

This summer we have been taking a look at the book of Hebrews, a book that doesn't seem to get as much attention as some of the others in the New Testament. It's a shame because it has so much to share with us. It was originally written to Jewish Christians who were tempted to return to Judaism either due to persecution from the government or from pressure by their own families who never accepted Jesus. The writer encourages them to stay the course, and he doesn't beat around the bush about it. He can be very direct. That might be another reason why this book isn't quite as popular as some of the others. But the writer is passionate in his explanation that the relationship that they can have with God through Jesus is better than what they could obtain through any other method. He doesn't want them to miss out.

Hebrews takes us through the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, and explains what's so good about it. It takes us on a Journey of Faith, and it presents Jesus to us as our guide on this journey. We've compared it with the Israelites escaping slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, and continuing their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

But, what if after they crossed the Red Sea, they refused to go one step further. *We accept that you saved us from the Egyptians, but we don't want to go any further. No, we like it here. We think we'll stay.*

Over the course of their journey through the wilderness with Moses ... and God, they learned about what it means to follow God, to see how much God cares about them, to be totally dependent on God, to understand what is expected from them, and to discover who God is. They wouldn't have learned any of that if they stayed camped on the eastern shore of the Red Sea and hadn't moved forward.

In our journey of life, we have the same opportunity on our journey of faith. With our Scripture passage for today, we're going to hear about how some of the descendants of those Israelites were willing to keep their tent by the Red Sea. And to be frank, there are a large percentage of people who call themselves Christians who are camping out there with them.

Today, our passage is from Hebrews 5:11-6:12, but I'm going to start several verses before at verse 7 to lend a little context. Hear the word of the Lord.

*5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him 10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek [in other words, a priest forever].*

*11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

*6:1 Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death [meaning useless rituals], and of faith in God, 2 instruction about cleansing rites [things associate with baptism], the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And God permitting, we will do so.*

*4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6 and who have fallen away [or if they fall away], to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

*9 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. 10 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. 11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

### **The word of Life.**

### **Thanks be to God!**

What is maturity? How can we measure it? We think ages like 18 and 21 make people adults, with a new level of maturity. However, is it possible for an adult to be immature? That's a rhetorical question because you'd have to be buried under a rock to miss the level of immaturity that we are seeing among adults these days. With the pressures of this last year and a half, it can seem like any hint of maturity has gone out the window. Of course, the truth is that this is always the case among humanity. What we're living in is what we notice the most, and we get nostalgic about the past and how it was so much better. This passage in Hebrews is a perfect example. He's talking about the same problem 2000 years ago. Sometimes we can consider these ancient writings and say, "That was so long ago. How can that be important to my life now?" So many things can change about people and the way we live our lives, but the human condition does not change. As a group, we resist maturity, but we can have so much more.

Think of infants that can only have milk, and if as they grew, we never gave them anything else. How would that work? Would they grow up to be healthy children? That's not what we do. We start to introduce them to other things, things they can chew on, things they can dig their newly emerging teeth into. Not too many will be ready for a big steak or spicy food in their earlier years. It might even be a struggle to get them beyond mac and cheese and chicken nuggets for a while, but we want them to grow and progress. In time, those foods that they really couldn't swallow or process as babies may become their favorites. A teenager's favorite food might be pizza, but they couldn't have eaten that as infants.

And yet in the church, especially the western church, often we have been satisfied with staying spiritual babies, never getting beyond the most basic thing. Do you believe in Jesus? Yes? Well, that's fantastic. You are now in the "saved club." While on the surface that is very much true, it's like going to an amusement park, fair, or carnival and never going beyond the front gate. Sure you were admitted. When you go home, you can say, "Yes, I've been to the fair," but you haven't experienced the greatest things about it.

The other issue is that when we don't go further inside and explore, learn, and mature, we can be easily drawn away by other things that sound good, may even sound *like* Christianity, but really isn't. One of the philosophies that is popular right now is Moral (or Moralistic) Therapeutic Deism. Basically, it says:

*Morally, if I do good things, I'm good. If I'm mostly good, I will go to heaven when I die. However, each person really defines "good" for him or herself. The primary purpose of life is to be happy. If it makes me happy, then it's good. There is a higher power or god, but it doesn't get too involved in our lives and doesn't have too many expectations for us.*

That sounds good, right? I mean it sounds good to me. Some of you may even be saying to yourself, "Yeah, that's what I believe." In some ways, it's close to the practice of Christianity, but in others it misses the mark, by a huge margin. Probably the first, and it is very clear in the Bible, is that God is *very* involved in our lives and really cares what happens to us. Otherwise, there would be no Jesus. If there were no expectations of what God considers good or moral, and if we were capable of doing it ourselves, there would be no *need* for Jesus.

