

Embrace Assurance Hebrews 5:11-6:20

As we continue our sermon series on the book of Hebrews, I want to walk you through a difficult text that I think is often misunderstood. We will be looking at some verses that have caused many Christians to live in fear of losing their salvation, which is ironic because as you will see, the whole intent of this passage is exactly the opposite. It was meant to help Christians know how and why they can have full assurance that they won't ever lose their salvation and can be more sure of being saved from their sins than any guarantee in this life.

As most of you know, Matthew had a terrible accident over Christmas vacation and broke his leg really bad. We all know how expensive emergency medical treatments can be, which is why we get health insurance to help pay for them. But how confident are you that your insurance company will do that? Amy and I are beginning to see it's not necessarily a sure thing, and many of you have found that out first hand. A few years ago, several people lost their sheds as roofs collapsed under the weight of the snow. Many people thought they had insurance to cover the cost of rebuilding and the damage to the property underneath only to find out that wasn't the case. It's a sick feeling when you find out that something you were depending on isn't really a guarantee.

But you don't have to worry about that when it comes to salvation. God's promise of salvation is a fireproof guarantee that we can be confident in and that's what our passage for today was meant to point out. But it takes some careful examination to get there. So we are going to walk through this text and try to understand what the author is trying to say. The first thing he does is to voice some frustration. He just got done writing about how Jesus is their perfect high priest in the order of Melchizedek and he wants to go deeper on that subject, but he realizes he can't because of where things were at in their spiritual lives.

Read Hebrews 5:11-14.

¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who

have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

You can see his frustration – like a parent scolding a teenager for childish behavior. He rebukes them because they were wallowing in spiritual immaturity – far behind where they should have been by that time. When a person becomes a Christian, they have not reached the goal that God has for them – they have only just begun. Romans 8:29 tells us that God’s goal for us is that we would be conformed to the image of Christ. We see that again in what Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13-14. God is working in us, *“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children...”*

Spiritual maturity is similar to human development in that you start out as an infant and as time goes on you are expected to grow until you become a fully mature adult. When you’re an infant, it’s ok to act like an infant. When you’re a child, it’s ok to act like a child. But when you’re a teenager or an adult it’s no longer ok to act like a child. You are expected to put childish ways behind you and act your age. When adults act like children it can be really frustrating, and that’s the frustration behind what the author of Hebrews writes.

They weren’t growing. They weren’t listening and learning. They were dull of hearing. They should have had a clear understanding on the basic principles of Christianity so that they could be teaching others, but they weren’t. They were like babies feeding on milk when they should have been adults eating solid food. They were unskilled in understanding biblical truth and were unable to distinguish good from evil. So he rebukes them and then goes on to tell them what they needed to do.

Hebrews 6:1-3

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, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.

The remedy to spiritual immaturity is straightforward – leave childish ways behind and go on to maturity. He mentions several topics that would have been taught to them when they first became Christians – things he probably taught them

himself. He tells them, “It’s time to move on from the basics and go deeper.” He used the analogy of milk and solid food earlier and it applies here as well – “You need to eat more than just milk. You need to start adding solid food to your diet.”

This is a challenge for all of us. When you became a Christian, you didn’t arrive at God’s ultimate goal for your life. He wants you to grow. He wants you to become more and more like Jesus so that your life becomes a reflection of his glory. That’s his goal for you. He doesn’t expect you to become spiritually mature overnight; it takes years of growing, but he does expect you to make progress. He wants you to grow. And that’s what he’s at work doing inside of you.

Now we come to the section that can be very difficult to understand. It’s written within the context of his loving rebuke for their spiritual immaturity and challenge to move on to maturity. And we have to take that into consideration as we look at what he has to say.

Hebrews 6:4-8

⁴ For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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.

⁷ 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. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

I remember reading these verses when I was a younger Christian and thinking they meant, “You’d better watch out, because if you keep going the direction you’re going, you’re going to fall away and lose your salvation.” And I think that’s the way a lot of people think when they read this passage. But if that’s what it means, there are a lot of theological problems with that. In many other places in the Bible it says that if you are truly saved, you can’t lose your salvation. Romans 8:39 says that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In John 10:28-29 Jesus says his sheep will never perish and no one will snatch them out of his hand or out of the Father’s hand. In Ephesians 1:14 it says those who have believed in Christ were “sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” And there are

many more verses that would indicate that if you're saved you can't lose your salvation like it sounds in these verses.

So what is he trying to say? First I want us to notice that he changes his subject from "you" and "we" to "they" and "them" in verse 4, so he switches from talking directly about them to describing a different type of person. He isn't saying that they were this type of person, but I do think he's trying to make them think, "In your current condition of spiritual laziness, how do you know this isn't you?"

What kind of person does he have in mind? Is this a born again, Spirit-filled, true believer who has been justified by God through faith in Christ and thus would be considered "saved" who then falls away and loses their salvation? Like I said before, if that's true, then we've got theological contradictions all over the Bible. So let's look a little deeper at how he describes them.

He first describes them as having "once been enlightened," and if you look at the other time he uses that term in Hebrews 10:32 you can see he's referring to someone's initial hearing and understanding of the gospel message. So I think that's what he also has in mind here – someone who has heard the gospel and understood it. The Greek word means to "shine" or "give light." It's something that happens in a person's mind when they hear and understand something new that was previously unknown. This isn't something that happens deep down in a person's spirit, like the enlightenment that comes when a person is born again by the Spirit; it takes place in the mind and involves understanding.

They have also "tasted the heavenly gift." He doesn't use this phrase anywhere else, but I believe it relates to being enlightened – hearing the gospel and the message of salvation and thus getting a taste of God's heavenly gift of salvation – seeing and understanding what it is and what it will be like, though not actually being saved. They are getting a taste of it, not fully eating or drinking it.

