

A Better Assurance

Hebrews 5:11–6:12

A few years ago, we bought a swing set for our backyard from Walmart. Cheapest thing we could find. It took about a couple of hours to put together. And when our little girls would play on the swing set, it worked great. They spent hours on that thing, swinging back and forth to their heart's content. But when Joshua, or some of the neighbor boys who were a little older and a little heavier, would swing on it, the whole thing would move up and down, with the legs lifting off the ground as they went back and forth. We had anchored it with those little ten-inch metal spikes that came with the set. But those accomplished nothing. Without drilling down deeper to anchor it more firmly to the ground, that swing set wasn't capable of handling a heavier load.

The same thing can happen in our walk with Christ. There are some loads in life—some challenges or questions—that are relatively easy to carry with just a little faith or a little knowledge of Jesus. When I became a Christian at the end of high school, I had plenty of questions about God and life and faith. Is making out with my girlfriend bad? Am I supposed to go to church every Sunday? What does the Bible say about heaven and hell? How can I be sure that God loves me even when I mess up? And with each of those questions there were people—friends, youth group leaders, and adults—who would open the Bible and help me see the relatively clear and simple answers from Scripture. I didn't know much about Jesus, but I was sure that he loved me, and I could understand what he said about these things.

But then there are some *big* questions, and some *big* trials that find us in life, where those simple answers just don't seem to hold the weight. You can feel your faith being uprooted from the ground as you try to carry them. Trials like unanswered prayer, suffering, loss, feeling abandoned by God even when we're trying to do the right thing. Or questions like, how can Christ be the only way of salvation when so many in the world and throughout history have never heard of him? Or how can a certain behavior be bad when the people who want to do it are so nice, and just want to do it out of love? And all of a sudden those simple answers that made so much sense before, leave us unsettled, unsure, vulnerable.

There comes a time in our faith when we need to be willing and able to drill down deeper in order to hold on longer. To move on from simply repeating the basics of the Christian faith, to a more mature doctrine and relationship, a deeper understanding of who Christ is and what he has done—one that's able to bear the weight of the questions or challenges we face and offers a better assurance. That's what the author wants to do in our passage in explaining the relationship between Jesus and Melchizedek.

The church he was writing to in the first century was facing a significant challenge—the pressure to go back to Judaism, back to the old covenant, as though Jesus had never come, never died, never fulfilled God's promises. And so author's goal has been to convince his readers that Jesus is

better than the old covenant in every way—better than the angels who delivered it, than Moses who mediated it, and, as we saw a couple weeks ago, better than Aaron the high priest who applied it.

But the pressure to go back to Judaism raised some pretty big questions about the relationship between Jesus and Israel’s old covenant. Questions that their persecutors no doubt exploited, and therefore required a deeper grasp of Christ in order to hold on tighter with full assurance. For instance, how can Jesus be a priest if he’s not descended from Aaron, or Levi? Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. There’s no such thing as priests from Judah. Explain that one if Jesus is better.

And that’s exactly what the author wants to do—he wants to explain how Jesus is able to be a better and lasting high priest because he comes from a more ancient and abiding order of priesthood—the order of Melchizedek. He introduced this idea in the previous passage we looked at: Jesus, “being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (5:10). And then he begins our passage, “*About this* we have much to say . . .” (5:11). He wants to elaborate, to drill deeper.

But then he hesitates. He wants to drill deeper, to strengthen their grip on Christ, but there’s an obstacle in the way. A barrier he feels that he needs to deal with first, before he can elaborate on Melchizedek to strengthen them (which he will eventually do in ch. 7).

So what is that obstacle—the barrier to a firm grip on Christ? What’s the danger of a faulty grip? And what’s the benefit from grasping Christ more firmly, from drilling down deeper? That’s what our passage invites us to consider this morning. First . . .

The Barrier to a Firm Grip on Christ (5:11–6:3)

What is the obstacle that keeps the author from drilling deeper into who Christ is with respect to Melchizedek? Verse 11 again: “About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”

It’s tempting to think that he doesn’t go there because the subject matter is really hard. It’s hard to understand because it’s such a complex idea. But that’s not what he says. The readers’ inability to go there is not an intellectual problem—this doctrine is just too elevated—it’s a *spiritual* problem. They have become *dull of hearing*.

What does that mean? The word translated “dull” here in 5:10 is the same word translated “sluggish” in 6:12. So he brings up the problem at the beginning and end of our passage. It’s the picture of laziness. Being disengaged, uninterested, unmoved by the urgency or importance of the situation. Spiritually lazy.

And because of this spiritual laziness, their spiritual growth has been stunted. He continues in v. 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. . . .”

