

Hebrews 5:11- 6:12: Don't Fall Away

Introducing the Theme

We are approximately in the middle of the book of Hebrews now. Last week, Peter preached about the priesthood and next week, Jonathan will speak about Melchizedek, the high priest. But between these two passages on the Old Testament priesthood, we have a message about something slightly different.

Today's passage is about the spiritual diet for Christians, which starts with spiritual milk. The apostle Peter wrote this in one of his letters,

'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.' (1 Peter 2:2-3 NIV)

That started me thinking about some of the old advertising campaigns for milk, so we are going to have a look at a few of these to find the benefits of milk!

Firstly, it doesn't matter how old we are: milk is good at any age. You are never too young or too old for milk.

It helps develop strong teeth and bones, vitality and endurance.

It helps us women to keep our looks and our health!

For the elderly, milk is the food of foods that will fight off all ailments and give you vigour and well-being.

Milk is the vitality beverage, which keeps you 'bright' and 'in the fun game'.

And finally, if you want a child to win a race, milk is necessary.

You get the idea: according to these campaigns, milk is a valuable component of our diet.

Milk alone is good and right for a newborn baby – that is the perfect diet for that time of life. But it is for a season only. There comes a point when the baby is weaned onto solid food. When we look at this advert, we know that the message is that milk is a beneficial part of a diet that also involves solid food. Milk alone is not enough as we grow.

And that is the same for us as Christians. When we first come to faith, there is a season where spiritual milk is exactly what we need – it is the vitality beverage! We need to include that in our intake throughout our lives with Christ. But there is a point where milk alone is not enough – we need to move onto the spiritual solid food that enables us to win races. And that is what we are going to look at this morning.

Sermon

The theme of how to run the race of faith fits nicely with the start of the Paris Olympics this week. To compete in the Olympics starts with a combination of natural ability and the desire to pursue that sport to the highest level. Over time, being prepared to race has become increasingly complicated, involving more and more people. An athlete now needs a team of trainers, physiotherapists and nutritionists; they need sponsorship deals, the highest level of equipment, a specially designed diet and training programme. It is all incredibly complicated. So I was relieved recently to hear an interview with the O'Donovan brothers who rowed at the Rio Olympics in 2016, winning a silver medal.

They were asked about their approach to the race. The answer?

“It's a fairly simple sport... There's a start line and a finish line... Your man says go at the start and there's a hooter at the finish. It's about going from A to B as fast as you can.”

As I was preparing this message, I was getting a bit bogged down in all the information and references back to the Old Testament. What we are supposed to do to run the race of faith, both as individuals and as a church, can feel overwhelmingly complicated sometimes. But the important point is this: there's a start line and a finish line, and we need to be moving towards that finish line.

The writer of Hebrews presents a clear example of what not to do. He implores his readers not to make the same decisions that the Israelites made in the wilderness after leaving Egypt.

The problem was not that they had misunderstood something and made a mistake. The problem was that they had experienced God's power at work in delivering them from Egypt, they had experienced further miracles as God provided them with water and food, they knew without doubt that God Most High existed and was present with them *and they had rejected Him*. He had answered their prayers for deliverance, but they continually complained against Him. According to the covenant God had sworn with Abraham, God had prepared a land of promise for the people where they could live in His blessing and provision, but they discussed returning to slavery in Egypt. Hebrews 3 refers back to Psalm 95, where the people of Israel at that time are described as *hardening their hearts* against the LORD and that time in the wilderness described as the *rebellion*. We read in Numbers 14:11 and 23 that God called this treating Him with *contempt*. There were consequences to their choices. In verse 23, God said,

“No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see [the land promised].”

The people had forfeited something extraordinary. God Most High wanted a covenant relationship with them, whereby He met their needs out of His immense power and provision. They had seen God's glory and goodness, so they knew He could and would deliver on His promise. But they did not want to change. They did not want to give up their attitudes of complaint and dissatisfaction to become mature people who partnered with God. To return to our Olympic analogy, Israel was not interested in running the race of faith. They had no intention of heading towards the prize and inheritance He offered. They missed out.

However, God saw two Olympians of the faith. One of those was Caleb, who had absolutely no intention of *going back* to slavery, nor of *staying put* if God was telling him to go somewhere else. He wanted to see the glory of God fulfilled in his life, for his descendants and for his nation. This was a man who knew that God was worth committing to and he devoted every ounce of strength to receiving the prize and inheritance God had promised. What God said, Caleb would do. And God saw that. The generation of the nation of Israel who had treated God with contempt would not inherit the land, but,

“...because My servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows Me whole-heartedly, I will bring him into the land...” Numbers 14:23

It starts with what is going on in our hearts. Israel had hardened hearts of rebellion that held God in contempt. In contrast, Caleb is like a stick of rock that had the name of God Most High printed all the way through. Caleb's heart and spirit were for God. He knew, without doubt, that the only things worth having in life came from God; and this stirred his desire to passionately pursue all that God had for him.

This is the background theme of warning in Hebrews: we need to be aware of whether our hearts are pursuing the things of spiritual life or spiritual death. In that context, we now come to something very specific

for the readers of this letter. They had received Jesus Christ as Lord, and they had embraced the 'milk' teaching which provides strong bones of faith. This constitutes learning about:

Repentance from sins (which lead to spiritual death)

Faith in God (trusting that He exists and is present with us)

Baptism (in water and in the Holy Spirit)

Laying on of hands (to pray for God's blessing, anointing, healing upon someone)

Resurrection of the dead (physical death is not the end when we are in Christ)

Eternal judgement (learning that there is a Heaven and Hell and that our choices have eternal consequences)

Just because it is referred to as 'milk' does not mean that this is easy teaching, but it is an essential starting point – it is our 'vitality beverage!'

