

Go On to Maturity
Hebrews 5:11-6:3
December 31, 2023

Introduction

What a passage for the last day of the year. Some (many?) of you have been charting out a few resolutions for 2024. Whatever your thoughts are about that form of goal-setting, none of us will get very far in life without some form of resolve. Even children learn this virtue from the simplest of stories. Remember, “I think I can—I think I can—I think I can”? While pure determination will not overcome humanity’s shortcomings,¹ we do see in Hebrews 5-6 a kind of resolve that is appropriate for all of Christ’s followers.² A kind of resolve that is far more lasting than Google’s 65 Best for 2024. A kind of resolve that acknowledges our weakness and determines to rest in the strength of another.

The writer of Hebrews is urging his readers to resolve toward spiritual maturity. There is the central statement of this passage, 6:1: **Let us press on to maturity.**

Think of maturity as being “complete” as a Christian: the development of your character and your lifestyle as a Christian are “filled in”,³ sometimes in Scripture we read of it as a sort of perfection, as in James 1:4, “let endurance have its *perfect* result, so that you may be *perfect* and complete, lacking in nothing.” We’re not thinking, however, of that final perfection, as even Paul disclaimed in Philippians 3:12, “not that I am already *perfect*...” but of a maturity of understanding and commitment, that is possible here and now, that equips Christians to hold fast to Christ all the way to that final perfection for which we are waiting. Maturity recognizes that both spiritual qualification and also spiritual confidence come from Christ’s high-priestly work.⁴ Maturity and endurance with Christ go hand in hand.

Apparently, these Jewish Christians were lacking spiritual maturity. And so their strength of endurance was also weak, which is a dangerous position to be in. So dangerous that the writer resorts to very strong words.

The High Priesthood of Christ is a doctrine that keeps the fire of perseverance burning hot. The writer wants to add fuel to that fire by way of Christ’s relationship to the Old Testament character, Melchizedek. He has **much to say** about it all, but at the moment he feels hindered from elaborating. Before he adds the fuel, he blows on the coals in order to grab readers attention.

And get attention he does. What a rebuke! **We have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.** He finds this subject hard to explain, not because the topic of priesthood is too complex, nor because he as a teacher finds the concept too difficult. Like a wise teacher, he has considered his audience. It is hard to explain because there is a problem in the hearers—they have become **dull of hearing**; in 6:12, the same word is translated **sluggish**. It’s as if their spiritual ears have grown numb and insensitive; they are slow to respond to truth. If the writer unfolds Christ’s high priesthood at this point, the readers will not gain the full benefit, because they have become lazy responders.

His warnings have been echoing since 2:1, **we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.** Then a bit clearer in 3:12, **Take care brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from**

¹ See Sliger, “In the Days of His Flesh: The Son’s Perfection.”

² So I considered the title, “A Resolution for Every New Year”

³ Ferguson, *Maturity*, 3, 7.

⁴ Attridge and Koester, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 162–63.

the living God. Then three times, **Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.**⁵ Again in 4:11, **let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall... Finally, you have become dull of hearing.**

Paul accused the Jews of having zeal with a lack of knowledge.⁶ But the writer of Hebrews is pointing out that these Jewish Christians have a knowledge without the attendant zeal. This dullness has stunted their advancement and withered their perseverance. The Hebrews have become distracted and apathetic; their hearts are on the verge of hardness; they are at risk of falling away from Christ, because dullness is not static. It moves one direction or the other. Readers will either advance because of these warnings, or they will fall away. In time, one will prove the genuineness of their conversion, the other the falsehood.⁷

Here's the picture, if I might paraphrase, the writer says: "I want to tell you meaty things that will strengthen your faith, that will increase your hope, that will encourage your endurance. But you are not ready for it. It will hardly encourage you because you've gone backwards. So, move on to maturity. These lessons will strengthen your perseverance!"

By way of rebuke and then encouragement, we see 3 attitudes that mark a resolve toward spiritual maturity: dissatisfaction, determination, dependence. May these principles prevent the Hebrew problem in all of us.