Several of you here are elementary teachers. You expect in elementary school, especially the early grades, that students will have to focus on the basics—their ABCs, learning to read, learning their numbers, adding and subtracting. You don’t expect when a student starts middle school to have to go back over the alphabet with them again. In fact, you expect that if you were

to put them in a room full of Kindergartners, that they would be able to teach the younger students their ABCs.

That's what the author expects of the church he's writing to. That at this stage in their spiritual growth, they should be able to move beyond some of the basic or foundational truths of the faith—not leave them behind, but build on them. But instead he finds himself going back over the alphabet with middle schoolers at the beginning of each school year, when he should be teaching them algebra.

What are some of those basic doctrines they are stuck on? He gives some examples in ch. 6:1-2: “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God”—what’s involved in beginning a relationship with Christ—turning away from sin, from works that are done out of spiritual death or that lead to spiritual death, and turning in faith toward God—specifically faith in Jesus Christ. “Instruction about washings, the laying on of hands”—this is most likely helping new believers sort out some of the ceremonial aspects of the faith—the transition from various Jewish ceremonial washings that are ultimately fulfilled and replaced by baptism in Christ,¹ and the laying on of hands which is used in all sorts of ways (e.g. blessing, commissioning, healing).² And “the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment”—instructions about what’s to come—the hope of the resurrection for those who belong to Christ, and the terror of eternal judgment for those who don’t.

Those are some critical, foundational elements of the Christian faith. But to survive the storm they’re in, they’re going to need to go deeper. To move on from simply repeating the basics, to more mature doctrine and relationship, a deeper understanding of who Christ is and what he has done. Or as he illustrates it at the end of ch. 5, they need to *move on from milk and start adding some solids to their diet*, if they’re going to finish well in the faith.

‘I want to help you feast on the beauty and assurance of Christ as a priest in the order of Melchizedek, but’ “. . . You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child” (5:12-13). Because of their spiritual sluggishness, they don’t know how to apply God’s Word to their situation in order to be faithful and persevere. “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (5:14). Those who are not lazy in their hearing, but focused and disciplined. Those who don’t tune out when someone’s teaching the Word, because they’ve already got this, only to be surprised when life hands them a test. But those who are willing and able to drill deeper into their knowledge and relationship with Christ, that they might be able to discern the difference between good and evil as they follow God and make their way through life.

We see this distinction between the two crowds who surrounded Jesus at the beginning and end of his last week on earth (the week we celebrating during Holy Week)—the crowd that accompanied him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the crowd that surrounded him at his trial before Pontius Pilate on Good Friday.

Sometimes we think that these were the same crowd, the same people acting in two different ways, illustrating how fickle the human heart is. And I’ve thought that in the past. But if you

¹ See P. E. Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 199-202.

² See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTCF; Nashville: B&H), 176-177.

look more closely at the details of the stories, that's almost certainly not the case. Luke 19 tells us that "as he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of *his disciples* began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen" (Lk. 19:37). Matthew 21 makes a distinction between "the crowds that went before him and that followed him . . . shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'"—mostly pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for Passover, and the people of the city who were "stirred up, saying, 'Who is this?'" (Matt. 21:9-11). John further clarifies that those who took palm branches and went out to meet Jesus and escort him into the city as God's king did so because they had heard the testimony of those who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead (Jn. 12:12-19). In contrast to this first crowd, the crowd gathered on Good Friday appears to have been mostly residents of Jerusalem, stirred up by the chief priests' and Jewish leaders' false accusations against Jesus (Mt. 27:20; Mk. 15:11; Lk. 23:1-25; Jn. 19:1-16).³

And so you have two crowds responding to the same person in two different ways. One crowd crying out in worship, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 21:9). And another crowd hurling insults, crying out, "Crucify, crucify him!" (Lk. 23:21). So what's the difference? How do you end up with such drastically different reactions to the same person? After seeing the same miracles or hearing the same teaching from him?

The difference was their grasp of Christ, their understanding of *who Jesus is*. One crowd saw Jesus as the king. They couldn't believe that God was finally answering their prayers and fulfilling his promises. Now some of their expectations about how Jesus would establish his kingdom were likely off; many of them were looking for a bloody revolt, not a bloody Savior. But they recognized and worshiped Jesus as king, and he didn't silence their praise (cf. Lk. 19:39). But the other crowd saw him as a traitor, an imposter. They couldn't believe that God would answer their prayers or fulfill his promises through someone like this.

