

No Way Back

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 6 verse 4 through 12, but we're jumping in in the middle of a paragraph if you look in the Bible, but in the middle of the author's train of thought. So I want to step back to 6.1 and start reading at verse 1 so we can catch a little bit of the bigger picture of what is going on in this passage. So Hebrews chapter 6, I'll be reading verses 1 through 12.

The author writes this, he says, 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.

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. 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. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness, to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Several years ago, I was meeting with the former pastor of this church, Josh Moody. For many years, Pastor Josh invested a lot of time in meeting with me regularly, in mentoring me, praying for me, and gradually giving me opportunities to serve and teach in this church.

[2 : 37] And one day we were talking, and he said to me, one of the hardest things about preaching is that you want to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. In fact, many passages of scripture seem designed to do just that.

But the problem is, when you preach a message of comfort for those who are afflicted, the people who are comfortable in their complacency hear it and feel justified in their complacency.

And then when you preach a message of warning to the complacent, the people who are afflicted hear it and feel even more discouraged and afflicted by the warning.

He said it's hard to get the message across to the people who really need to hear it. Now this morning's passage contains both a warning to awaken the complacent, as well as a comfort to strengthen believers who are afflicted.

And this passage is not easy to understand and apply rightly. Throughout church history, it has often been misunderstood. And we too are prone to misunderstand some parts of it.

[3 : 46] Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit saw fit to inspire the author of Hebrews to write these words, not only for the original hearers, but also for our benefit. So as we prepare to dive into this sometimes difficult passage, let's pray together.

Almighty God, we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as we look into this passage, into the warning, as well as the comfort, that we may hear clearly what you have spoken, and that we may apply it to our hearts and our lives, as you desire. For your glory, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So before we jump into this passage, let me set the broader context just a little bit. Last week, Pastor Nick preached on chapter 5, verse 11, through chapter 6, verse 3.

And this is sort of the beginning of the section that he's in. Now the writer begins, if you look up in chapter 5, verse 11, he begins by addressing a problem in the community that he's writing to.

He says, you have become dull of hearing. And that word dull could mean lazy or sluggish or complacent. And so he urges them in chapter 6, verse 1, And then in verse 4 through 12, the author

gives two reasons why we should go on toward maturity and not remain complacent and stagnant. [5 : 22] He gives a word of warning in verse 4 through 8, and then a word of comfort in verse 9 through 12. And then at the end of the passage, chapter 6, verse 12, he reminds us of the purpose of everything he said.

He said, all this I've said so that you may not be sluggish. That's actually the same word that he translated dull, that was translated dull back in chapter 5, verse 11.

So at the beginning and the end of the passage, he's addressing the same issue. He's saying this is so that you may not be sluggish or complacent, but through faith and patience inherit the promises of God.

So that's sort of the big picture of our passage today. There's a warning to the complacent, and there's a comforting word for God's people. And it's all part of an exhortation not to be complacent, but to press on toward maturity in Christ.

Now this passage is primarily directed toward people who have already identified themselves as Christians. But if you're here today, if you're not a Christian, if you're spiritually exploring or searching, I hope this passage will be helpful to you as well.

[6 : 25] In particular, this passage may give you insight into the nature of the Christian life, both the challenges that Christians face, as well as the comforts that Christians hold on to.

But even more than that, I hope you'll see in this passage the character of the God that Christians believe in. So first, let's look at the warning in chapter verses 4 through 8.

Now, this is not the first warning passage in the book of Hebrews. If you were here for our last fall, when we started the book of Hebrews, we looked at a warning in chapter 2, as well as in chapter 3. In chapter 2, he says, chapter 2, verse 1 through 4, he says, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, to the message of Christ, so that we do not drift away from it.

And the image is of a boat without an anchor, drifting slowly down the stream, and eventually ending up far away from its original destination.

[7 : 29] Chapters 3 and 4, he gives another warning. And there he says, take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

But exhort one another every day, so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. So there are the images of a heart that gradually grows hardened in its resistance towards God. And there he gives the example of the people of Israel, who had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought out into the wilderness. And they heard God's word, they saw God's power, but over and over they did not trust God.

They did not believe in Him, they did not obey Him. And as a result, many of them did not enter the promised land. And as we'll see, some of these themes from these two prior warnings come up again in this passage.

So as we look at this warning in verse 4 through 8 of chapter 6, we might first ask, well, what does this warning mean? Well, the clearest thing it means is that spiritually speaking, there is what we might call a point of no return.

[8 : 38] In other words, if you drift far enough downstream in the boat, eventually you will come to a point of no return, where the current will take you over the spiritual equivalent of Niagara Falls.

