

HEBREWS

The Danger of Dullness
5:11-6:12

Introduction

You might be in danger of danger of being “dull.” It might sound like a social problem but it’s really a serious spiritual issue. “Dull” is a word that means *sluggish* or *lazy*. It occurred twice in the text as a warning to the Hebrew Christians:

1. In 5:11 they were told, “you have become dull...”
2. In 6:12 the same word is translated “sluggish” in the NKJV and “slothful” in the KJV. They were becoming dull.

They had *become* dull in one area and were in danger of *becoming* dull in another.

They had already become “dull of **hearing**.” Then, in verse ten of chapter six, the writer mentioned their “work and labor of love... [ministering] to the saints...” to warn that they were in danger of becoming dull of **helping** one another.

Dullness of hearing and dullness of helping are serious spiritual dangers. We want to learn how to avoid them. We’ll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Won’t Become Dull Of Hearing If You Exercise Your Senses, and #2 You Won’t Become Dull In Helping If You Endure Your Suffering.

#1 You Won’t Become Dull Of Hearing If You Exercise Your Senses (5:11-6:8)

The Hebrew Christians to whom these words were first written desired to *end* rather than *endure* their persecution. Their plan was to remain Christians but return to Jewish ritual religion with its ceremonies and sacrifices. Throughout the letter the writer tells them to instead “*Hold fast!*” to their profession of faith in the midst of suffering and endure to the end.

The Hebrew Christians were having a hard time receiving this word of exhortation. In 5:11 you read,

Hebrews 5:11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

The “of whom” is Jesus. The writer had just been explaining the great High Priesthood of Jesus. His priesthood should have been their source of empowering to “*Hold fast!*” Instead they were struggling with the teaching because they had “become dull of hearing.”

In these verses we will learn how dullness of hearing *develops*, how it can be *defeated*, and just how *dangerous* it can be.

You see how dullness of hearing develops in verses twelve and thirteen:

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.

They had been “born again” for a long time but instead of maturing into Christian adulthood they remained spiritual infants. They should be “teachers” but instead needed others to “teach [them] again” the basic truths about their Christian faith.

Hebrews 5:13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

The “word of righteousness” is the written Word of God, the Bible, as it applies to your daily life and walk to produce right living. “Unskilled” means *not put to the test*. They were not putting God’s Word to the test; they were not *applying* it. **Dullness of hearing develops when you do not apply God’s Word in your daily life and decisions.**

You see how dullness of hearing is defeated in verse fourteen:

Hebrews 5:14 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.

You pass from infancy to maturity “by reason of use.” You use God’s Word of righteousness in your daily life to make *right decisions*. As

you do, your “senses [are] exercised to discern both good and evil.” You become more sensitive to the spiritual consequences of “good,” or biblically correct, decisions, and “evil,” or biblically incorrect, decisions.

“Meat” and “solid food” in these verses means **applying God’s Word**. It is not some mystical or metaphysical depth of doctrine; it is simple obedience. **Disobedience develops into dullness of hearing and immaturity; obedience defeats dullness of hearing and promotes maturity.**

The writer then exhorted them to go on to maturity in his warning about the danger of dullness in the first eight verses of chapter six.

Hebrews 6:1 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,
Hebrews 6:2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

“Let us go on” means *be carried forward*. “Perfection” means *maturity*. It is a promise that God will carry you forward to maturity. The writer just told them to obey the Word of God; he now reminds them that obedience is made possible by the empowering of God and not through self-effort and energy.

In order to be carried forward by God to maturity you must “[leave] the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ...” These six “principles” are “elementary” truths of their former Jewish religion that were all fulfilled by Jesus Christ:

1. “Repentance from dead works and... faith toward God” was the truth taught in elementary form in Judaism. Repentance toward God by faith in Jesus Christ is its fulfillment.
2. “The doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands” were Jewish practices. “Baptisms” here is plural and refers not to a believers baptism but to various Jewish ceremonial washings. “Laying on of hands” refers to the practice of placing your hand upon the animal sacrifice to identify with it. As Christians we are washed by regeneration and identified with Jesus as He took our sin upon Himself as our once-for-all sacrifice.

