

Scripture: Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Message: Keep on Believing and Living

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An accomplished artist was applying the finishing touches to a bronze sculpture. He kept filing, scraping, and polishing every little surface of his masterpiece. "When will it be done?" asked an observer.

"Never," came the reply. "I just keep working and working until they come and take it away."

Much the same could be said of those who are children of God. We are saved by grace. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus. Yet when it comes to the matter of being like Jesus in our everyday living, we must keep working at it until the end of our lives. The acorn does not become an oak tree in a day. The accomplished musician did not come that far by a single lesson. It is not one touch of the artist's brush that produces a masterpiece painting. There are always months between seedtime and harvest.

In our verses from Hebrews 5 and 6 the author encourages his readers to continue to grow in faith. He talks about the need for solid food, not milk; for growing beyond the basic, elementary truths; for building on the foundation and going on to maturity.

When we reach certain stages in our lives, we may have a sense of having "arrived." After years of grade school and high school and university, a person finally gets the degree they have been working for and there is a sense of having arrived. "I've accomplished something." It's a similar sense of arrival when a person gets their driver's license. Now they have arrived into the real world of adulthood where there is independence. Some people have this sense of "having arrived" when they get their first pension cheque. Now they have come, after years of work, to the stage of accomplishment and rest.

That attitude might also be present in our faith life. It happens when a person settles down to the satisfaction of being saved. The general pattern of thinking is, "Good! I've heard the gospel, I've trusted Christ, my sins are forgiven, I'm on my way to heaven—I have arrived! This is it—now I can settle down and coast the rest of the way."

Or maybe at some point in their faith journey someone says, "I've lived my faith well enough. I've learned enough. I've served enough. I think I'll take it easy."

The author of the book of Hebrews saw this happening in the early church to whom he was writing. They had so much going for them in their faith and relationship with the Lord and Saviour. But they weren't going anywhere with it. They were not getting beyond the basics. They were not growing up into maturity.

Parents of a newborn child know that their baby must be fed milk for her nourishment.

A baby is still too small for some delicious meat, potatoes and vegetables or pizza or lasagna. But if my wife and I enjoyed only milk at every meal, I would probably not be well enough to stand in this pulpit. Milk is certainly very important, having proper nutrients and vitamins and protein. But it cannot remain the sole ingredient in one's diet as a person grows older.

So also with our spiritual food. We teach our children in Kids Club beginning at a very young age. But what is taught during the service to a 4-year old child is very different from what will be discussed on Thursday evening at youth group. Parents would be pretty upset if big theological words and definitions were taught to their 4-year olds. And parents would be equally upset if simple Bible stories were all that was taught on Thursday night.

So the writer to the Hebrews tells his readers that it is time to move beyond the basics. They have learned and come to understand the basics of their faith well enough. Now they must move on to more solid food. It's not that we reject the basic elementary truths in moving beyond them, as if we don't need them anymore. These truths are a foundation.

A foundation is a solid and secure base on which we can build. A foundation is something that, once laid, we can fully trust ourselves to—and get on with the business of construction.

Some elements of this foundation are identified in the first verses of Hebrews 6. There is repentance from acts that lead to death and faith in God. Repentance means admitting wrong and turning away from it. This is confessing sin and choosing to live in a way that honours God.

With repentance comes faith in God. If repentance is a negative action of turning away from sin, faith is a positive action of accepting Christ and receiving life in Christ.

This foundation includes instruction about baptism and the laying on of hands. Baptism in the name of the Triune God is an expression of identity, God making promises and identifying us as part of his family.

Laying on of hands is a symbol of setting someone apart in service for the Lord. We do not go about living our faith by ourselves, but we are part of a community that identifies and supports its leaders.

There is the belief in the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Christ died for our sins, and he rose again. If Christ was not raised, then our faith would be in vain. One day we will all rise from the dead and stand before the great Judge.

These are part of the foundation of our lives. When a builder is putting up a house, he first lays down a good foundation. But once the foundation is in place, he does not spend days and weeks and months walking around the foundation, checking it out, admiring its strength, and wondering if it is good enough. He *builds* on the foundation.