If you are a new Christian, some of these things may not be familiar to you – do not worry about that! You might like to use this as an invitation to find out more: to ask questions and re-read these passages for yourself.

Where the Hebrews were concerned, there was a problem and it was this which had caused the writer to put quill to papyrus: the people had lost interest. They had learned the 'milk' teaching for new Christians but were not motivated to learn anything else. In chapter 5 v. 11, the writer says, 'you no longer try to understand...' That initial desire to learn and receive the teachings of Jesus Christ had worn off. They had stopped pursuing the prize. They were content to stay as spiritual infants and there are consequences to that. After all, if a child were raised with only milk for nutritional intake, we would very quickly see the impact of that on growth, health and energy. We do not question that it would be physically unhealthy to live entirely on milk. Just as Olympic athletes do not run on a diet of milk alone, so we cannot be Olympians of faith with only spiritual milk. We need spiritual 'solid food' which involves:

- **learning how to live righteously:** in other words, learning how to live in a way that pleases God and changing our lifestyle accordingly. No one can do that for us; it is entirely our own choice to adopt a godly lifestyle. This should flow from our relationship with Christ – that in knowing Him, our desire is to please Him.
- **becoming independent learners:** no longer being 'spoon-fed' but seeking God for ourselves through studying Scripture and learning to hear His voice for ourselves. It is as we learn and engage with Scripture ourselves that we learn to recognise God speaking to us and to hear what He is saying for others. God's word needs to be in us, so that it can work in us and through us.
- **training ourselves to distinguish between good and evil:** this enables us to keep running in the right direction, not being distracted or tripped up by temptation or deceptions. The New King James Version says that we need to be people 'who ... have their senses *exercised* to discern both good and evil.' Our spiritual senses need practice and exercise, so that we can recognise what the Holy Spirit is showing us to be good and what is evil.

When we are securely on a diet of spiritual 'solid food' we become mature believers and should then be able to train or disciple others. (Hebrews 5 v13) We cannot fulfil what is known as 'The Great Commission' to make disciples, if we are not disciples ourselves. (Matthew 28:19-20). We cannot show others how to follow Jesus if we are not following Him ourselves. We cannot help someone else to listen to God, to discern good from evil, to study the Bible and so on if we do not do those things ourselves. We need to be pursuing the prize, whole-heartedly convinced that it is worth living for, in order to show others.

If we meet someone who is mature in faith, know that this has come from the *desire* to run the race and the *self-discipline* to keep going no matter what. It takes both to push past distractions, temptations and the things the world offers in order to reach the finish line well.

I am not the only person to use the Olympic Games as an example of living a life of faith. In a letter to the believers in Corinth, the apostle Paul wrote this:

Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25)

At the time winners would be given a wreath made of thin olive tree twigs, which would not be at its best for long – the leaves would become brittle and break within a short space of time.

Near the end of his life, Paul sent his final words to Timothy, the young man he had disciplined. This is not about following his dreams, but a message encouraging him to continue in maturity of faith.

But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, ... discharge all the duties of your ministry.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have *longed* for His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:5-8

This is such a theme amongst the writings of the apostles: life is tough, there is hardship, it is a fight at times; but there is a prize to come that is worth pursuing with a whole heart. Paul did not endure hardship so that he could sit on a cloud playing a harp for all time. He endured and persevered so that He could be with our Lord Jesus, in the richness of His perfect goodness and glory. The apostles lived knowing that when their time on Earth was done, all that they would know would be timeless joy, peace and wholeness with their beloved Saviour. They *longed* to be with Him. That is pure relationship.

Please do not allow condemnation to take hold if you feel that you are not being a Caleb or a Paul today. Firstly, it is easy to lose our race mentality when it comes to our faith - there are all sorts of things that can get in the way each day. Secondly, this is not about being an extroverted evangelistic visionary. This is purely about our hearts before God, whatever our gifts or personality type, whatever our background and upbringing. God is interested in your heart; He wants to live life with you, as He made you to be.

To return to the Irish Olympic rowers for a moment: they were asked if it was difficult to get back in the boat and back to disciplined training once the Olympics had finished. The answer was, again, very simple: *not really, you just put the boat back in the water, same as before.*

When our heart has chosen Jesus, when we desire to keep the faith and finish the race well, then we just keep putting the boat back in the water. We open the Bible again, we speak to Jesus as we go about our daily duties, we ask the Holy Spirit how we can be the light of Christ that day. Whatever we do, wherever we are, we choose to put the boat in the water each day and paddle with Jesus, for Jesus, towards the finish line. Amen.

Response

We are going to pause and reflect for a moment. When I was at university, I met an American student who recited Psalm 34 from memory, and one verse she spoke has stayed with me and been on my mind as I

prepared this talk. That verse is, 'taste and see that the LORD is good'. Caleb and Paul tasted and saw that the LORD was good and ran towards Him. They knew Him, they chose Him and they did not regret that choice.

If anyone is choosing to run towards Jesus for the first time, please do ask someone to pray with you.

If anyone wants to put their boat back in the water, then again, please do come for prayer.

I am going to read Psalm 34:1-8 in a moment, as I think both Caleb and Paul would use these words as their testimony and encouragement to us all. Before I do so, there are some slices of apple and honey here, and I would like to invite you take some and eat, as a reminder that whenever we come to God, we will taste and see that He is good.

I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul shall make its boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear of it and be glad.

Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.

I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.

They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed.

This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!

Let's pray...