

## **A Study in Hebrews**

### Study Three

#### Hebrews 4:12-6:3

##### Day One

12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

v. 12 – Someone once said that the Bible is the oldest book whose author is still alive! That is why the word of God is living and active. There is a living God backing up His word. I am always in awe of the Bible's ability to judge what I am thinking today. The Bible can evaluate whether I love my wife or if I am doing a good job at work.

The Bible contains history, but it is not a history book; science, but it's focus isn't science. The Bible is a book about a good God seeking after bad people and then giving those people a standard by which they are to conduct their lives. When these same people confess that they are not able to maintain that standard, then God comes and lives in them to enable them to keep His "rules." This is how magnificent our God is. But His word is an active agent that is able to penetrate the hardest heart and darkest places.

I don't read the Bible just to be familiar with its stories and themes. I read it so it can change me into the man that God wants me to be. I read the Word to get the Word in me so it can do the work that needs to be done so desperately.

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:9-11).

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm, but it may be worth your while to read it today or this week. It is located exactly at the midpoint of the Bible. I see Psalm 119 as the point upon which the entire Word rests, sort of like the midpoint of a seesaw. From Psalm 119, we can "swing" to the Old or New Testament, but both Testaments are one and the same—they are God's word to man.

v. 13 – God sees it all. I am always surprised that people are not more honest with God. They act like they will tell God something He doesn't know or that will make God angry. If God were going to "get you," He would have "gotten you" already. If God knows your thoughts and words before you say them, why would saying them make God angry? My point is that you can be honest with God. Everyone must give Him an account of their life, whether now or later. I want to do mine now and ask His forgiveness where I need it.

Is there anything you need to tell God today?

vs. 14-16 – We are introduced to the theme of Jesus' High Priestly ministry in this verse. As the high priest went through the tabernacle and Temple, Jesus went through the heavens. He fulfilled God's desire for righteousness in a spiritual sense and, because He did, we can hold fast our confession of faith in Him and His priestly work.

Jesus is a human being, just like you and me. He understands us not simply because He created us, but because He is one of us, in every way except sin. The Greek gods were weird and played with man, teasing him and then punishing him according to their whims. The god of Islam is so far away there is no hope that anyone can know or touch him. The Buddhist god lies within every man and has a thousand different faces, all of which take on the look of the people who "carry" that god. But our God, the God of heaven and earth, is one of us. We can go to Him because He understands. He may rebuke or discipline, but He understands.

As one pastor said, our flesh sits on the throne in heaven. We are well represented in the heavens, so go there with confidence, expecting help and not judgment.

## **Day Two**

5:1 Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

2 He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

3 This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

4 No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.

v. 1 – There is still a mentality that there should be certain men (or women) who do the "things of God" while everyone else goes about their daily business. But that all changed with Jesus. While He was the great High Priest, we are all priests today, having access to God and permitted to relate to God directly rather than through a priestly caste:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9-10).

vs. 2&3 – All priests in the old covenant were sinners themselves and made sacrifices for themselves as well as the people. They should have been mindful of man’s sinful condition so they could deal gently with others. This rule still applies today:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load (Galatians 6:1-5).

Martin Luther spoke of and restored what he called the “priesthood of the believer.” As a “priest,” we are to be mindful of our own condition, thus having grace and mercy for the similar condition in others.

v. 4 – It is an honor to do God’s work. But this is an honor that is now available to all believers. We do not choose it; we are chosen for it. First, Aaron was chosen to be Moses’ spokesperson, then he was chosen to be priest. Your role in Christ may change, but your purpose remains the same.

### **Day Three**

5 So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest.

But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

6 And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

v. 5 – Since Jesus was not a Levite—He was of the tribe of Judah—He was not in the priestly family of Aaron. Therefore He did not claim the High Priestly office by means of birth, but through an appointment by God. Here the writer quoted Psalm 2:7, which he had also referred to in Hebrews 1:5. There was an important connection between Christ’s Son-ship and His role as High Priest.

v. 6 – The writer now quoted Psalm 110:4 and positioned that verse as a Messianic reference. Jesus did not use the title “High Priest,” nor did anyone use this title in referring to Him. His priesthood was not after Aaron’s, but rather modeled after Melchizedek. Since the writer continues this line of thought later in the letter, we will discuss Melchizedek then, too. But suffice it to say that Jesus was an eternal priest whose ministry was different than the High Priests that Israel had previously known.

v. 7 – The picture painted here is a powerful one. Jesus did not rely on His divinity to achieve His mission. He was a priest and functioned as such out of His humanity and that included a vibrant prayer life.

He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:41-44).

It is said in Luke 22:41 that Jesus withdrew a "stone's throw" from the disciples to pray. Why? Perhaps because He was so noisy when He prayed. Jesus did not pray solemn, polite prayers, nor did He say "in Jesus' name" at the end of His prayers. When Jesus prayed, He talked to a real Father out of His suffering and pain. Jesus was heard, not because He was God, but because He knew how to "get hold of God."