3. “Resurrection of the dead... [and] eternal judgment” were taught in Judaism in a very elementary way. Now that Jesus has risen, we have a *full* and *complete* understanding of our own resurrection and of eternity.

The point the writer is making is this: The Hebrew Christians should *never* consider returning to the elementary truths of their former Jewish ritual religion now that Jesus had fulfilled them.

Hebrews 6:3 And this we will do if God permits.

Ah, here we go! This verse begins what is arguably the single most difficult and disputed passage in all the Bible. At the heart of the controversy are the shocking words in verses four and six, “for it is impossible... 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.”

This is a serious warning; but to who? Five major theories have emerged over the centuries as to *who* and *how* these verses apply:

1. They are saved persons who fall away and forfeit their salvation.
2. They are persons who only profess to be saved but fall short of being born again.
3. They are saved persons who backslide and forfeit fruitfulness in this life and rewards in the next.
4. This is a hypothetical case that cannot really occur.
5. This could only occur in the first century to the generation of Hebrew Christians considering a return to Jewish ritual religion.

There are problems with all these theories. Rather than discuss the *theories*, let’s look at the *text* itself. We’ll see the *persons described* and the *problem discussed*.

The persons are described in verses four and five:

Hebrews 6:4 For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,

Hebrews 6:5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

“Impossible” means *impossible!* Whatever happens to them **cannot** be undone. The people are described using words that can only refer to genuine believers:

1. “Once enlightened” means once-for-all brought into spiritual light at regeneration.
2. “Tasted the heavenly gift” means to fully experience the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.
3. “Partakers of the Holy Spirit” means they have the Holy Spirit as an indwelling Person.
4. “Tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come” means their lives had been radically, miraculously transformed.

The problem is discussed in verse six:

Hebrews 6:6 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.

“Fall away” is not the word for a final, total apostasy from faith in Jesus Christ. Notice also that the subject here is “repentance,” *not* salvation. He never says it is impossible, if they fall away, to renew them to *salvation*. He says it is impossible, if they fall away, to renew them to “repentance.”

What *is* he talking about? If you have been here for our previous studies you know that the writer has repeatedly referred to an incident from the Old Testament (Numbers 14). God had redeemed the Jews out of Egypt and brought them to the borders of the Promised Land, to a place called Kadesh-Barnea. When God commanded them to go forward into the Promised Land they made a definite decision to disobey due to disbelief. God told Moses He would smite them and disinherit them and make a nation from Moses (Numbers 14:12). Moses interceded for the people and pleaded with God to spare them. The Lord *pardoned* them (Numbers 14:20), but He would not *permit* them to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:21-34).

There is an all-important sequel to the story. The people repented and made an attempt to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:40-45). God would not permit them to go in. They were defeated by

their enemies and went on to live defeated lives for forty years in the desert.

Listen carefully: At Kadesh-Barnea the Jews had fallen away. God pardoned them but would not *permit* them to fully recover. It was now *impossible* for them to be *renewed* by their *repentance* to the place of their refusal to enter the Promised Land.

Does that sound familiar? **The Hebrew Christians were in exactly the same place spiritually!** God wanted them to go forward to maturity in their Christian lives. They wanted to return to Judaism. A return to Judaism was so serious a falling away that God warned them He would not permit them to fully recover. They could be pardoned and they would remain Christians. But it was one of those life-changing decisions whose consequences could never be completely undone. It would be impossible for them to be renewed to a place of real Christian maturity even if they were to repent.

The seriousness of this falling away stems from the fact that in a return to Judaism “they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame.” Every animal sacrificed in the Temple looked forward to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. If you go back and sacrifice an animal you are declaring that Jesus needs to be crucified *again*. A public return to animal sacrifices would be a shameful denial by a Christian of the completed work of Jesus on the Cross.

