



Hebrews 5:12-6:9
Growth is Essential

Summary: Spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation.

We are now in our third week of Advent, the season when Christians reflect on the fact that God came to earth, and of all possible ways, He came as a child. An infant. Born into a working-class family. Wrapped in a blanket and laid in a manger, a feeding trough for livestock. This is how Christ came that first Christmas.

But why? Why did He do that? Because He came to save us. And to identify with us. To experience our weaknesses, our struggles, our temptations. To become a High Priest who could sympathize with us and conquer sin for us. He came as a child, grew as a man, and fulfilled His purpose.

Now He calls each of us to come, follow Him, find our life's purpose and the power for it. The problem is: that's neither automatic nor easy. And this morning we'll see the problems that arise when we stall out or our growth is stunted. Along the way, we'll investigate one of the most troubling passages in the New Testament – one that has provoked questions, concern and angst for countless people.

You might want to take notes on this one or come back to it again. So let me start with this - if you walk out of here knowing only one thing from our time together this morning, I hope you know: spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation. I'm going to say that a lot, because it's the key to understanding the really hard stuff we'll see in Chapter six.

First though, let's jump right into Chapter Five, where we left off last week, and you'll see what I mean about spiritual growth being the best evidence of your salvation:

Hebrews 5:12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

When a woman is pregnant, she makes regular trips to the OB/GYN for checkups. They perform an ultrasound and take measurements of the baby – they're looking for signs and patterns of normal growth and development. The process continues after the birth. You have frequent appointments to track the normal, expected development of the child and you hear things like, she's in the 90th percentile for height, or he's in the low 20th percentile for weight – and you can feel all sorts of things about that – especially if it's your first child.

But regardless of where they fall in the ranking, what you're most concerned about is: are they within the range that is expected for their age?

If not, and especially if they're on the low end, it may be an indication that something is wrong. Something is slowing or preventing development. Things may still turn out to be OK, but it's worth looking into because *most* normal, healthy, babies, develop at a predictable rate and hit certain predictable milestones as they grow.

The author of Hebrews is trying to say the same thing is true for those who have been born-again through faith in Christ, that *spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation*. And if you're not developing, if you're not progressing spiritually, if you're not maturing, it's a sure sign that there may be a problem.

So, let's take a look at what some of those milestones are with the intensity and focus of concerned first-time parents:

Heb 6:1 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection [or, maturity], not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits.

These six items, three pairs of two, are the equivalent of spiritual baby food. Now, there is nothing wrong with baby food. God has designed babies to need milk and soft food until their palette hardens and they begin teething. So, there is nothing wrong with these things - in their time and place - as the foundation for the rest of life.

There is a range of time, that differs from child to child, from family to family, but the time does come when children stop receiving milk from their mother or a bottle. The milk has done its job. It's time to move on to additional foods and continue developing. The same thing is true spiritually - every new Christian needs to know certain things, but at some point, you should hit particular developmental milestones as you mature.

It's like learning your alphabet so you could move on to reading and writing, or learning addition and subtraction so you could move on to higher math. These are basic principles, foundational principles, they are not unimportant, but the whole purpose of learning them is so that you could build upon them. These are [the elementary principles of Christ](#), the basics of the Christian faith, which includes things like: [repentance from dead works and faith toward God](#). So let's talk about each of those.

First, repentance. Jesus began His earthly ministry with a call to repent. The word literally means to have a change of mind, to see things differently - I once thought this was OK and now, I know it's not. I once thought I should do that, and now I know that I should not. It's a complete turn-around in your life - I was headed away from God, but He called to me and I turned. Now I'm trying to put Him at the center of my life, by [faith](#).

If you have never done that, it's where you need to start – and you can do it right here, right now, in your seat by simply confessing to God that your life is full of [dead works](#), things that do not satisfy you, things that leave you empty in your soul, things you might be ashamed of, embarrassed by, or just disappointed or disillusioned with – you tried them out and they didn't work – they're dead. And listen, death comes in all forms – so we could be talking about a total mess, or maybe you've done your best to make it look good – we're talking an Egyptian mummy in a golden sarcophagus – it doesn't matter, without the Spirit of Christ in you, your works are dead.

