

Lesson 15 “Warnings and Promises”

Hebrews 4:14 – 6:20

Well, today’s lesson opens in Chapter 4, verse 14 by saying, “Therefore...” The old saying is when a sentence starts with “therefore” we need to see what it’s there for.

You recall last week we learned that these Hebrew Christians were under persecution and were facing some tough choices. Did they stick with Christianity or relapse back into the comfort of traditional ritual Judaism? It was like straddling an earthquake fault with one foot in Moses’ Law and one foot in Christ’s love demanding a decision to leap to one side or the other. Christianity was not just another sect of Judaism; it was a personal commitment to Jesus, the Messiah.

The writer of Hebrews was reinforcing that they had made the right choice in accepting Christ over the Law.

1) He was superior to the prophets because Jesus didn’t just foretell and share the Word of God – He was the Word of God. He spoke creation into existence.

2) He was superior to the angels (Dan gave us some background on angels) – Jesus was higher than the angels, He was the Son of God.

3) He was better than Moses because Moses was faithful as a servant in God’s house, while Jesus was faithful as the Son who built the house. His was the better ministry.

The Hebrews were warned against unbelief and urged to fully commit now, while it is still TODAY. They couldn’t walk the fence –

nothing is hidden from God. His Word judges the thoughts and intents of the heart and some day we must give account to Him. So . . .

Verse 14 – “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

Hebrews is a book of perils or warnings. There are six:

- 1) the peril of drifting (2:1-4)
- 2) the peril of doubting (3:7-4:2) Dan covered those last week.
- 3) the peril of dull hearing (5:11-12)
- 4) the peril of departing (6:1-12) Those are in today's lesson.
- 5) the peril of despising (10:26-39) and,
- 6) the peril of denying (12:15-29)

In the Old Testament we have the interpretation of human need; in the New Testament is a revelation of the Divine supply. In the Old we have the unveiling of the human heart; in the New we have the unveiling of the heart of God and the way in which He has answered humanity's need in Christ.

Mankind tries to rationalize away sin, but the heart pierced by the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin, knows it needs a Savior, an intercessor, a High Priest to open the way to the throne of God's grace. Jesus is that High Priest.

Remember last week we learned that as an Apostle Jesus represented God to man and as a High Priest, He represented man to God.

It's important that we recognize that the Old Testament tabernacle was the gospel in pictures. There was an altar for blood sacrifices and the laver was for washings of purification. The Holy Place contained the Showbread (representing Christ as the Bread of Life) and the Golden Lampstand (representing Christ as the Light of the World) and the bowl of incense (representing the prayers of the saints). Behind a thick veil or separating curtain (which split in two when Christ died) was the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant rested topped by the Mercy Seat. The human high priest could only enter there once a year after making atonement by blood sacrifice for both his own sins as well as the sins of the people. Jesus' death had split the veil so we might behold directly the mercy and grace of God. Now as a priesthood of believers, we too may approach the throne of grace with confidence every day, not just once a year.

Because we have a completed Bible and can see the typology in the Old Testament, we have the advantage. They, on the other hand, still needed convincing in their infant faith.

Scripture says that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. Vs. 15 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize

with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”

That’s comforting isn’t it? He knows what we’re facing . . . He’s a personal God. The temptations of Jesus were not intended to see if He could sin. Sin did not attract Him, sin repelled Him. The tests demonstrated Him sinless to us and showed us His purity. Like gold when it is mined has the dross skimmed away so the pure gold is left, there is still one last step; another heating to prove the purity of the gold.

We know Jesus was fully human and yet He was without sin. We are so conditioned to awareness of our sinfulness, we’re sure that somehow we must sin every day. Maybe we do, but as we grow in our Christian walk I think it’s possible for us to go a day or days without sin. God is constantly conforming us to the image of Jesus, and as we yield and pursue His righteousness, the goal becomes attainable, not in our strength, but because He is living in and through us. I’m sure there are many days when God is pleased with our obedience and commends us to the angels as He did when He praised Job. God wants you and me to succeed in righteousness!

