

Maturing in our faith

... before it's *too late!*

Hebrews 4:14-6:12

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The Pilgrim's Progress is a book about the journey of faith. A book about following Jesus - from this life all the way to the next. The main character is named, appropriately, *Christian*. And as he travels on his journey to the Celestial City (*heaven*), Christian encounters a number of people along the way. People with names such as *Obstinate*, and *Pliable*, and *Mr. Worldly Wiseman*. At one point, he arrives at The House of the *Interpreter*, where *Interpreter* takes him by the hand and leads him into a very dark room, where a man in an iron cage sat. Author John Bunyan describes the scene.

Now this man seemed very sad - he sat with his eyes looking down to the ground, his hands folded together, and he sighed as if his heart were breaking. Christian asked, "What does this mean?" The Interpreter then told Christian to inquire of the man himself. So Christian asked the man, "What are you?"

The man answered, "I am now, what I once was not." Christian responded, "What were you once?" The man said ... I once was, as I thought, headed for the Celestial City; and had joy at the thought that I would get there." Christian further questioned, "Well - what are you now?" The man responded, "I am now a man of despair, and am locked up in despair - as in this iron cage. I cannot get out. O, I cannot escape!"

Christian then inquired, "But how did you get into this miserable condition?" The man in the iron cage replied, "I stopped watching and being serious. I let my worldly lusts reign. I sinned against the light of God's Word, and His goodness. I tempted the devil - and he has come to me! I have provoked God to anger—and He has left me! I have so hardened my heart, that I cannot repent!"

Then Christian asked the Interpreter, "Is there no hope for such a man as this?" Then the Interpreter said to the man in the iron cage, "Is there no hope - must you always be kept in this iron cage of despair?" The man replied, "No, there is no hope at all." ... Then the Interpreter said to Christian, "Let this man's misery be remembered by you - and be an everlasting warning to you!"

That's what the author of Hebrews is doing. Warning us! Warning us about not growing in our faith, but instead, slowly, over time, drifting away from Jesus. Sometimes so far, to the point that we're not able to ever come back again. And so, back in chapter 4, verse 4, he says what? "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us what? **Hold fast** our confession.*" Hold on to Jesus! Don't ever turn back. Never let go of Him!

If you mess up - *when* you mess up - He understands. He knows what it's like to be tempted. He knows how hard it is. He understands. He knows you're going to mess up and sin. He knows you're going to drift from Him. But when you do, don't give up. Don't stay away. But turn back to Him. The longer you wait, they harder it gets; the harder your heart grows. If you wait too long, like the man trapped in the iron cage, it may be too late for you. You might find yourself locked in despair forever!

5:15-16 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

What's all this talk about a high priest? What's a high priest? Who needs a high priest? Because you can't do it on your own. You can't face God on your own. You'll never make it. You don't stand a chance! He's holy, perfect. You're not. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you'll never be good enough to face Him. It's hopeless. *You're* hopeless.

What do you need? Not to try harder. That won't do you any good. You need someone. You need a mediator. You need someone to go to God on your behalf. To plead your case, your hopeless cause. You need someone to step in for you. To intercede. To help. As Hebrews 5:1 says, *For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.* For, without the shedding of blood, there's no forgiveness. There's no hope.

2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. 3 Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. 4 And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, [Ps 110] "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; 6 as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

We can't face God. We need a high priest to go before Him on our behalf. But what's *wrong* with the priests we already have; the ones who served in the temple in Jerusalem? They're *NOT GOOD ENOUGH*. They can't face God themselves, let alone, for you. Also, whatever they do for you, it's *NEVER ENOUGH*. They can't keep up with all your sinning. They can't possibly offer enough sacrifices. They need to be offered again and again and again and again. It's never enough, is it? And high priests *DON'T LAST*. They go and do what? They die on you. And then, you need what? Another and another and another.

You can't face God yourself in your sin and live. You don't stand a chance. You need a mediator, an advocate, a helper. Someone's to face God on your behalf; in your place. But who? Who's *GOOD* enough, who doesn't need to offer sacrifice for himself first? And when is enough, *ENOUGH*? Is there someone who can ever offer enough sacrifice to pay for all of your sins? And is there one who will *LAST*; who will be around when you need him, who won't go and die on you?

Thank God, there is One, your Mediator, your High Priest, Jesus, God's only Son! *5:7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect [complete – going through with it, all the way to the cross], he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 10 being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

When you stand before God on judgment day, who's going to stand with you? Who's going to stand before God on your behalf? *Jesus* is the only hope you have. One who's *been tempted as you are, yet without sin*. *Draw near with confidence then, to the throne of grace*. He's the only one who can help you! And the author is saying what? "And you're tempted to what! To go *back!* Back to a mediator who's not good enough himself? Back to one who can never do enough? Back to one who's going to die and not be around for you?"