It is my theory that when Jesus sweat blood, He had done that before. He was accustomed to praying so fervently that the blood vessels in His forehead burst and mixed blood with sweat. You don't have that happen by praying what I call, "Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep" prayers. Jesus was fervent when He prayed, expressing His urgent need for His Father's help.

I have adjusted my own prayer life based on this image of how Jesus prayed. You would be wise to do the same.

#### **Day Four**

8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered  
9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him  
10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.  
11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.

v. 8 – Remember the great "kenotic" passage (kenosis is the Greek word for "emptying"):

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8)!

It is hard to imagine that Jesus would learn anything since He was the epitome of perfection. But even a master violinist can become better, even though there was no imperfection prior to the improvement. But that violinist can improve with age as he or she learns new techniques or learns how to present the music more effectively.

If Jesus learned obedience through suffering, how do you think you and I will learn? Will it be by a different path? I don't think so.

v. 9 – The word for “perfect” here is one that is used to describe someone who has reached their goal. Jesus became complete when He died and was raised from the dead and is now a source of salvation for all. But for anyone to receive the benefit of this salvation, they must obey Him, not just believe in Him or talk about Him.

v. 10 – Jesus wasn't a priest in the past tense. He is a priest, still functioning in His priestly role according to God's will and on behalf of anyone who has faith in and obeys Him.

v. 11 – The Hebrew readers were rebuked for their slowness to learn. They should have been progressing in their concept of Jesus. Instead they were bogged down by their romantic and cultural connection to Judaism. Tradition can keep you from growing in God. The Jewish writer who wrote this letter was himself growing in his understanding of Scripture and Jesus. The Jews to whom he was writing were not growing.

### **Day Five**

12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.

14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

vs. 12&13 – This is so true even today. My generation has had more Bible teaching than any previous generation. We have more Bible translations, teaching cassettes, CD Roms, videos, books and church classes than at any point in history. Yet we have few who are willing to teach the elementary truths. They want to be fed every week, indeed even every day, but are stunted in their spiritual growth.

v. 14 – In 1987, I enrolled in a class called “Systematic Theology.” I enjoyed the class, but I was bothered by it as well. I had been a pastor for 13 years at that point, but I was hearing things in class I had never heard before. I was ignorant and not growing in doctrine, history or Biblical studies. Even though I had neither the time or money, I kept going back to school and eventually earned my doctorate nine years later.

During that time, I tried to learn to distinguish between good and evil, the special and the ordinary, the holy and the profane. I am still learning. I am writing these studies in part to continue to grow as a writer and teacher. I want solid food; I don't want to live on milk, which could be my past experiences or the titles that may be afforded me as I grow older.

### **Day Six**

6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,  
2 instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.  
3 And God permitting, we will do so.

vs. 1-2 – The writer considered repentance, faith, baptisms, laying on of hands, the resurrection and eternal judgment to be elementary teachings. How much do you know about each of those six topics? They would make a good study and warrant investing time to know the basics of each item.

In sports, often the most successful players are those who master the fundamentals, going on to outstanding performance. I think it is the same thing in following Jesus. I went back to school in 1987 to earn my doctorate because I wasn't happy with my lack of understanding around basic theological issues.

v. 3 – Was the writer referring to the remainder of this letter, or was he simply making a faith statement about the Hebrews in general? Remember, these Hebrews were considering abandoning the faith to return to Judaism. They would have had to turn their backs on these elementary teachings to embrace all kinds of acts that lead to death. But Christians can do the same thing. I urge you to continue to grow in the grace and the knowledge of God, not tiring of the journey or disillusioned by disappointments:

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:10-14).

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too,

do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:60-69).

### **Day Seven**

4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,  
5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,  
6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

vs. 4-6 – There is always a great debate over whether someone can lose their salvation. Here I believe we see that someone can give it back! The writer was not addressing someone who has sinned or made a grievous error. The writer was talking to people who were considering a rational, calculated decision to depart from the Way and return to Judaism. Someone who would do this could not be reinstated to life, according to the author.

Verse six summarized what someone was doing who denied Jesus having once known Him: they were crucifying Him all over again. And we know that the Father had Jesus to suffer and die once and only once. Anyone who would deny Christ after having known Him is a “Christ-killer,” rendering His love and grace useless and embracing a counterfeit once having known the real. For that, there is little mercy from God.

Has you encountered hardships in your life and ministry? Have you “cooled” to the cause of Christ because you are disillusioned or hurt? If so, I implore you not to turn your back on Jesus. Press through your pain and sorrow and reassess whether idealism or a wrong concept of Jesus caused you to become angry or to lose heart. Then reconsider the great treasure you have in Jesus, even if your own life has not turned out the way you thought it would. He is still worthy of all praise and honor.