Hebrews 5:1-6 addresses the duties of the Old Testament high priest with a reminder that no one appoints himself to the position – it is a call from God. So too Jesus was called to His office of High Priest by God. He was not a descendant of Aaron and the priestly Levitical line. We

know Jesus was from the tribe of Judah – but His priesthood was in the order of Melchizedek.

We met Melchizedek in Genesis and next week's lesson expands on that subject, so we'll wait for Dellen to enlighten us.

Now Hebrews 5:7-10 has some interesting things for us to consider. Verse 7 – “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death and He was heard because of His reverent submission.” But Jesus wasn’t saved from death, was He? He died. How then was His prayer heard? One explanation offered is that the word “reverent submission” can mean “godly fear” and it might mean here that “He was saved from being afraid of death.” Certainly He knew the glories awaiting Him, so death itself was not a fearful thing, but separation from the Father was.

Another view that was intriguing to me when I studied for this lesson was one from the Living Bible. Vs. 7 is paraphrased this way: “Yet while Christ was here on earth he pleaded with God, praying with tears and agony of soul to the only one who would save him from premature death. And God heard his prayers because of his strong desire to obey God at all times.” Then the footnote reads . . .

“Christ’s longing was to live until He could die on the cross for all mankind. There is a strong case to be made for Satan’s great desire that Christ should die prematurely, before the mighty work on the cross

could be performed. Christ's body, being human, was frail and weak like ours (except that He was sinless). He had said just a few moments before, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful unto death." Can a human body live long under such pressure of spirit as He underwent in Gethsemane to the point of sweating drops of blood? God graciously sent an angel to strengthen Him so that He could live to accomplish God's perfect will at the cross."

Stop to think of the possible dangers of premature death before the cross – when the soldiers came to arrest Him in the garden; the torturous flogging; the crown of thorns, all after a sleepless night of mock trials. What if He had died before the cross, before the fulfillment of Isaiah 53? Anyway, it is something to think about.

Another suggestion by commentators was that He prayed to be delivered out of the state of death, not that He should be delivered from dying. We can be sure that it was great anguish for Jesus to know that by becoming sin for all mankind, He would be separated from the Father. Yet it was His will to do the Father's will and in the process Jesus was given the strength to go through the horror of what dying for sinners fully meant.

Continuing the theme of Christ's oneness with His people as their High Priest, the writer points out in verse 8 that "He learned obedience from what He suffered." It is one thing to say and firmly believe that I am ready to obey even though it should mean suffering, and another

thing to actually undergo the suffering. Jesus in His earthly life was not only ready to obey, He actually did obey and suffered in the process.

A similar remark applies to being “made perfect” in verse 9. Jesus always had the perfection of being ready to suffer, but He added to that the perfection by actually suffering for our sins and thereby becoming the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.

Now we come to the peril of dull hearing. We can listen and listen a lot, but never hear in our spirit what God is saying through His Word to help us grow in our faith. We think since we’ve followed the basics of becoming a Christian – belief, repentance, baptism – we’re all done. That may be for salvation, but until you understand grace deep in your soul and the depth of what Christ did for you on the cross, you’ll continue to be a “babe in Christ.” The writer acknowledges that this is meat for the mature, but says in effect, “You’re still only able to digest milk and even at that, you’re showing very little signs of growing up.”

I need to say something that can be hard to hear.

We’re taught to be careful and considerate of the weaker brother. It’s a truth of Scripture that we must agree with. But the weaker brother has his own responsibility – to grow up! You can’t stay a spiritual baby forever and enjoy the abundant life Christ came to give you. That’s a truth of Scripture also. Are you growing in grace and knowledge?

Age alone does not produce maturity. Wrinkles? Yes. Senility? Maybe. But maturity? No. To produce healthy growth, we need three things:

1) nourishing food – the Word of God. Get truth down inside us, internalized and applied. We must be doers of the Word.

