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April 16th: Job 14 & Hebrews 5:11—6:20

April 15, 2021



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If a man dies, shall he live again? The imperative of spiritual progress to maturity.

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Transcript

Job chapter 14. Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers.

He flees like a shadow and continues not. And do you open your eyes on such a one, and bring me into judgment with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one. Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass, look away from him and leave him alone, that he may enjoy like a hired hand his day.

For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease, though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud, and put out branches like a young plant. But a man dies, and is laid low, man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake, and a

river wastes away and dries up, so a man lies down and rises not again, till the heavens are no more, he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep. O that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait till my renewal should come.

You would call, and I would answer you, you would long for the work of your hands, for then you would number my steps, you would not keep watch over my sin, my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and you would cover over my iniquity. But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place, the waters wear away the stones, the torrents wash away the soil of the earth, so you destroy the hope of man, you prevail forever against him, and he passes, you change his countenance and send him away, his sons come to honour, and he does not know it, they are brought low, and he perceives it not, he feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself. Job chapter 14 concludes the first cycle of discourses, in the preceding chapter Job had declared his intent of calling God to deal with him and his case face to face, in this chapter Job continues to speak of his situation, and a small note of hope emerges midway through, over the course of the chapter Job uses a number of pieces of nature imagery, and they move from the weakest to the strongest as Norman Harville observes, from flowers and shadows to trees to lakes and rivers to mountains.

Man is a weak and immortal creature, the chapter opens with Job exploring this point, man's days are few and they have little to offer but difficulty and trouble, Job's words at this point might remind us of places like Psalm 90 verses 5-6 and 9-10, you sweep them away as with a flood, they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning, in the morning it flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it fades and withers, for all our days pass away under your wrath, we bring our years to an end like a sigh, the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty, yet their span is but toil and trouble, they are soon gone and we fly away, though man may bloom beautifully like a flower, his glory is but fragile and short-lasting, and it soon passes away, he is insubstantial and fleeting like a shadow, leaving no mark behind him. Harville argues that verse 3 refers to the opening of God's eyes upon Job's situation, to God's response to Job's request that he come into judgment with him. John Hartley by contrast argues that this needs to be read against the mismatch between God and his creature.

Job is asking why the great and transcendent creator would fix his gaze in such a devastating way upon one of his weak and frail creatures. In chapter 4, in the first of the speeches of the friends, Eliphaz had argued that, next to God, no human being or mortal could be pure. The meaning of verse 4 is difficult to determine, but this thought may lie in the background of it.

As a mere mortal, Job cannot hope to survive if he is judged according to the holiness of a transcendent God. Against the utter brilliance of God's glory, the smallest imperfection

in Job would be exposed in the most glaring and unforgiving of ways. God has set limits for the life of man, a span for his days, like the limits set upon the sea.

Job wishes that within these limits, the Lord would spare him as his frail servant from the consuming power of his gaze. No creature can withstand it. If man must live a life of toil, then at the least he desires that the Lord let him alone while he does so.

Back in chapter 8, Bildad the Shuhite had presented his analogy of the two plants. In verses 16-19 of that chapter, he is a lush plant before the sun, and his shoots spread over his garden, his roots entwine the stone heap, he looks upon a house of stones. If he is destroyed from his place, then it will deny him, saying, I have never seen you.

Behold, this is the joy of his way, and out of the soil others will spring. While many commentators have read this as an extension of Bildad's image of a single destroyed plant, Robert Gordas and others following him argue that there are two plants being referred to here, and that the second plant is one that is destroyed and then rises up again. Job explores a similar image in verses 7 and following of this chapter.

There is a tree that is cut down, and yet there is hope that it might sprout again. New life can emerge even from its seemingly old root and dead stump. However, man is quite different from such a tree.

If a man dies, is there such hope for him? His life is like dried up water, leaving behind a dead and desert place. There is no seeming hope of his being revived. At this point in the chapter, and in Job's speech, there is as it were a break in the storm clouds.

For a moment a shard of the sunlight of hope comes through. It comes in the form of a thought about death and resurrection. Job has just given the example of the tree that dies and can rise again, and now he goes on to imagine what it would be like if he could do the same.

For the duration of the time of God's burning wrath and anger, Job wishes that he could be hidden in Sheol, that he might, as it were, take refuge in the grave. He would be concealed, and when the fierce storm of God's anger passed, the Lord would have set a time for hearing Job's case, would remember him, and he would come forth. If there were such a hope, Job would be prepared to live out the rest of his life, no matter how difficult the period of service might be.

He would lie in his grave waiting for the summons, and the Lord would call and his creature would answer him. While he had once treated him harshly, the Lord would long for his creation, and as Job answered his Creator's call, he would come forth and the Lord would have forgotten his sin. The Lord would now watch over him, but not for judgment, for blessing.