Dissatisfaction with Immaturity (5:12-14)

The main thrust of the rebuke is to identify readers in this immature status. He aims not to mock his readers, but to very clearly point out their shameful condition. They have gone backwards. At one time, they heard the gospel, trusted Christ, and even suffered for the sake of their faith.⁸ But the pain of suffering is not always due to its depth, but rather oftentimes to its length. Fatigue leads to fear; fear gives way to disobedience; disobedience sinks to unbelief.

Finding endurance difficult, they seem to have regressed. Instead of advancing, they have taken an about-face.⁹ They are acting like spiritual children. The writer hopes that by pointing out their condition, he will goad the Hebrews back to a place of adulthood.

He exposes their regression with three different metaphors.¹⁰ 5:12 speaks in educational terms. By this time, they **ought to be teachers**, but what they need instead is a lesson in the basics of God's Word. Every Christian should advance to a point of helping others along. Maturity means being able to rehearse foundational truths of Scripture, especially the gospel, independently and confidently,¹¹ so that others might benefit. The Hebrews, however, went backwards. They needed to be taught again, as if unlearned children, the basic building blocks of God's Word.

The next metaphor is developmental—they need a **milk** kind of teaching, **not solid food** kind of teaching. We know this picture. Milk is for those who cannot yet handle solid food. If you deliver a cheeseburger to your infant when she wakes up at 2am, at best you have a snack while you listen to her cry. Maturity means that milk has prepared your digestive system for the more complex food. The Hebrews should have grown up enough to digest steak, but they have turned back. They need the spiritual nourishment of the undeveloped, a very simple diet of basic truth.

⁵ Hebrews 3:7-8; 4:3; 4:7

⁶ Romans 10:2

⁷ And so I also considered the title, "Spiritual Counsel for Those on the Brink"

⁸ Hebrews 10:32-33

⁹ Notice the negative repetition of *again* in 5:12, 6:1, and then 6:6.

¹⁰ Duguid, Hamilton, and Skylar, *ESV Expository Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 12:81-82.

¹¹ Even especially to yourself, though Hebrews is emphasizing the activity toward others.

5:14 uses exercise terms. Maturity is the result of training—practice, practice, practice until a habit has formed. Violinists and carpenters and attorneys know that starting out in the field means practicing the basics over and over and over again, whether that’s the use of a bow, blue prints, or the law. After constant practice, those skills become second nature, a habit that equips the professional for any possible circumstance. With every new project or piece of music, he doesn’t need to relearn the art, but apply his expert habit to the new situation. A novice, on the other hand, must refocus on the basic practices and **then** apply those skills to the situation. Rather than demonstrating a constant habit of spiritual discernment, the Hebrews were being overwhelmed by the problems of untrained childishness.

The Hebrews had learned the basic truths of the Old Testament as part of their Jewish heritage. From the Law and Prophets they were taught the character of God, His expectations, and the kind of worship and obedience that pleases Him. They were taught God’s call to “be holy for I am holy.”¹² They were taught the sacrificial system and the priesthood, and that their deeds were not righteous enough for God. They were taught that one sacrifice or a thousand was not enough to cover the cost of their sin-guilt. They were taught that they must trust in a mediator, and that a better mediator was coming. They were taught that genuine faith in this Savior was demonstrated in repentance from sin and the exercise of a holy lifestyle. Of prime importance, they had been taught that this Christ had come into the world, and His name is Jesus.

Even if they did not grasp all the intricate details of the shadows and types, all the factors of how atonement works and the ins and outs of the Trinity, they could grasp God’s character, his revelation of what is right and wrong, and how they should respond in obedience and trust. They should be able to discern, not only the right kind of behavior, but also the right kind of teaching. While constantly practicing those basics, rehearsing the truths, and reminding their hearts of these things, they might develop a confident habit of faithfulness even in the most trying times.

But they are in classic child mode: “I forgot.” Which is sometimes true and sometimes not, but the effect is the same. Both infants and childish adults act unlearned, undeveloped, untrained. As they linger here, the Hebrews demonstrate being **unaccustomed to the word of righteousness**. They had been taught what righteousness is, where it comes from, how to apprehend it, but they were inexperienced in applying this truth to themselves.