2) sufficient exercise – like James says, “faith without works is dead.” Another good saying is, “Faith with works is a force. Faith without works is a farce.” We must be pursuing righteousness in obedience.

3) keen discernment – Hebrews 5:14 “But solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” How do we have discernment? How do we know what’s true?

There was a Peanuts cartoon showing Charlie Brown and Snoopy in a classroom. Charlie says to Snoopy almost in disbelief, “The teacher says you got the only perfect score on the ‘true or false’ test.” Then he says to the teacher, “No, Ma’am, I don’t know how he did it.” To which Snoopy replies, “What’s true is true and what’s false is false.”

How do Christians train themselves to be able to understand teaching about righteousness?

1. Begin with truth you already know but have not been obeying.

Does God want you to stop some activity you know to be wrong?

Does Scripture exhort you to change your attitude, forgive someone, reach out to help another? No further light will be given to you until you obey the truth you already have.

2. Review the promises of God for help to obey His word.

2 Timothy 2:7 says, “Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.”

3. Claim those promises for yourself, do what you need to do and count on God’s grace to see you through the consequences.

As soon as we get one area under control, another area of disobedience is sure to make itself known. So we follow this procedure whenever we become aware of areas in our lives or thinking that needs to be changed. It’s this constant use of knowing and obeying which enables one to grow and handle the solid food of the teaching about righteousness. In Ephesians 4:14 Paul says, “then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”

Life presents thousands of examples of the need to act on knowledge before any benefit is received. You may know a phone number, but it must be dialed, or at least accessed if you’re using technology, before a connection can be made. You may know the price of an object, but you must pay that price to obtain it. You may ask God to remove the weeds in your life, but we should pray with a hoe in our

hand ready to take action to remove them. We grow by putting our faith into action.

Perhaps you discussed in your small groups about the elementary teachings of the faith in 6:1,2. “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instructions about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”

This is not a comprehensive list of elementary teachings of the faith but a list of examples of basic faith – the ABC's – conversion, church practices, and coming events (prophecy).

Conversion . . .

Repentance is a permanent change of mind which results in right behavior. After turning from lifeless works (repentance), a positive action of faith in God must be taken. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin.

Church practices . . .

Baptism is an initiatory rite and must not be regarded as final fulfillment of what it means to be a Christian. Christian's are expected to learn and grow; to become disciples.

The laying on of hands is an act of identifying an individual for the activity of God . . . representing a beginning not an end.

There's no mention of the Lord's Supper here, but it's one of the sacraments (which is a good indication that this is not a complete list). =

Coming Events . . .

Prophecy, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment – things to come. All of these are basics of the faith the author identifies.

It is one of the basic things about the Christian life – we rarely stand still. We either progress in faith or we slip back.

Here we come to the peril of departing. The writer in chapter 6 speaks to people who have had enough experience of Christian things to know what the faith is all about and to know that they ought to go on with it.

6:4-6 “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace.”

Nothing in the passage says that genuine Christians may fall away and that if they do they may never come back. That would put this writer in contradiction with other New Testament writers who emphasize that people continue as Christians because of God's power and not because of their own efforts.

John 6:39 Jesus says, “And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up on the last day.” Or John 10:27-29, Jesus says, “My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Ray Stedman’s commentary shed a little light on this passage for me. He reminds us that this was written to spiritual infants and asks this question, “Is it not possible that we frequently confuse conception with birth? If the spiritual life follows the same pattern as physical life, we all know that physical life does not begin with birth. It begins with conception. Have we not, perhaps, mistaken conception for birth and therefore have been confused when certain ones, who seemingly started well, have ended up stillborn? Is there in the spiritual life, as well as the physical life, a gestation period before birth when true, Spirit-imparted life can fail and result in stillbirth? Is there not a time when new Christians are more like embryos, forming little by little in the womb, fed by the faith and vitality of others?