And the result will be certain and unavoidable destruction, without any hope of being rescued or restored. Now this is a terrifying warning, but it's the very clear teaching of this passage.

Verses 4 through 6 are one long sentence, but the main clause says, it is impossible, in the case of certain people, to restore them to repentance.

He doesn't just say it's difficult or unlikely or unusual, he says impossible. Now this is not the only passage in Scripture that teaches such a thing.

In Mark chapter 3, Jesus himself says, all kinds of sins will be forgiven, the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter.

[9 : 41] But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin. In other words, there is a point of no return, spiritually speaking.

Now over the years, different people have come to me, and they've said to me, I'm worried that I have crossed this line. I'm worried that, according to this passage, there's no more hope for me, and I'm forever lost.

What do I do? Now if there is a point of no return, it's a good question to ask. Who exactly is this verse talking about? How can you know if you've crossed that line?

Well, in order to answer that question, we need to look carefully at how Hebrews describes these people. In verse 4 through 6, and he describes them in two ways.

First, he describes them as people who have experienced rich blessings in the context of a community of believers. Now very much like the Israelite community who as a group had experienced God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

[10:58] And in fact, the terms he used here would have reminded his hearers of Israel's experience in the wilderness. So he says, they've been enlightened. Well, the people of Israel had seen God's glory descending on Mount Sinai in fire and smoke.

They were led through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He says, they had tasted the heavenly gift. The people of Israel had tasted the manna from heaven, bread from heaven that God had provided for them.

It says, they shared in the Holy Spirit. Well, Moses and the 70 elders of Israel were filled with the Spirit and their Spirit-led leadership benefited the whole community. He says, they not only heard God's word, but they saw evidence of God's power parting the Red Sea, providing water from the rock, defeating their enemies.

And in a similar way, this passage is describing people who have experienced rich blessings in the context of a community of believers. So from their outward appearance, from a human perspective, these people would appear to be Christians.

Right? They've been baptized. They've received the Lord's Supper. They've had powerful spiritual experiences. They've enjoyed some of the benefits of being involved in the Christian community. They've not only heard the word of God from reliable messengers, they've seen evidence right in front of their eyes of its truth and power and goodness.

[12:30] But then he says in verse 6, they have fallen away. And the emphasis here is on the contrast between God's generosity and kindness toward these people and their utterly ungrateful response.

In other words, God has exposed these people to numerous spiritual blessings, most especially the message that God loved the world so much that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, who willingly came into the world and willingly died on the cross as a sacrifice for sinners.

But after having publicly embraced this message and identified with the Christian community, their response is to crucify the Son of God once again. In other words, to publicly and definitively reject him.

And in their public rejection of Jesus, to scorn him before the world. Verses 7 and 8 present the same contrast. There are two kinds of land. Both kinds of land are watered by the rain and cultivated by the goodness of God.

But the land in verse 8 bears only thorns and thistles. No good fruit. And in the end, he says, it is only fit for burning.

[13:50] In Jesus' parable of the sower, which we heard earlier, the seed of God's word is sown everywhere on all four kinds of soil. On the hard ground, on the rocky ground, on the thorny ground, as well as on the good soil.

And so in all these examples, God is shown to be not only righteous and just in his judgment, but generous and loving and kind far more than any of us deserve.

But despite God's generosity and his kindness and his love, it says that these people have fallen away. Now when this passage talks about falling away, it's not talking about a temporary relapse, but an ongoing and permanent condition.

John Calvin said this, he said, the writer is not talking here about theft or lying or even murder or drunkenness or adultery.

He is referring to a complete falling away from the gospel in which the sinner has offended God not in one respect only, but has utterly renounced his grace.

[15:00] Now in the Bible, there are several examples of believers in both the Old and New Testament who fall into serious and damaging patterns of sin, sometimes even for extended periods of time.

But eventually, the Holy Spirit convicts them of sin. They're never totally satisfied in their patterns of sin. And eventually, they turn back to God and they repent and they ask for forgiveness.

And you know, the New Testament says it's not, it doesn't just say forgiveness is possible if we repent. It says forgiveness is promised to all who repent. To repent simply means to turn to Jesus. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness because Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for sin.

And His blood covers anyone and everyone who turns to Him. And the writer of Hebrews is in full agreement with this promise. Notice what he says here.

[16:08] He does not say it is impossible for some people to be forgiven even if they repent. What he says is it is impossible for them to be brought to repentance.

In other words, they never turn back. They fall away and they never turn back. And Jesus says a very similar thing in that passage about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

He says it is an eternal sin. In other words, it is a permanent and unchanging and ongoing state of willfully refusing Jesus Christ who is God's only provision for forgiveness.