And here's the thing: their failure to recognize Jesus wasn't an intellectual problem. It's not as though the disciples and pilgrims had a better education or higher IQ, and so they were able to figure out what the scribes and Pharisees couldn't. The Jewish leaders' inability to recognize Jesus for who he is, and treat him as he truly deserves, was a *spiritual* problem. They thought they had God nailed down. They were the keepers of the covenant, the protectors of the kingdom. And so they didn't pay attention in class, when Jesus was preaching or doing great works. Their hearts were dull and sluggish. And as a result, the good they Jesus him do was condemned as evil, and the good they thought they were doing (as if to defend God's kingdom) was the greatest evil in human history—crucifying the Son of God. They were so sure, and so wrong.

And the stakes here are incredibly high. It's not just failing a math quiz; this is life and death. Those who were so sure they were defending God's kingdom ended up finding themselves *eternally outside* that kingdom. And the author of Hebrews registers the same warning in our passage. He calls for them in 6:1 to "leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity" because of the utter danger of a faulty grip on Christ, vv. 4-8.

³ See the helpful comments by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Justin Taylor, "[Five Errors to Drop from your Easter Sermon](#)," *Christianity Today*, Apr. 15, 2014.

The Danger of a Faulty Grip on Christ (6:4-8)

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance 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 if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (6:4-6)

These are some hard verses. Not just because they're a heavy, heavy warning. But also because they raise a lot of questions. Is he saying that it's possible to lose our salvation? And if we lose it, never get it back? Is he saying there's a level at which my sin can get so bad that I'm just finally out of luck? No more second chances?

Those are big questions. And whenever we wrestle with big questions like this, we have to take them in light of the whole counsel of Scripture. And we have to remember what they're doing *here*—what's the purpose of saying this *in this passage*?

In terms of the whole counsel of Scripture, we know from places like Ephesians 1 that salvation is God's sovereign work. "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works *all things* according to the counsel of *his* will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of *his* glory" (Eph. 1:11-12). Salvation is God's work, not ours. As Ephesians 2 puts it, we are saved by *grace*, not by works (2:8-10). And those whom God saves, according to ch. 4, he seals until the end. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, *by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*" (4:30).

We also know from Philippians 1, that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6). And from Matthew 24:24 that it's impossible for false teachers to lead God's elect to fall away. Because according to 1 Peter 1, it's by *God's* power that we are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:3-5). And therefore, as John 10 assures us, Jesus gives his sheep *eternal* life, and they will *never* perish, and *no one* will snatch them out of his hand (Jn. 10:27-28).⁴

So can a genuinely born-again believer in Jesus Christ lose their salvation? According to the whole counsel of Scripture, the answer is no. You didn't earn your salvation, you can't unearn it. We are accepted by God on the basis of our union with Christ who lived for our righteousness and died for our sins and rose again for us; the only way God can eternally reject us, is if he were to eternally reject his Son. And that's not going to happen. So one of the great assurances that comes from holding fast to Christ, is finding out that it's actually him who is holding us.

So what are these verses doing here then? What *are* they saying, and how do they contribute to the bigger argument he's making about the importance of drilling deeper in Christ in order to hold on longer, and the problem of sluggish faith?

Obviously, they are here as a warning. A warning *to* those who are content in their spiritual laziness *about* the apostate—those who claim the Christian faith and then reject it. So the

⁴ For a helpful summary (which influenced this discussion), see R Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 159-160.

warning is *about the apostate*—those who have had an experience of Christianity, an experience of God, but who ultimately forsake the faith. It’s not just talking about your sins adding up until you hit some point of no return; it’s talking about those who having tasted the gospel of Jesus ultimately reject it. As one author explains, “Such persons, of their own choice, withdraw themselves from the sphere of redemption and take their stand with those who *crucify the Son of God* and *hold him up to contempt*. They now show themselves in their true colors. They join the ranks of the mob that yells ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ and that wickedly derides and insults the suffering Savior.”⁵ As he illustrates in vv. 7-8, the falseness of their faith is revealed by their lack of fruit. When the gifts of God don’t produce what they ought, that’s evidence that God’s not really there. Their faith is in something else.

So this is a warning about the apostate—those who fall away from Christ and show themselves to be false. There is no opportunity for repentance after that. But this warning *about* the apostate is given *to* the spiritually lazy. Those who are content in their sluggishness, stuck in a simplistic understanding of the faith. Who assume they’ve got God figured out, that there’s no need to learn anything new or to pay careful attention; doctrine’s boring anyway. Those who think nothing of hopping onto the swing set with all of the weight of their challenges and questions, without any care for whether it’s securely anchored to the ground. Those who are therefore at risk of presuming upon God’s grace and being unstable and uprooted in their faith.