We do not describing spiritual maturity in terms of age or advanced education but by faithful habits—the repeated application of God’s truth to life over time. Do you have a practice of discerning right from wrong? Or are you constantly swayed by earthly and fleshly desires? Do you have a habit of obedience and repentance? Or do you need others around you to frequently point you to those patterns? Do you remember that true righteousness is out of your reach, and as a habit turn to the righteousness of Christ to overcome your failures? Or are you prone to either justify yourself or condemn yourself? Do you often rest in Christ’s perfect work in your place? Or do you usually find yourself striving to accomplish your own standards? Those kinds of questions may help you think about your own condition.

To be clear, spiritual infancy is not evil. Surely when Jesus said, “You must be born again,” the offspring of that new birth is a spiritual infant, who must have the appropriate diet to grow. By making good use of that diet, she might then move on to more complex food. But just like you would expect your 17-year-old son to have meat for dinner and not a bottle of milk, so we expect that followers of Christ advance to a maturity. There is no typical speed or degree of growth per se, but *dissatisfaction* with not growing is reasonable. Dissatisfaction naturally gives way to determination.

¹² Leviticus 19:2

Determination to Mature (6:1-2)

Determination is a second attitude that marks a resolve toward spiritual maturity. Here is truly the same attitude in positive terms rather than negative.

If the end of chapter 5 sounds rather harsh, listen carefully to the beginning of chapter 6. For the tone shifts. That will happen again this chapter. The writer is thoughtfully pastoral: strong rebuke is paired with comforting encouragement. There is rebuke in 5:11-14, then encouragement in 6:1-3, followed by another round of harsh truth in 6:4-8, accompanied by an even more encouraging portion of 6:9-12.¹³

Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity. Though they are currently acting like infants, their condition is not terminal. The situation is not hopeless. And he calls readers to make this move *together*. His rebuke of **you**, moves to an urging of **us**. Though he scolds the readers, his teaching is not merely name-calling accusation. I see here an emulation of our Lord. He enters into their situation and determines to lead his people to more pleasant terrain. This corporate campaign of advancement is entirely possible if they have the resolve.¹⁴

When my daughter moves on to calculus, she will not throw out algebra. (Though she may enjoy that.) She will surely have to use a great deal of algebra, but she will not refer to the topic as algebra, but calculus. Likewise, the actions here are somewhat complementary to one another. **To press on to maturity** is to **leave the elementary teaching**. But not as if to throw it out. Here is a fourth metaphor in the writer's expression. **The elementary teaching about the Christ** is the foundation upon which he wishes to build the structure of **maturity**. Maturity is the greater goal, but it is built upon the elementary teaching.

That foundation being the **elementary teaching about the Christ**. The key word being *elementary*. Maturity is not moving beyond Christ, but moving beyond the *elementary* teaching about Christ. No writer leaves off the ABCs, but he moves beyond the ABCs to greater elements of writing. Interpretations of just what are the elementary teachings abound at this point. But here is where context assists us.

Remember, the Hebrews are thinking about going back to Judaism. They are thinking about returning to the Old Covenant, clinging to what was at best a marker pointing to something far greater. In that way, the Old Testament, where this old covenant is found, is the **elementary teaching about the Christ**. He is present in the sacrifices and the priesthood, but only in types and shadows, in prophecies and promises. But now, the substance has come. They want to hold onto what God spoke long ago through the prophets and ignore that now He has spoken in His Son.¹⁵

Rather than hold on to the true object of their faith, they want to tear down all the majestic truth built on the foundation. What would you think if your builder one day ripped down all the progress on your new home because he thought the concrete was too pristine to cover up?? You'd think that was absurd! Indeed, so it was for the Hebrews to rest on the foundation, rather than go on to the mature structure.

The Old Covenant themes mentioned in vv. 1-2 are valuable for what they are: repentance and faith are the basis of covenant life with God, washings describe the cleansing rituals associated with the priesthood and the sacrifices; laying on of hands speaks of the priests demonstrating the transfer of sin to the sacrifices, and may suggest the appointment of the priestly office; resurrection

¹³ Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 205.