In the context of this chapter, “falling away” is a decision to return to Jewish ritual religion with its animal sacrifices. The Hebrew Christians were being warned that once they made that choice they, like the Exodus generation at Kadesh-Barnea, would never be permitted by God to be renewed to go on to spiritual maturity even though they might repent. They would forfeit fruitfulness in this life and rewards in the next. They would be *disciplined* now and *disqualified* later.

The writer has been using the illustration of an infant maturing into adulthood. He now uses a second but similar illustration, contrasting *fruitfulness* with *fruitlessness*:

Hebrews 6:7 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;
Hebrews 6:8 but if it bears thorns and briers, *it is* rejected and near to being cursed, whose end *is* to be burned.

The “earth” represents the Christian and the “rain” represents the spiritual resources God provides to carry you forward to maturity and fruitfulness. You are encouraged to “cultivate” fruitfulness by “receiving blessings from God.” In other words, “*Hold fast!*” and don’t fall away, because God has provided the resources you need.

Those who choose to fall away will be fruitless. They will bear “thorns and briers” which will be “rejected... near to [being] cursed, whose end is to be burned.” This is a clear reference to standing at the Judgment Seat of Jesus to receive rewards. You can read about it in First Corinthians, chapter three. You’re saved, but your works will be burned.

You won’t become dull in hearing if you obey God’s Word and thereby exercise your senses. And,

#2 You Won’t Become Dull In Helping If You Endure Your Suffering (6:9-12)

It’s not easy for Christians who are suffering to “*Hold fast!*” and endure. But holding fast and enduring suffering is one of the ways you bring forth fruit. The writer reminds them of the fruitfulness of enduring suffering in verses nine through eleven:

Hebrews 6:9 But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner.

Only Christians can be called “beloved.” Only Christians can produce “things that accompany salvation.” The warning was real, not hypothetical, but it was about fruitfulness and rewards, not salvation.

He encouraged them to go on being fruitful and piling up rewards:

Hebrews 6:10 For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

Hebrews 6:11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end,

By the way: If these individuals **could** forfeit their salvation; or if they were never really saved - God **would** be unjust in “forget[ing] [their] work and labor of love.”

But He would not be unjust! They could expect their endurance of suffering to be *remembered* and *rewarded*. Rather than return to Jewish ritual religion to avoid suffering, they ought to remain in Christian fellowship and “minister” to their fellow “saints” who were suffering.

Hebrews 6:12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Don't become “sluggish,” which is the word *dull*; “*Hold fast!*” and help others. He will give them an example to “imitate” in the patriarch Abraham. Abraham believed God's promises even though many of them were delayed in their fulfillment. He was carried along to maturity and is a wonderful example of patient endurance. The example of Abraham that ends this chapter is a segue between this warning passage and a return to his explanation of Jesus as our great High Priest. We'll take a look at it next time.

A Hebrew Christian who returned to Judaism might relieve his or her own persecution but would aggravate persecution against their fellow saints. It would *hurt* rather than *help* their brothers and sisters. They should take their stand, stay, and help one another endure.

Conclusion

What does this have to do with us? I would suggest three things:

1. Persecution may yet come to us. If it does, we will be severely tempted to *fall away*. Instead we should “*Hold fast!*” and endure suffering to the end, helping one another to endure.
2. More likely is the very real danger of being or becoming dull on account of general suffering. You should exercise your spiritual senses and endure your suffering. If you exercise and endure, you will make progress and be fruitful in your Christian life, both now and at the Reward Seat of Jesus. If you do not exercise your spiritual senses by applying God's Word, you will not have the

endurance to make progress; you will regress and be fruitless in your Christian life, both now and at the Reward Seat of Jesus.

3. There are certain decisions to fall away whose consequences are such that we cannot be renewed even though we repent. The decision for a Christian to have premarital sex... To commit adultery... To pursue an unbiblical divorce... To get an abortion... God *can* and *will* pardon you; but you will be deeply affected.

It's always better to "*Hold fast!*" and be carried forward by God to maturity. Your great High Priest is in heaven ministering on your behalf. You can always "obtain mercy and find grace to help in [your] time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).