So if you are concerned, if you have read passages like this and you have wondered, have I passed this point? If you have been driven to despair by that thought, if you are concerned that you have done something so bad that God cannot or will not forgive you, your concern itself and your desire to be in right relationship with God is clear evidence that you have not done so.

The author of Hebrews did not give this warning because he thought that the people had already passed this point of no return. If he thought they had already passed the point of no return, the warning would be useless.

[17:37] You don't warn somebody when they've already fallen off a cliff and died. You warn someone so they don't fall off the cliff. It's like the rumble strip on the highway.

It's not the most pleasant noise to hear, but it saves you from going over the edge inadvertently or without realizing it.

Now the reason why the author gives this warning is because he saw that many of the people were beginning to drift away, to drift down the stream.

They'd become dull, sluggish, complacent. And so he warns them spiritual complacency is dangerous. Drifting toward the point of no return begins often as a gradual process.

Jesus describes the seed sown among thorns as seed that begins to grow but is choked out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this world.

[18:42] Think of a plant in the middle of a field that is gradually overtaken by weeds and thorn bushes and vines that gradually entangle it and suck the life out of it.

It doesn't happen all at once, but it's a gradual process, but it ends in suffocation. And similarly, he's warning them because the path to the point of no return begins with lots of small decisions.

Whether it's deciding that life is just too busy so it's not worth the time to pray or read the Bible anymore or deciding that it's not worth coming to church because you're just too tired or deciding to distance yourself from other Christians because you don't want them to challenge you and hold you to a higher standard or deciding to tell little lies out of a desire to please other people or indulging in hidden sinful patterns because they bring immediate comfort in a stressful time.

The warning is when these patterns continue unchallenged, unchanged, over time, your heart becomes increasingly entangled in the cares and riches and pleasures of the world and increasingly numb and hardened toward the reality of God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. And so the author of Hebrews is throwing a bucket of ice-cold water on us and he's saying wake up! Don't be caught in complacency.

[20:21] Don't live a sluggish Christian life. Don't continue along this dangerous path.

So that's the warning. But thankfully the writer of Hebrews not only gives a warning because I think if that's all he gave we might be startled but we might not quite know where to go next.

He also gives us a word of comfort to encourage us to press on in verse 9 through 12. Now in verse 9 his tone shifts from stern warning to tender brotherly affection.

He says though we speak in this way with stern warnings yet in your case beloved we feel sure of better things.

Things that belong to salvation. Notice how the pronouns shift in this passage. Verses 1 through 3 he says therefore let us go on to maturity.

[21:27] First person plural. This we will do if God permits. Verse 4 through 8 however he uses the third person. He doesn't say you he says in the case of those them they so he's warning them but he's not putting them in that category of people who have done that.

But then in verse 9 through 12 he goes back to the first and second person he says in your case we feel sure of better things. Now you might ask why does he feel sure of better things?

How can I feel sure of better things for me? Well in verse 10 he goes on to give two reasons for his confidence.

So first he says that he is confident because of their track record of work and love. Or if we use the metaphor of verse 7 he's confident because of the good fruit that he has already observed in their lives.

Now later on in the book in chapter 10 verse 32 and 34 and chapter 13 verse 1 and 2 he elaborates on the good fruit that he's observed in their lives.

[22 : 44] He says they've endured a hard struggle sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction because of their faith in Jesus sometimes standing alongside other Christians who were mistreated and imprisoned.

In other words they faced suffering and opposition things that would have could have tempted them to give up or turn away but they didn't give up and in fact in their trials they held on to the promises of Christ.

Chapter 10 verse 34 says they joyfully accepted the loss of worldly possessions and status because they knew that they had a better and lasting possession in Jesus Christ.

now the point of this is that suffering and trials will either drive you away from God into things like bitterness and despair and anger and anxiety or they will drive you to God and the Psalms invite us to bring our bitterness and despair and anger and anxiety to God.

you know it's very common to feel all of those emotions but the question is will we hold on to those things deep inside ourselves where they'll gradually eat away at us and then poison our relationships with others or will we bring those things to God honestly and seek our refuge and our help in him.