His transgressions, his faults and his impurities would all be covered over, and the Lord

would smile upon Job. And yet this bright parting of the clouds only lasts for a short while. Soon Job falls into shadow again.

Mountains and rocks are symbols of strength and power and endurance, of those things that are toughest and most resilient. And even if man's hope were like those things, they would be worn away by the battering might of the Lord that erodes all before it. God ultimately prevails even over all the hopes of man.

Man is sent away. He ends up in Sheol, where he is cut off from the land of the living. He does not know the fate of those that have come after him.

He is trapped in bitter pain and mourning, with no hope to anticipate. This contrasts with Job's earlier description of the realm of the dead, in chapter 3 verses 17-19, where he longed to be released into it. There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest.

There the prisoners are at ease together. They hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master.

A question to consider. What are some of the earliest passages evidencing a hope of resurrection in the scripture? Hebrews 5-11-6-20 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ, and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

And this we will do, if God permits. For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm, and holding him up to contempt. For lamb that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.

But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless, and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your

work, and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you. And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

It may seem as if the author of Hebrews has been taking us into rich territory of biblical insight, yet he feels keenly the limitations of his hearers. He wants to take them so much further, but he just isn't sure that they are ready for such advanced teaching. They still don't seem to have grasped many of the basics.

He remarks upon the poor progress of his hearers at the end of chapter 5. Considering how much teaching they had received, and how much time they had been learning, they should have grown so much further in their understanding, to the point of being teachers themselves. Indeed, he wonders if their grasp of the fundamentals themselves isn't a bit shaky at this point. Perhaps they have even regressed in their understanding to the point of being like babies, needing to be fed milk, unable to take solid food.

They are students with the dunce's hat on their head, being placed in the remedial class. They are unskilled and childlike, they lack the necessary capacity both to digest solid food, or the powers of discernment required of healthy eaters, who are active in discriminating and determining what they take in. One can perhaps imagine the author of Hebrews saying all of this with a slight twinkle in his eye.

By presenting the teaching that he wishes to give them as beyond their capacity and level of maturity, they will be provoked to protest that they are ready. Had he simply ploughed on into it, they might have grumbled that his teaching was too difficult and challenging. However, now they have been given something to prove, and will be eager to pay closer attention.

Within this, we should also recognise the emphasis that the author of Hebrews, along

with the other New Testament authors, places upon advancing Christians in their understanding, always pushing them to the next level. The author of Hebrews is concerned that his hearers are at the point where they can understand complicated and challenging teachings about Old Testament symbolism, narrative and typology. Wisdom involves the knowledge of good and evil, the ability to discern between these things.

The wise person has moved beyond the basics of pre-digested food, and they are able to test things for themselves. They are active learners, committed to growing in their own knowledge, having learnt some of the skills by which one can discern the difference between truth and error, and feeding themselves consistently. Having needled his hearers by suggesting that they are not yet prepared to advance in their study of the Christian faith, the author of Hebrews hopes to provoke them to try to prove him wrong.

Verse 1 of chapter 6 presumes that after such a challenge, the hearers will be eager to progress. Ok then, let's move forward. They should leave the basic classes behind, not having forgotten or abandoned their lessons, but moving on to the more advanced classes, in which the fundamentals are far more developed.

They are moving forward to perfection or maturity, the same thing that Christ attained to through his sufferings, in chapter 2 verse 10 and 5 verse 9. What are the most fundamental teachings, or the elementary doctrine of Christ? The list might be divided into three pairs, repentance and faith, baptisms and the laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement. Repentance is repentance from dead works, or from works that lead to death. The dead works are almost certainly not works done to attempt to earn salvation, but rather sinful works that have death and judgement as their natural harvest.

Repentance involves turning away from such things, and having turned away from them, we turn towards God and faith. Faith is the counterpart of repentance. Instruction about washings, or literally baptisms, refers to the instruction concerning the meaning of Christian baptism, quite possibly in its relationship to other baptisms, such as the baptisms of the priests in the Old Testament, the baptism of John and other ritual washings.

The laying on of hands is another ritual action of importance in appointment to office, in blessing and healing, and also in connection with baptism. It is probably on account of its relationship to baptism that it is mentioned here. The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement are the final foundational teachings that the author of Hebrews lists.

These concern the last things. At the end, the dead will be raised and will face final judgement. The judgement is eternal, its outcomes, positive or negative, will be both final and enduring.

The list of fundamental doctrines that he gives here might be a little surprising. They

have a more practical weight to them. They concern how we are personally to respond to the message of Christ, how we are initiated into Christian community and the horizon to which we must live.