¹⁴ Notice this corporate exhortation language throughout Hebrews!

¹⁵ See Hebrews 1:1-2. Duguid, Hamilton, and Skylar, *ESV Expository Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 12:82.

and judgment describe the sanctions of blessing and cursing for God's covenant people.¹⁶ Like chests containing the treasure of Christ inside. But now that Christ has come, they are simply treasure boxes without the gold. The OT was not insufficient, just not complete. Christ completes the revelation. No treasure hunter is satisfied with an empty box. And the OT principles devoid of their fulfillment are as worthless as pagan superstition. Why cling to the empty box when the treasure is within reach? Move on to the real treasure: Christ.

All that may explain the Hebrew situation, but we must ask, how do *we* apply this? None of us is likely tempted to go back to OT Judaism. Maybe not, but our human nature may sometimes be tempted to give in to the old way of comfort, to relying on self, or some superstition. That's the essence of what the Hebrews were regressing to—superstition and self-righteousness. Rather than resorting to former self-righteous methods of comfort, look to Jesus, in his person, work, and offices. That is the mature teaching to which the foundation was pointing.¹⁷ Here is another way to think about maturity—conducting the Christian life in the sphere of the fullness of the truth of Christ. It is a condition of being immersed in all the doctrine of Christ's person and work. That takes determination. To keep your ears open to the full counsel of Scripture, to spend time in the word and at worship, to direct your thoughts and meditations to Christ. Not being reluctant of hearing about Melchizedek, but hungry to understand just how he points to the gold in the box. Determination to recognize that Christ is not only the reward of your endurance but it's strength.

Verse 3 shows us again the wisdom of our writer, who brings theological balance to this call to action. 6:3 reminds us of the root of any good fruit from our efforts. A third attitude that marks resolve to spiritual maturity is dependence.

Dependence on God who Matures (6:3)

And this we will do, if God permits. Our author may be pastoral, optimistic, and hopeful, but he's not unrealistic. We see here his resolve to accomplish both 5:11 and 6:1. He has **much to say**, and he is determined to say it so that he and the readers will **press on to maturity**. He will take them to those solid-food topics for their endurance's sake. But that won't be an easy undertaking. Maybe there is a hint here of the complexity of the topic even for the writer. More significantly, the people are in this state of dullness, and though he thinks they can turn around, it likely won't happen in the time it takes to read chapter 6. Whatever success he has in writing and whatever response they give to his expression is up to the providential work of God.

Yes, we must apply our own determination, but don't think for a moment that simple determination will make anyone mature in Christ. That's the work of God. 18th c. theologian and pastor, Jonathan Edwards, is known for his spiritual richness. In his youth, near the age of 20, he penned 70 resolutions that guided the rest of his life. But listen to his introduction to that list:

¹⁶ Duguid, Hamilton, and Skylar, *ESV Expository Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 12:83.

¹⁷ If he had Hebrews 6 in mind, I can't determine, but John Newton's words are fitting. "Indeed, my friend, you will not be steadily comfortable till you learn to derive your comfort from a simple apprehension of the person, work, and offices of Christ... one direct, appropriating act of faith in him will strengthen you more than all the earnest endeavors you speak of. Evidences, as you call them, are of use in their place; but the best evidence of faith is the shutting our eyes equally upon our defects, and our graces, and looking directly to Jesus, as clothed with authority and power, to save to the very uttermost." Newton and Bull, *Letters of John Newton*, 173.

“Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God’s help, I do humbly entreat him, by his grace, to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ’s sake.”¹⁸

Like Edwards whose resolve is , we shall determine to advance, and put all the eggs of your spiritual investment in the basket of God’s willing.

Conclusion

Maybe one reason that so many New Year’s resolutions fail is that they aim for the result without affecting the proper motivation that lies behind that result. Hebrews has directed us not just to a goal, but to the attitudes and affections that lie behind that goal of pressing on to maturity. May God bless the cultivation of these attitudes in us.

¹⁸ Edwards, Dwight, and Hickman, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1:xx.