[24 : 14] you see when we suffer and take refuge in Jesus and bring all of the stuff that we feel to him he begins to work in us things like humility and trust and compassion and so he turns suffering and evil into things that can be a means for our spiritual growth and maturity and Jesus has been there Jesus himself has suffered he knows what it's like to go through hard trials and opposition and he has come so that we might never suffer alone but that all our sufferings might be with him by our side so if you've been through trials if you can look back at your life if you've been through trials that could have pushed you away from God but you're still here you still believe in

Christ you still pray be encouraged that's a good sign now the second thing he points to is not only their their work and their endurance through trials but their love for one another again suffering and trials can either cause us to distance ourselves from other people or to come closer together and stand together in the midst of them and instead of distancing themselves from each other the Hebrews loved and served one another with warm affection it says in chapter 6 verse 10 you have shown love for God in serving the saints as you still do in other words they had served not only the Christians in their own church but the saints more broadly speaking Christians perhaps throughout the world or in other churches chapter 13 verse 1 and 2 tells us they opened their homes to each other they loved each other like brothers and sisters in the family of God they even welcomed strangers and foreigners because they knew that

God and Jesus Christ had welcomed them and God had opened his home to them and so they opened their homes to others it says they cared for those in prison had compassion on them because they knew that Jesus Christ had paid a high price to set them free from their bondage and so they cared for those who were in bondage themselves and he says you've continued to do these things brothers and sisters may we be a church that is characterized by loving service to one another and in many ways we already are but let me urge you let us continue to do so more and more we live in a culture that's it seems like everybody's busy right hardly anybody how are you doing I mean my natural response is saying things have been pretty busy lately we live in a high stress high achievement culture that places a high value on individual freedom and autonomy and privacy but the gospel tells us that

Jesus Christ willingly laid aside his freedoms and became a servant to love us on the night that he was betrayed he knelt down and he washed his disciples feet and then he said as I have loved you you also are to love one another and by this all people will know that you are really my disciples if you have love for one another and so the author of Hebrews could say I see your acts of loving service to God's people your love for God is shown in your love for others and that's one of the fruits

of the Holy Spirit it's another sign that you have really experienced salvation from God because you see true salvation is not a temporary experience that doesn't last that's not real salvation at all true salvation is an eternal reality begun continued and completed by the grace of God and that's actually the second reason why we can have assurance why we can have confidence not only because of good fruit that we see in one another's lives and that we can encourage each other as we see that good fruit but ultimately because of the character of God the ultimate foundation of our assurance as Christians is the character of God himself and the writer of Hebrews says this in verse 10 he says

God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and your love that you have shown for his name you see God is the source of all the good fruit we produce that's why the apostle Paul calls it the fruit of the Holy Spirit not just the fruit of our good efforts but the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our life and in the gospel of John Jesus says I am the vine and you are the branches whoever abides in me and I in him he will bear much fruit apart from me you can do nothing and he continues he says you did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear good fruit that will last you see God promises that he will not overlook the good fruit that he himself has produced in our lives verse 7 says land that produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated receives a blessing from God

[30 : 18] Jesus himself promised blessings to his disciples both now and in the future read through the Sermon on the Mount it's full of them the Beatitudes blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account in that case he says rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven or in Mark chapter 10 he said to his disciples he said whatever I call you to sacrifice and leave behind for my sake and the sake of the gospel you'll receive many times more and in the age to come eternal life because God is not unjust when he makes a promise he will keep it he is faithful when he produces good fruit in our lives he will sustain it and he will reward it in the end because he has done it and so he goes on in verse 11 he says we desire for each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end so that you may not be sluggish but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises of God you see the purpose of both the warning and the comfort is to protect us from becoming complacent and you know there's no joy in spiritual complacency it's not even fun while it lasts but he's spurring us on to persevere in earnest love verse 10 in assured hope verse 11 and in patient faith as he says in verse 12 love hope and faith in Jesus you see the purpose of the comforting word is not to comfort us in our complacency but to spur us on to earnest love for one another and the purpose of the warning is not to make us despair and it's not to make us endlessly anxiously introspective either but to spur us on to persevere in looking to Jesus with our faith and hope fixed firmly on him you know if you're hiking in the mountains and the trail passes by some steep cliffs it is good to be aware of the danger but you will make no progress by just peeking over the edge of the cliff and imagining how horrible it would be to fall off you will just make yourself dizzy and unnecessarily scared and in the same way if you are endlessly anxiously introspective about your spiritual state you will not make much spiritual progress the encouragement here is to be aware and take the warning seriously but to keep going up the trail to follow in the footsteps of those who have persevered in faith all the way to the end and inherited the promises of God and most especially to fix our eyes on our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ because Jesus is the pioneer of faith in other words he's the one who's blazed the trail for us and he's the perfecter of faith he's the beginning and he's the end he stands waiting to receive us at the end and he watches over our every step along the way let us pray Lord Jesus where we have become complacent we pray that you would stir us up to an active faith hope and love in you and where we have become discouraged or even despairing would you comfort and strengthen us with your words of assurance and hope we pray that we would live a life of earnest love of patient faith and of assured hope in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we pray in his name amen