So, we need to know our Christian A-B-C's. How do we even learn about them? It starts with our enlightenment. We are shown the light, so to speak, to see and recognize the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. How much we need God in this crazy world. Then, we "taste the goodness of the word of God," as it says in verse four. We become acquainted with and have insight into the Bible and its message about Jesus. It teaches us what is good, sometimes by showing us the consequences of going our own way. It becomes the solid food we need that we didn't even realize that we were hungry for.

Verses one and two of chapter six give us the A-B-C's. First, is repenting, turning away from, past works that are meaningless. For the original audience of Hebrews, Jewish Christians, this meant leaving the temple sacrifices behind. Today, it might mean leaving behind horoscopes or tarot cards, or the worship of the idols of modernity like money, TV, other forms of technology, people, or celebrities. (Some of these can be important and valuable tools, but shouldn't be worshiped.) Next, is turning toward God, not as some indeterminate higher power with no interest in you or your life, but as one who loves and cares for you and wants to save you from self-destructive impulses and behaviors. Then, there is living in the community of faith that encourages and lifts each other up. Finally, there is the resurrection and yes, the justice of God in the new life, the new creation.

You might be nodding your head, or you might be saying, "This is the basics?!" If the second is the case, we have failed you. Too often the Christian church especially in the west has been more concerned with being the church of "nice" rather than the church of God. Sadly, that's how we wind up with things like Moral Therapeutic Deism and worse from people who still think of themselves as Christian.

That's why we call this life of faith a journey because even if you learn the A-B-C's, how can you stop there? It's just the beginning of exploring the new life we can have with God.

But then there's the disturbing part of today's passage, saying that those who *have* learned all that, who leave the faith, can't come back. Regrettably, these verses have been twisted into some very bad teaching that is on the other end of the spectrum from Moral Therapeutic Deism. What it really means is that if someone was a truly committed Christian with a thorough knowledge of the A-B-C's and beyond, then renounced the faith, condemned the man Jesus as a common criminal who died as any other man. How could *that* person come back? Why would they want to?

But let me tell you a story ... about myself. I *thought* I was a Christian long before I *actually* was one. I did all the things that I thought Christians did. I mean things that looked like loving your neighbor, celebrating the appropriate holidays, trying to understand, trying to be good.

And yet, in my heart of hearts, I was still sitting on the fence. I would leave and come back. There were things that I didn't understand, and I didn't like, especially in the history of the church. You know, things like the Spanish Inquisition and the systemized racism of the Age of Exploration. (I didn't even realize how much I *should have* hated it until just a few years ago.)

I hadn't learned that we're all flawed and broken creatures ... even Christians ... maybe especially Christians. When you give flawed people unchecked power, they ... we ... are going to do terrible things, even in the church. That doesn't give any of them a pass. The mass graves found at Native American or First Nation boarding schools that were run by so-called Christians that have been in the news lately, just as one example ... It sickens me.

But, there is a more excellent way. The true way of Jesus Christ, that acknowledges our human frailties, even our arrogance, and helps us to live the way that God intended for us ... if we will learn about it, if we will follow it. If we will accept in ourselves that we are broken and can't do it on our own. Once you fully accept that, how can you go back?

It's like the difference between clean and filthy water. If you are literally dying of thirst, and dirty water is your only option, or you never learned about the health dangers of dirty water, you will drink it. You may even be grateful for it. But once you have clean fresh water, nothing else comes close. If you are offered both? I don't know about you, but I'm taking the fresh water. I'm not going to be drawn away by something else.

As Hebrews says, there is hope, we can progress from milk to the greatest cuisine God has to offer. What we can do is get a firm grip on our A-B-C's, learn about the hope and joy that we receive through Christ Jesus. There are different ways we can do it. Last week, our Adult Sunday School class put out a survey of what you might like to learn about. Sunday School not work for you, for whatever reason, let me know. Have questions? Come ask me. What to do an independent study and looking for direction? I would love to help. People learn in all kinds of ways. There's no one way that works best for everyone. This past year, our normal patterns got disrupted. It's a perfect time to try out new things. It's a perfect time to explore all that the fair, the Kingdom of God has to offer.

When we understand what Christ has done and is doing for us, the new life we have through him, the love that God has for us, the kingdom to which we belong, we will realize what salvation and redemption really means,

and we will be so grateful. We will want that for others. We will want them to understand and see what God has for them.

Then we can go beyond simply being learners and become teachers of others. We will be able to share with them the peace of God that passes all understanding. Many of you may be familiar with Rev Rick Warren and his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. He and I don't see eye-to-eye on everything, but he tells a wonderful story about his dad.

His dad was also a pastor, but he had a passion about building churches, houses of worship. He went around the world building over 150 in his lifetime. One of the last ones was in Siberia if you can imagine it. He wanted as many people as possible to learn about God's love. Some of his last words to his son was, "Reach one more for Jesus."

When you really understand the love and greatness of God, you want to learn more about God. You want others to experience it too. You don't want to go back. You want to move forward on this great Journey of Faith with Jesus.

Amen!