When we, as followers of Jesus, know that the foundation of our faith is in place, we can

move to maturity by building on it. We don't have to worry about our relationship with God. We *know* that he loves us. We *know* that we are saved. We *know* the good news of the gospel.

Now, move on from there to grow into maturity. That takes work and effort and risk. It's a lot easier to walk around the foundation and admire its strength.

Being part of a body of believers, we must continually be growing, maturing, living out the implications of our faith. This includes challenging one another and helping each other to grow in our faith and trust and becoming more like Christ. As adults, this means getting involved in the lives of children and youth. Leaders in Kids Club, GEMS and Cadets are helping children to know the foundation of their lives and build on it. Bible studies are places where we can help one another build on the foundation of our faith. Elders and deacons and pastoral care workers can call us to account when they see us wallowing in childish simplicity instead of growing in maturity. They can ask questions and present challenges to lead us to greater growth. This goes beyond our programs to the relationships that we have with each other, where we encourage and challenge each other.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, once told a story about a flock of geese in Denmark. Every Sunday the geese would gather in the barnyard near the feeding trough. One of their number, a 'preaching goose,' would struggle up on the top rail of the fence and exhort the geese about the glories of goosedom. He would tell them how wonderful it was to be a goose, rather than a chicken or a turkey. He would remind them of their great heritage and tell them of the marvelous possibilities in the future.

Occasionally, while he was preaching, a flock of wild geese, winging south from Sweden, across the Baltic Sea on their way to sunny France, would fly, high overhead, in a marvelous V-formation. When that happened, all the geese would excitedly look and say to one another, 'That's who we really are. We are not destined to spend our lives in this stinking barnyard. Our destiny is to fly!'

But then the wild geese would disappear from sight, their honkings echoing across the horizon. The barnyard geese would look around at their comfortable surroundings, sigh, and return to the mud and filth of the barn. They never did fly.

Are you settled and comfortable? Are you growing spiritually? Have you moved beyond the elementary truths?

Don Whitney of the Navigators suggests some questions to ask to make sure you are still growing. We might not see growth over a week or month, but ask these questions to evaluate the past 6 to 12 months.

1. Are you more thirsty for God?
2. Are you more and more loving?

3. Are you more sensitive to and aware of God?
4. Are you governed more and more by God's Word?
5. Are you more concerned with the physical and spiritual needs of others?
6. Are you more concerned with the Church and the Kingdom of God?
7. Are the disciplines of the Christian life (such as prayer, worship, fasting, giving) more important to you?
8. Are you more aware of your sin?
9. Are you more willing to forgive others?

Growth in faith happens intentionally, not automatically. Without definite purpose and occasional evaluation, we may find that we get stagnant in our faith, and maybe even drift from our walk with the Lord.

We don't need to be discouraged by slow spiritual growth, as long as we are growing! Direction is more important than speed. The question isn't always *how quickly* we are growing, but rather *is there* growth and maturity?

Consider the illustration in vv. 7-8. Rain keeps falling on the land as a continual blessing from God. The land drinks in the rain. One part of the land is being cultivated, and as a result of this diligent labour it keeps on producing the fruit of the field to nourish the people; in full view of everyone God is blessing the land, the labourers, and the persons receiving the crops.

Although the other part of the land receives rain, no one tills the field, or sows seed. The owner of the field does not seem to show interest in his land and therefore thorns and thistles take over. The useless land eventually will be cleared of these thorns and thistles by burning them.

The point is, believers and those who do not believe receive continued blessings. If the heart of a person resists faith in God, all the blessings of God do not make that person grow in faith. Merely observing, tasting and experiencing the blessings of God cannot save a person unless genuine spiritual rebirth has taken place. When rebirth is evident and God's blessings are received with thanksgiving, spiritual life develops and brings forth fruit. Not the rain alone, but the rain and the labour expended in tilling the land, determine the crop that the land produces.

There is no standing still in our life of faith. We must continue to grow in our faith and obedience. We must persevere to grow in knowledge and to bear fruit.

God calls us to keep on believing and living out our faith. How is that happening in your life? Where is that happening beyond Sunday morning worship? How are you being encouraged by others? How are you challenging others?

How are you responding to God's blessings?

Amen.