They have "shared in the Holy Spirit." He mentions this back in Hebrews 2:4 where he talks about how one of the ways God confirms the credibility of the gospel is through gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed among members of the church family according to his will. So being part of a Christian community, they would have "shared in the Holy Spirit" in this way – they would have been blessed by other people's spiritual gifts like teaching, prophecy, speaking in tongues and healing.

They have “tasted the goodness of the word of God.” The Greek term for “word” shows he has in mind a “spoken word about a matter.” And in this context I think it refers to God’s revelation of the gospel that was preached to them by the apostles. In other places he refers to it as “what we have heard” and “our confession.” So these people have also had a taste of the goodness of the gospel. They’ve heard and understood the good news of God’s grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ and his gift of salvation to all who believe.

And finally, they have tasted the “powers of the age to come.” My study Bible pointed out that he uses the same word in Hebrews 2:4 that’s translated “miracles” there, and I think he has that in mind – the miracles, signs and wonders they saw that accompanied the initial preaching of the gospel – supernatural powers that will be part of the age to come.

After carefully examining the details of his description, I don’t believe he’s talking about a genuine, born again, spirit filled Christian. Instead, I believe he’s talking about someone who was intrigued by the message of salvation and by signs and wonders and liked what they saw and heard, so they joined the Christian community and experienced all kinds of spiritual blessings, but they were never truly born again in their spirit. They had a kind of faith, but it was a “dead faith” like James talks about in James 2:17. Things took place at the mental and emotional level, but nothing happened at the spiritual level. Christianity was just an intriguing thing they were into, but they were spiritually dead.

And how do we know it was that and not the real thing? We know because over time they decided to turn away. Over time, when the emotions and excitement of Christianity wore off they looked at everything they had seen and experienced and said, “Nope. Not for me. I’m all done with this Jesus stuff.” And I think what the author is saying is that when someone does that, it reveals the true condition of their heart. It’s impossible for them to come back to repentance because they have already tasted the goodness of Christianity and then hardened their heart and decided that Jesus was a fake and deserved to die.

And that seems to fall in line with the analogy he uses in verses 7-8. He likens the person he has just described to worthless land that along with the good soil soaks in all the blessings and nourishment of regular rains, but will only produce thistles and thorns. It is on the brink of being cursed and in the end will be burned. So the

person he's describing didn't lose their salvation; they were never saved in the first place. They looked a lot like a Christian because they had a surface level faith and were part of the church community, but over time the true condition of their heart became evident by their falling away.

So I think he's warning his readers to not remain in their place of spiritual laziness and immaturity or they will live in fear of being the kind of person he just described. How will they know that that's not going to happen to them? How can they be sure of their salvation? Not by staying where they were at! Something has to change. There is a way they can be sure of their salvation and that's what he writes about in the last two sections.

Read Hebrews 6:9-12.

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

Do you notice how they can have the “full assurance of hope,” which is the same as the “full assurance of salvation”? By showing the same earnestness as those who are showing love for the Lord in serving the saints. By not being sluggish but by imitating the people of faith that went before them. In other words, by moving forward and growing in spiritual maturity. By doing these things they can have full assurance of hope – the eternal hope of salvation. And he finishes this passage by telling them why they can have that assurance.

Read Hebrews 9:13-20.

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this as a sure

and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Here he tells them that the assurance of salvation is founded on something that cannot be shaken. He uses the example of Abraham to point out that when God makes a promise and swears an oath, he will keep that promise no matter what. And because of that, we can have full assurance that God will save us from our sins. Why? Because God wanted us to have that assurance, so he swore an oath to that effect – he shows them that oath later on in chapter 7. And by virtue of that oath and the fact that God cannot tell a lie, we can be absolutely sure that he will save everyone who runs to him for refuge. We can hold fast to the hope that is set before us as a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls. There will be no surprises in the end and we do not need to fear. Christ has gone before us and has paved the way through his ministry as our high priest. Therefore all who are trusting in him have the guarantee that they will be saved.

Assurance of salvation is something that we can joyfully embrace, but how can we embrace it? God wants us to have it and it is there for the taking, but how can we experience it? We know we won't experience it if we wallow in spiritual laziness like his readers were doing at the beginning of this passage. If you are making no effort to grow in your faith and spiritual maturity, but are content with sin and spiritual apathy, you will probably struggle with assurance of salvation because how do you know if you're saved or if you'll prove to be the kind of person he described in verses 4-5? God knows, but how can you? Don't remain there in fear and uncertainty!

Embrace the assurance of salvation by pressing forward in your faith and growing in spiritual maturity. That's what I think he's saying here and what is confirmed by other NT passages as well. Perhaps the clearest is the book of 1 John. John tells his readers in 1 John 2:5-6: *"By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."* Also in 1 John 2:28 he writes: *"And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming."* After writing many more things like these and calling them to live lives of obedience to God he says this in 1 John 5:13: *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal*

life.” Living like this doesn’t save you, but it is evidence that you have been saved and therefore gives you the assurance of salvation.

I want to give you the opportunity to respond to this message with confession and repentance before God. If you realize you have been content with spiritual laziness and know you’re not where you need to be – if you see that this morning and want that to change, I encourage you to take a few moments in the quietness of your heart right now to confess that to God and ask for his power to change. Recommit your life to him. There are many ways you can take steps toward growing in spiritual maturity, so ask God to make it clear to you what he wants you to do. And talk to one of the elders, small group leaders, or pastors here at church – we are here to help.

Let’s take a few moments for quiet prayer and reflection and then I’ll close this time with prayer...