Confess that to God, ask Him for forgiveness, and He promises He will receive you as you turn around and follow Him, have [faith toward Him](#). That's [repentance](#), it's the process of spiritual birth, of being born-again - that's where we all begin.

And then, you move on to the [doctrine of baptisms and laying on of hands](#).

We find three major baptisms in the New Testament. First is the baptism of repentance, this was the baptism of John the Baptist, who came before Jesus and called people to get ready for what God was going to do next. After Jesus came, there was no longer any need for this baptism, because we received the second form which is the baptism of identification with Jesus. After His crucifixion and resurrection, but before ascending to Heaven, one of the last things He told the disciples was:

Matt 28:18... [“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.](#)

This is the Great Commission – Christians are told to go and share the good news they have received – that we can born-again, we don't have to live a life characterized by [dead works](#), a life that feels empty no matter how much we acquire or attain. Instead, we are promised that we can be cleansed no matter how dirty we've been. And now, we can live a life that is directed and defined by God instead of carefully curated, designed and determined by us.

And the primary symbol of beginning that new life is a baptism in which we declare publicly, yes, that's what I want. And so, you're buried symbolically under the water and then raised to new life – just like Jesus who entered the tomb and rose again.

Then there's the baptism of the Holy Spirit – which you see all over the book of Acts and in other places as well - evidence of the Holy Spirit coming upon a Christian to affirm their salvation or empower them for service.

Related to this is the idea of [laying on of hands](#). This is another form of identification and empowerment that you see all over the New Testament for two primary reasons. The first is to intercede for someone, to bring them before God asking Him to give them wisdom, comfort, victory, or encouragement. It's sanctified, holy touch, providing a physical

connection while seeking spiritual provision – and because it’s sanctified and holy, I’m going to say that the only place it should occur is on the top, back, of the shoulder. Now, that placement is not Scripture, but it’s wisdom and it keeps everyone safe.

The other time you’ll see laying on of hands is when someone is being commissioned for service. You’ve seen us do this when someone is stepping into a new ministry or challenge – we did this for the Millers when they took off for Columbia, we did this for Trip when we ordained him as a pastor.

We get this model from Scripture. When the early church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, they laid hands on them and prayed. And later when Timothy was going through some hard times in ministry, Paul told him:

2 Timothy 1:6 I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. **7** For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

In each case something *spiritual* transpired and it was signaled by the *physical* act of laying on hands. Much like with baptism and communion – we do something *physically* to testify that something has happened *spiritually*. And, before you go thinking one person’s hands are more spiritual than another, let’s remember something else about baptism – there’s nothing magical about the water, ours comes out of a hose, we don’t import it from the Jordan River and even if we did, it wouldn’t matter – it’s just a symbol, a physical connection point to a spiritual reality.

The same is true with **laying on of hands** – you probably aren’t going to feel anything – no electric shock like a static discharge, no strange warming sensation – they’re might be, but don’t demand it. The point is simply to put your hand on someone else and demonstrate unity and connection as you bring them before God to meet their need and give them spiritual empowerment for the tasks they face.

Mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, aunt or uncle, mentor, friend, I encourage you to do this for people. Place a hand of blessing on their shoulder and pray for them. Intercede for them, ask God to fill them and empower them, to guide them and direct them, to give them courage and joy and spiritual gifts that they would not have otherwise. Be a blessing and seek a blessing. This is normal, basic, foundational, Christian living.

That brings us to the **resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment** which, in a sense, underlay and influence everything else. This is the entire reason we **repent** and **turn to God** and are **baptized** and **seek the empowering of the Holy Spirit** received **through the laying on of hands**, that we might be able to face **the judgment of God** in **the final resurrection**.

From the very beginning of time God has been telling us there is a right way to live and wrong way to live, there are good things to do and bad, and one day we will face His **judgement** for what we have done and left undone, for our thoughts, our words, and our deeds, and He will not leave anything out – everything will be examined.

You can either face that examination on your own and deal with its consequences accordingly, or you can receive divine pardon by claiming the blood of Jesus – accepting His suffering on your behalf, allowing Him to pay your debts, to fix what you have broken, to fill in what you lack and receiving new life in exchange.