The Lenten season reminds us that we can't make it on our own, and points us to our only hope, Jesus Christ ... *5:10 being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek*. A never-ending Mediator. We'll hear more about this in chapter 7.

5:11 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.

*6:1 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.*

Are you dull of hearing? Am I dull of hearing? After all these years, are we just still babes in Christ? Instead of teaching others, do we still need to be taught the basics of following Jesus all over again? Is that all the farther we've gotten? How do you know? What's this mature faith that is spoken of here? What does such faith look like? The Apostle Paul dealt with this in one of the more advanced churches, or so they thought.

1 Corinthians 13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing....

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful ... 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things ... 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ... 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

That's what the author of Hebrews is talking about. That's what this *righteousness*, this righteous kind of living looks like. That's what a discerning faith looks like. That's what mature faith looks like. It's not just talk. It's not just knowing stuff; knowing the facts of Christianity. It's not just memorizing some Bible verses. It's not just intellectual; something in your head; ideas that you talk about. Rather, a mature faith is what? It's *lived out* in daily life. It's practiced, day in and day out, in all circumstances and situations. You can see it. You can taste it. That's why Jesus says what in John 15? If you're attached to Him, you'll produce much fruit; good fruit! A mature faith is lived out daily, in service to others, in sacrifice for others, in laying down its life for others. It's end game is what? Love. Love of God and love of neighbor. A faith that reflects the life of its Master. *Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to **maturity** ... And this we will do if God permits.*

And then, a WARNING! A warning for those who *don't* grow in their faith. Who never mature. Who never live out their faith, their trust in the Lord. But instead, they do what? They shrink back. A warning to those on the road to the Celestial City, who are distracted on their way. John 15 ... *Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit ... If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned!*

6:4 *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.* It's one thing for an unbeliever to show contempt for the Lord. She doesn't know any better. It's a whole other thing for a believer to do so! It's like being Judas all over again!

Jesus gives the same warning to the scribes in Matthew 12:31 ... *Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*" 1 John 5:16 refers to a sin that "leads to death".

6:7 *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.* James 2:17 ... *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, puts it this way - as a senior devil is teaching his apprentice what to do about his "patient", who's become a Christian. "The great thing is to prevent his **doing** anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but *act*. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. ... The more often he feels without *acting*, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel." (*Letter 13*)

Then the Interpreter said to the man in the iron cage, "Is there no hope - must you always be kept in this iron cage of despair?" The man replied, "No, there is no hope at all." Interpreter responded, "Why should you have no hope? Jesus is full of mercy."

The man in the iron cage answered, "I have crucified Him afresh; I have scorned His person; I have despised His righteousness; I have counted His blood as an unholy thing; I have insulted and disdained the Spirit of grace. Therefore, I have shut myself out of all the promises, and there now remains nothing for me but threatenings, dreadful threatenings, fearful threatenings of certain judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour me as God's adversary!"

Interpreter then asked, "For what did you bring yourself into this dreadful condition?" The man responded, "For the lusts, pleasures, and profits of this world - in the enjoyment of which, I promised myself much delight. But now, every one of those things bite me, and gnaw me like a burning worm!"

Interpreter then questioned, "But can't you now repent and turn back to God?" The man answered, "God has denied repentance to me. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe. Yes, He Himself has shut me up in this iron cage! Not all the men in the world can free me. O eternity! eternity! How shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in eternity!"

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author is warning followers of Jesus who are in danger of drifting away, who are being tempted to turn away from Him, encouraging them to **hold on**, to not give up, to repent and turn back, before it's too late, before it becomes impossible to do so, and they're locked in despair for all eternity!

If *your* faith is growing weak, if there's little fruit, if you've been neglecting God's Word and His great salvation; His appointed Mediator, your only Hope when facing Him on judgment day, if you're letting go of Jesus, and drifting away; following something else, turn back *now*, before it's too late! If *today* you hear His voice, don't harden your heart, but open His Word, which is calling you back, and *draw near to the throne of grace*, where you will find mercy and find grace, while you still can!

*6:9 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.*

A strong warning is given to these followers of Jesus of what could happen to them if they turn away from Jesus. Yet, the author has hope. Hope from what he sees – good fruit of faith, an abiding in Jesus. God has noticed. It hasn't skipped His attention. Their work for the gospel. Signs of maturity in their faith, shining through in loving service to others. Not just looking to their own interests, but to the interest of others. A reflection of *Jesus* shining through!

*4:11 Let us therefore **strive to enter that rest**, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit.* The Word of God. This powerful, living, active, penetrating presence of God, is what keeps our faith in Christ alive and brings it to maturity.

It's been said that the book *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been printed more times than any other book in history - except for one - the Book it's based on. God's book, about *His* journey to find us and bring us back home to Himself. God's book about the journey of faith. A book about following Jesus, holding on to Him and never letting go, from this life, all the way to the next.