

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS – PART SIX

The exciting message of Hebrews is no baby food! To appreciate what is to come in the next few chapters we need to have moved on from a diet of spiritual milk only. But just exactly what is the teaching of spiritual beginners? The writer describes the three items on the menu of young Christians. First there is the ‘foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God’. These are what we did to become Christians. At the cross of Christ we turned from running our own lives in our own strength to Jesus Christ and asked Him to come into us and take over. This is still a good way to start every new day so that we know yesterday is forgiven and Jesus is in charge. It is good in preaching to remind one another that there is no other starting point. But we are not to stay there.

The second item on the baby Christian’s menu is ‘instructions about washings, and laying on of hands’. These are the outward pictures of our new Christian faith, baptism, confirmation, commissioning, and otherwise expressing our desire for the world to know that the past has gone and we are under new management. They normally follow fairly quickly although different churches may delay for various reasons to be sure where the new believer really stands. They are not intended to be a repeated activity for a new boost of spiritual energy.

The third item causes the biggest surprise. It is ‘the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement’. These are part of the prophecies of the future events surrounding the return of Jesus Christ. To many Christians this is the main course in our spiritual diet. Whole books, conferences and seminars are devoted to Christ’s final return. Some denominations have separated from others because they believe their version of the future is the only right one. We are obviously meant to know what the Bible tells us, Old and New Testament, about the future and believe all of it, even though God does not seem to have told us exactly what the order is, as if He wants us just to trust Him that it will all work out in the end. All these are an important beginning, but the heart of the message for growing Christians is something else.(6:1,2)

One of the most fundamental questions of pastoral care is what to do about Christians who crash. Have they lost their salvation? Are they hopeless? Can we get them started again and if so how? Clearly the writer is talking about those who have really become Christians because he talks about them having already done five things which could only be said of a child of God – they are: enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. They have started but then ‘fallen away’. The Greek word means to drop away or depart from beside someone. It could describe for example a soldier dropping out or deserting from the army, and the lost sheep wandering off from the shepherd.(Lk.15:1-7) It could also describe the prodigal son going away from the father’s house to be independent and learn the hard way.(Lk.15:11-32) In each case the one who had fallen away remained a soldier, a sheep or a son. The heart of our problem is that we cannot force them back to repentance by force feeding them with more ‘milk’. Until there is a change of heart they are making a mockery of the cross of Christ. They will go through a painful process

under the conviction of the Holy Spirit which is like a farmer with a field full of weeds who will burn off the rubbish, re-plough the ground and sow fresh seed. Paul used a similar illustration in I Corinthians 3:10-15 to describe the burning off of the rubbish of self effort so we might again be free for Christ to build His own work on the foundation which He laid in our lives when we came first to Him. He went on (I Cor.3:16,17) to remind those to whom this was happening that the Holy Spirit still lived in them. They clearly had not lost their salvation.(6:3-8)

Like a parent with erring children, the writer wants and expects better things for the 'fallen away' Christians. He reminds them of the fruit which showed in their lives when they first knew the Lord. There was an obvious love for God which showed in a practical care for their fellow believers. Even now this continued although they had become hard of spiritual hearing and therefore were wandering away. He wants us to continue from where we started with the same hope in all God has promised on which we depended in faith. Just keep going as you began, he urges us. But to keep going we need some solid food, some spiritual meat.(6:9-12)

The writer is now ready to serve the main course which will occupy the next four chapters. He introduces it by taking us back to the greatest example of patient faith in the Old Testament, the story of Abraham, and God's promise to him of a son, Isaac, for whom he had to wait for 25 years. Mostly Abraham believed God's promise but sometimes he 'fell away' as with Hagar and Ishmael.(Gen.16:1-6) He tried suggesting easier ways for God to bless him which were always refused.(Gen.17:17,18) Again and again the Lord brought him back to Isaac as the only way He would bless him and future generations. In the same way God brings fallen away Christians back to the simple fact that He has no other way of blessing except through giving us Jesus in whom is everything we will ever need. Understanding this is the 'meat'. Anchoring our hearts to this message is the only way not to drift away. As Melchizedek, the high priest, was sent to encourage Abraham, Jesus entering heaven on our behalf is our encouragement.(6:13-20)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the 'elementary teachings' which the writer regards as spiritual milk? Why are they important in the diet of a young Christian? How will continuing to stay on milk prevent us pressing on to maturity? How may we make this mistake in our local churches?(verses 1-3)
2. In what five ways is the spiritual experience of the Christian who 'falls away' described? In what circumstances have you seen people fall away from faith in Christ? Why can we not renew them again to repentance? What happens when we try? What message are they giving the world about the cross of Christ?(verses 4-6)
3. How is the pastoral problem presented by those who fall away illustrated from farming? What similarities are there between this passage and I Cor.3:10-15 which help us to be clear about the salvation of those who fall away?(verses 7,8)
4. How have the readers of this letter shown the reality of their salvation? What are they urged to do to avoid falling away? What then is the secret of pressing on to maturity?(verses 9-12)

5. How does the story of Abraham illustrate the idea of faith on the one hand and falling away on the other? How did God's promises help him to press on to maturity? How can the same principle help us to 'anchor our souls'? How does the similarity between Melchizedek and Jesus made it easier to anchor instead of drifting away?(verses 13-20)