These are the basic, fundamental teachings of the Christian faith – that we must turn to God, identify with and depend on God, so that when we face the judgment of God, we are able to stand. You never outgrow these basic facts, they are the foundation of Christian life. But, you are expected to build upon them, follow God’s direction, receive God’s empowerment for your life and grow, mature, develop as a normal, healthy, Christian.

Remember, *spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation*. And with all of that in mind, let’s move on to the most difficult part of the text – I know I’m giving you a lot this morning, but it’s because I believe the best way to process it, is to see it all together:

4 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

7 For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; 8 but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.

Those are heavy, heavy, words, and they can provoke a lot of questions, the most serious of which is: does this mean you can lose your salvation?

Let’s begin by recognizing what we have all experienced. There are people we have known, or known of, who once appeared to know and worship God and yet, their life no longer resembles what it once did. You might say they have backslidden, they have walked away from the faith, they have deconstructed their faith, they no longer believe in God, or they believe in God but no longer the church. It takes various forms and it’s nothing new – there was a time, a few thousand years ago, when both Judas and Peter walked away from Christ.

The entire story of human history, and therefore the entire story of Scripture is the story of God trying to do us good, and people wandering away from Him. It began with Adam and Eve, continued with the nation of Israel, repeated with the disciples and continues in the Church today. People know God, hear from God, encounter God, and then a few years later you find they’re no longer who they were, what they were, or where they were.

The question is: what were they then? And in light of our text here in Hebrews, what are they now? And most importantly, can that ever change? Have they lost their only chance?

I'm here to tell you the discussion and debate on this issue has raged for centuries. Probably because it's so personal – there's someone you know that fits this description, it's not just a theoretical problem, it's real for you.

I'm going to outline a few thoughts on the matter, but I want to frame everything with the point I made earlier: *spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation*. Sometimes the best solution is to never have the problem. Here in Hebrews 6, we're trying to do an after the fact investigation – to figure out what went wrong, and why, and, what can be done about it? The answer *will not be entirely satisfactory*, which is why I want to emphasize the importance of catching things as early as possible so you don't have to figure out what do about the mess later. I want to emphasize: *spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation*.

There are three main options for interpreting the text: 1) it's a hypothetical warning; 2) it's speaking of people who *seemed* like they were saved but never were; or, 3) it's speaking of people who actually *were saved* and then there are some variations on that.

If you want to say this is hypothetical, but could never really happen, then you have to deal with the fact that it sure seems like a real and urgent warning with severe consequences, and there are similar warnings all over Hebrews and the rest of Scripture including references to hardened hearts and an unforgiveable sin. It's not the most popular interpretation, but it is an option.

Second, some say this speaks of people who hung around the church but were never truly converted. They *seemed* to be Christians but were never actually transformed. This tends to be the position of those who identify with what is called Reformed Theology or Calvinism who will point to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the belief that all true saints, that is, everyone who is truly called and converted by God will persevere to the end no matter what they face in life. Those who take this view often have a very high view of God and doctrine. They are good people.

But the problem in my view is, this position does nothing to calm the fears and anxieties of people who can't be sure they're really saved until they make it to the very end. As one scholar in this camp says, you have to accept "the fact that only God knows in advance the difference between true professions and false."¹ Which means, even though I may think I'm saved right now, I can't know the future and therefore I can't be sure that I won't drift away one day, proving that I was never really, actually saved today.

That just doesn't seem like it gives you the kind of confidence God promises to believers in other places. And, you still have to deal with all the warnings in Scripture written to Christians about the dangers of following false teachers and false doctrines – if the saved are truly saved and nothing can ever disrupt that, then why all these warnings issued to the church?

¹ Robert Gundry, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 5th Ed, 509.

Of course, the third position is very difficult as well, because the only other alternative is that this is speaking of people who were *truly saved*, born again, but have departed from the faith. There are several ways of handling this. I'll give you six, quickly.