“If this be the case, then the critical moment is not when the Word first meets with faith, for that is conception; but the critical moment is when the individual is asked to obey the Lord at cost to himself, contrary to his own will and desire . . . in other words, when we are called upon

to learn obedience at the price of self-denial, that is the true moment of new birth. In grace the Lord may make this appeal over the course of many years, but if obedience to the Lordship of Christ is ultimately refused, this is a stillbirth. The months and even years that may be spent in the enjoyment of conversion was simply Christian life in embryo. The new birth occurs when we first cease from our own works and rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ. That is when the life of faith begins.”

That is to fully understand God’s grace. We cease from working for our salvation. We enter the Sabbath rest of God.

Personally, I think that as a true Christian, God has a firm grasp on you and if you are in danger of “falling away” by becoming so deeply rooted in sin that your heart is becoming hardened towards repentance, He would take your life before He would let you lose your salvation. That’s my opinion. However, on the other hand, as the passage in Galatians 5:4-6 says, should you reject the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior and return to the Law or your own works as merit for your salvation, you can fall from grace! You live by the Law and you’ll be judged by the Law. Why would anyone choose Law over grace? And how dare any of us rely on what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed “cheap grace” that thinks because we’re secure in Christ that we can live any way we want to.

If the choice facing these Hebrew Christians was to go back to Judaism and its reliance on works of the Law and the blood of animal sacrifices, it would crucify Jesus all over again. That says Christ's blood was not enough. It is to take a stand with those who rejected Christ and put Him on the cross.

One writer remarked, "Correction does much, but encouragement does more." Hebrews 6:10-11 "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure."

The writer desperately wants each and every one of his readers to persevere. Doesn't it encourage us to see perseverance in each other? We need to hold on not just for ourselves, but for the sake of others. Every one of you could share a testimony of perseverance. And we're reminded that God doesn't forget our good works while we persevere in our Christian walk.

In verses 13-20 the author brings his discussion back to where he left off before his lengthy discussion about the peril of departing; that is the fact that the certain hope of our future salvation is an anchor to our souls while we wait on God in the storms of life.

True faith by nature awakens hope. It is the anchor of the soul. This "hope" is not just "hope you have a nice future," but is a hope based on the fact it WILL happen. Our hope of future salvation is certain because

God's promises have never failed any that trusted in them. Abraham is "Exhibit A" of a man who trusted God against all odds and found Him to be faithful. Paul called Abraham "the father of all who believe," and added, "In hope against hope he believed . . ." (Romans 4:11,18)

God, in eagerness to convey to men of faith the total trustworthiness of His Word, added a solemn oath to the promise He'd given. God's bare Word should be sufficient, since His Word is always true. But when God says it with an oath or pledge, He wants us to know that it is a done deal! In verse 17 to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, God "confirmed it with an oath." Because of the weakness of our flesh, God condescends to add the oath to His word to give us double assurance. God does not lie. We are held fast as though by a great anchor against the beating waves of trouble and doubt . . . held steady in midst of trying circumstances as we grow in the certainty of our hope of glory.

Well, as I said, this is a lesson of warnings . . . the perils of dull-hearing and of departing. This is the take away I see from this portion of Scripture:

To the weak - forsake your immaturity. Get on solid food.

To the wicked -to trifle with God's grace is to offer the final insult to God. To reject Jesus is the unpardonable sin.

To the wise - continue to grow.

Had these Hebrew Christians made a mistake in accepting Christ as the Messiah? Should they go back?

Choices . . . perhaps this little couplet applies:

The man who once most wisely said,
“Be sure you’re right, then go ahead,”
Might as well have added this, to wit:
“Be sure you’re wrong before you quit.”

When Jesus was on earth, His ministry was essentially that of an Apostle. He came to reveal the love of God to men. When He returns to earth again, He will reign as king, conquer all His foes and inaugurate a rule of righteousness. Today as High Priest He sits at God’s right hand and is our Advocate before the Father.

The writer of Hebrews has shown us that Jesus is the real priest, the rightful priest, and next week we’ll see Him as the royal priest.

Let’s pray.