise of God. But God's ultimate promise to Abraham was the promise that all of Abraham's descendants would be blessed. And who are Abraham's descendants today? They are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. The promise to Abraham by God, that which he confirmed with an oath, came true in Jesus Christ.

Verse 19 refers to "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." In the ancient world the anchor was a symbol of hope. The writer of this *Letter to the Hebrews* insists that Christians possess the greatest hope in the world. What is that hope? He says it is the hope which enters the inner court beyond the veil. What does he mean by that?

In the middle of the O.T. temple was the most sacred of places referred to as "the Holy of Holies. The veil was the curtain which covered it. Within the Holy of Holies there was held to abide the very presence of God. Into that place only one man in all the world could go, and that one man was the High Priest; and even the High Priest could only enter that Holy Place on only one day of the year, "the Day of Atonement." And even on that day he was told that he could not linger, for it was thought to be a very dangerous and terrible thing to enter into the presence of the living God.

What the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is saying is that "Under the Old Jewish religion no one might enter into the presence of God but the High Priest, and he might only enter in on one day of the year; but now, Jesus has opened a way to the presence of God for every man and woman at every time." Jesus went into the presence of God to make it safe for all men and all women to follow. That presence so long hidden and barred was now open to all. What is one of the first things that happened after Jesus took his last breath on the cross? It says the curtain, or the veil, was torn in two.

Yes, God calls us to be His people, to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to turn from it and walk in His ways. But none of that saves us. None of that gets us the gift of eternal life. The only thing that gets us into the presence of God and the gift of eternal life is what Jesus did for us on the cross and our faith in Him, a faith which comes through hope and patience in the promise.