1. Some say you can become apostate – you can walk away from the faith you once professed and be lost forever, which no one really wants to accept, because it means you could never change your mind and come back – you're now the spiritual walking dead.
2. So, some say it's a reference to those who feel tempted to go back to the systems of Jewish life and faith – to continue to make offerings at the Temple for example instead of trusting wholly and completely in Jesus. And those who hold this view say, you can't actually do that, there's nothing there for you, how are you going to add anything to what Jesus has done?
3. Some say if you choose this path, you lose your reward but not your salvation. They make reference to passages like 1 Corinthians 3 which speaks of being saved as through flames, by the skin of your teeth.
4. Others say it would be impossible for you to be saved again, but what is impossible with man is still possible with God and so it might be possible to lose your salvation but God, in His mercy, could still call you back to what you left just as He called you in the first place.
5. There are those who say this is hyperbole – that being restored to your salvation after you left the faith would be so hard as to *seem* impossible – like Jesus speaking of how hard it is for a rich man to be saved. He said it would be like a camel passing through the eye of a needle.
6. And finally, some point out that Hebrews was written during a time of religious persecution and those who denied the faith did so under duress, it wasn't a sincere and real denial – they just said what they needed to say in order to save their lives. This happened again a few centuries later during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian. Christians were persecuted and some denounced the faith for the sake of their own safety, though not actually, in their hearts. Years later, after leadership in the Empire had changed and the persecution passed, the churches had to struggle with what to do with those who had denied the faith but survived.

Which of these views is right? I don't know – some are stronger than others, but I'm not entirely sure. Yet here's what I do know: God-loving, Jesus-trusting, Bible-believing saints have held all of these positions, and more. I can't say definitively which is right. Which is why I started by saying, if you leave here this morning knowing only one thing, I hope it's this: *spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation.*

It's like asking, what's the best way to respond to a major airline disaster? The answer is: train your pilots well. Train and equip excellent mechanics. Know what conditions you

should and should not fly under. Develop better technologies and systems for flying. Study issues in the past and learn from them. In other words, do everything you can to prevent an actual disaster from occurring. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Let me try to address the issue again like this – spiritually speaking, proximity is no guarantee of salvation – it is possible, for you to be very religious and not be saved – that is a very real possibility. But it's also true that assurance of salvation increases as distance decreases. In other words, the closer you get to God, the more often you respond to His guidance and direction in your life, the more you depend on Him for strength and endurance, the more you grow spiritually - the greater the confidence you will gain in your salvation.

Go back and remember the whole context of this passage – these few difficult verses in chapter six occur as part of an exhortation to grow, to move beyond the basics, to come boldly before the throne of God, and to call out to our sympathetic High Priest.

You are invited to [be enlightened, to taste the heavenly gift, to become partakers of the Holy Spirit, to taste the Word of God and the powers of the age to come](#) – and you wouldn't be here hearing all of this right now if God didn't want you to receive it. So, have you? And if not, will you?

God keeps making us offers my friends. Accepting them and growing in response is the best evidence of your salvation.

Let's pray.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Rom 15:13



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Hebrews 5:12-6:9 Growth is Essential

Summary: Spiritual growth is the best evidence of your salvation.

Pastor's Note: I encourage you to think and pray through this difficult text but to remember there are various interpretations of it made by very wise, very educated, very godly people. I encourage you to hold your position lightly and with charity, especially if you are participating in a home group setting. Let iron sharpen iron, but please, don't cut another brother or sister with your newly sharpened edge. – Pastor Jeff

- Are you in a season of growth, stability, or decline in your spiritual life?
 - Have you experienced growth in some areas while remaining stable in others?

- Have you ever experienced a season of backsliding or stagnation in your spiritual life?
 - What led to it?
 - What was that period like?
 - What pulled you out of it?
 - Have you regained your prior position, or are you still working your way back to where you once were?

- Have you advanced beyond the basics, or do you still feel like you're struggling to get them down?
 - What questions do you have about these foundational aspects of the faith? Where will you go to seek answers?

- Review Hebrews 5:14 – how does this say we become ready for solid food? What does that look like in your life?

- Read 2 Peter 1:5-8. How does this passage parallel the encouragement to grow in Hebrews 5:11-6:3?

- Look up the following verses and note what they tell us about God's attitude toward us and the protection we have from outside forces (i.e. Satan or other forces, either human or demonic) which might want to drag us away from God:
 - John 6:39-40
 - John 10:27-30
 - Romans 8:38-39
 - Romans 11:29
 - Phil 1:6
 - 1 Peter 1:5
 - 1 John 2:1