The author wants to take his hearers beyond the basics and trusts that God will make his teaching effective in this regard. He is deeply concerned for their progress in no small measure because standing still is not an option. Those who are not progressing are in real danger of falling away.

He is exhorting them to continued growth, expecting that they will heed him. However, his exhortation consists not merely of encouragements and promises but also of very serious and grave warnings. Although these warnings are framed in a more generic fashion, not addressed to any particular group of or among the hearers of the book, and the author is confident that his hearers will respond appropriately, the warnings are not empty ones.

Indeed, I believe that they refer to a specific group of people especially. The language is the language of Christian experience, but I suspect that he is here referring to the unbelieving Jews of that generation and previous generations who opposed the Gospel and rejected Christ. He is earlier spoken of people who received the good news, as those who were in the wilderness led by Moses.

They had a similar sort of experience but they did not respond by faith. The apostle Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 1-4. For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. The purpose of such a way of speaking is to get Christians to recognise the similarities between them and the children of Israel who were led by Moses into the wilderness. He had already been doing this in chapters 3 and 4. Once they recognised the similarities, they will be warned about any presumption that they might have, appreciating that such great gifts can be forfeited by those who respond to God's immense goodness with unbelief.

The children of Israel were once enlightened. They had the fire of God's presence in their midst. They were led through the waters and declared to be God's own people.

God lighted their way both physically and spiritually. They tasted the heavenly gift. As Paul puts it, they ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink.

They participated in Christ himself. They shared in the Holy Spirit. Isaiah chapter 63 verse 11 speaks of the Lord placing his Holy Spirit in the midst of the people of Israel

when he brought them out of Egypt.

There are similar claims in Israel's national confession of sin in Nehemiah chapter 9. For instance in verses 19-20 You and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manner from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.

They tasted the goodness of the word of God, having actual first-hand experience of God's good provision. They had tasted the powers of the age to come. They had experienced his might over creation, in judgment and healing, in the plagues of Egypt and in the miraculous provision of the wilderness.

However, even after first-hand experience of all of these things, an experience also shared by many non-believing Jews with first-hand experience of the ministry of Christ, they still rejected the word of the Lord and fell in the wilderness. At such a point, after they had experienced so much, yet determinedly hardened their hearts and what is more, rejected such a great salvation so decisively, there was no remaining hope for them. They were condemned to destruction and they perished, their bodies falling in the wilderness.

Christ was once crucified, made an open shame before others. For the author of Hebrews it is as if those who reject the gospel are inflicting a sort of a second crucifixion upon Christ, if that were indeed possible, holding him up for shame to the world and cutting him off from themselves. However, they are the ones who will lose out, they are doing this to their harm.

The author of Hebrews describes such a situation by contrasting land that is well watered and responds with fruitfulness and a good crop to that land if it bears thorns or thistles. It is the same land but two different potential responses. It seems to me that he is here referring to the poor response of Israel to the many blessings of God over the centuries and to the fact that the judgment of God is about to fall upon it.

Behind this might lie Old Testament passages such as Isaiah chapter 5 and its song of the vineyard. The point of this is that the recipients of the book ought to see a cautionary resemblance between themselves and the people of Moses who failed in the wilderness. If they are careless they could fail too.

Beyond this, however, they faced the temptation of falling back into the unbelieving Judaism that they left behind. However, that unbelieving Judaism was doomed on account of its unbelief. It had experienced all of these blessings yet persisted in its unbelief.

There was no hope of salvation to be found there. However, the author does not believe that the judgment awaiting the unbelieving Jews awaits those to whom he is writing. All of the signs in their case point in a far more promising direction.

To this point they have manifested commitment and fruitfulness in their faith and love and they continue to do so. Yet they should beware of complacency or presumption at this point. They must earnestly press forward, grasping hold ever more firmly of the promised reality that they await.

The more sure their grip upon that, the more prepared that they will be to persevere, inheriting the promises in the end. Perseverance for the author of Hebrews is related to our grasping hold of God's promises and people can be strengthened in their perseverance as they are assured of the strength and the surety of God's promises. He ends this chapter by directing their attention to the power of God's promise.

Not only did God make a promise which he would not lie about or renege upon, he also accompanied the promise with a vow, swearing by himself, to give us two things of certainty that we can rest upon. For the author of Hebrews, the sure and the certain promise of God is like an anchor which through Jesus has been placed in heaven itself. We are able to cling onto a promise that is attached to God's very throne.

Christ's high priestly status assures us in all of this. He is the high priest who has gone ahead of us into God's holy presence, into the heavenly realm that corresponds to the Holy of Holies. A question to consider.

What lessons about Christian growth might we learn from this passage?