So we need to let the weight of this warning stand, as a caution when we are tempted to turn away, and as a reminder of the urgency of drilling down deeper in our doctrine of Christ. But for those who truly do belong to Jesus, we need to hear not just the warning that keeps us holding fast to Christ, but also the assurance that comes from being held fast by Christ. And that’s what the author gives us in vv. 9-12.

The Benefit of Grasping Christ More Firmly (6:9-12)

“Though we speak in this way”—in this strong, urgent warning—“yet in *your* case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation” (6:9)—not to apostasy or condemnation.

He issues this warning because of the dullness of their faith, but that warning is *not* a verdict. They’re lazy, but they’re not lost. And he wants to reassure them of that. And the basis of that assurance is that there’s actually evidence of their faith. The rain that has fallen on this church has borne good fruit, and God will not overlook that. He sees their work and the love that they’ve shown for his name in serving the saints, as they still do (6:10). They should be encouraged by that fruit.

But they should also be just as eager to deepen their faith and understanding of Christ—to drill deeper in doctrine and relationship—as they are to express that faith in love and service (6:11). You’re doing a great job loving one another, serving one another, and God sees that. But you need to do just as good at moving on to mature doctrine of Christ, so that you can enjoy the better assurance we have in him. “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” (6:12).

⁵ P. E. Hughes, 218. See also Schreiner, 187.

That you may be equipped to finish well, however heavy the challenge or burden. Sometimes we need to drill deeper in Christ to be able to hold on tighter and longer.

And this really is a call to caring about *doctrine*. I get it that sometimes doctrine can be boring in the way that it's taught. Or that people can spend so much time learning information or arguing about who's right, and so little time actually loving and serving their neighbors.

But the two are not mutually exclusive. And the reality is, you're not going to love well for very long with a shallow understanding of Christ. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" is good milk for baby Christians, but it will not keep us from thinking God has abandoned us in our suffering, or slipping into the prosperity gospel, or turning Jesus into a social justice warrior for the cause of the day. Just as the early church needed to be able to go deeper in their doctrine of Christ to resist the temptation of reverting to Judaism, so we need to be willing and able to go deeper to stand against the false teaching and false promises that surround us today. It is possible to be solid in our love and service, but sloppy in our doctrine and faith. But that kind of sluggishness will not help us finish well.

So this a call to care about doctrine, to become skilled in the Word—knowing it and applying it. It's also therefore a call to *discipleship*. To teaching one another the Word, and helping each other grow in our relationship with Jesus.

If the only time we open the Word together is when we're gathered in this room on Sunday morning, then we shouldn't be surprised if our spiritual growth is a little stunted. It's like trying to live on one meal a week. Now hopefully many of us are feeding on the Word on our own during the week, and that's crucial. But we need to feed on the Word *together*. Because it's reading Scripture in community that we learn how to read and understand it, how to apply and obey it, how to wrestle with hard questions and learn how to follow Christ in a sometimes hostile world. To be a disciple of Christ is to be a *learner*—that's what the word means. And so are we learning together? Maybe in a home group or a Bible study, or just sitting down with someone else who's a little further along in their faith, someone I can really learn from. And someone else who's maybe a little younger in their faith, someone I can invest in to help learn and grow. This is a call to discipleship—deepening our knowledge of and relationship with Christ together.

And it's ultimately a call to *keep our eyes and our faith fixed on Jesus*. He offers a better assurance of salvation. Better than the old covenant, better than anything in this world, and better than anything we can try to do for God. All of our works will fall short, but Christ is a great high priest who has secured for us an eternal redemption. "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25).

So may we not be sluggish or lazy in our faith. But may we be just as eager to drill down deeper into the beauty and mysteries of Christ, as we are to share his love with others. May we be willing and able to drill deeper to hold on tighter with full assurance of hope till the end. Because even as we hold fast to Christ, it's really him who holds us fast to the end.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. When someone starts talking about doctrine, or getting into details about doctrine, are you the kind of person who wakes up and gets excited, or the kind who falls asleep and tunes out? Why do you think you respond the way you do?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. In terms of context, what did the author discuss in the previous passage that helps us understand what he's talking about now?
3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
4. How does the author summarize the problem he is trying to address?
5. What danger does the author discuss in this passage?
6. In light of the problem he has raised and the danger at stake, what does the author want this church to do?
7. What comfort does the author offer in vv. 9-11? How does that relate to the warning or danger he described earlier?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. Where do you find yourself most prone to sluggishness or laziness in your faith?
9. What do you see as the major challenges in our day that might cause a lazy church or a lazy Christian to be tripped up or uprooted in their faith?
10. What about Jesus Christ do we need to understand better or explore more deeply in order to strengthen our faith in the world today?
11. What are some ways to deepen our grasp of Christ together? What does that specifically look like for you?