

“Middle School Faith”

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If your faith is still in Middle School, there's a problem.

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

June 5, 2022 – Confirmation Sunday

Transition

Today is Confirmation Sunday. At the 8:30 service twenty-six 12 and 13-year-olds formally confessed their faith and joined the Corinth Reformed Church family.

What do you remember about Middle School? It was a time of transition for me. Wasn't it for everyone? Not like it was for me. My transition was unique. Four words summarize my Middle School years.

Family: We returned to the U.S. from Pakistan in 1968. I had just finished 6th grade in a missionary boarding school, and now enrolled in a public school – Harry A. Hunt Jr. High School in Portsmouth, Virginia. I was naïve about how awkward and different I was. I ran for class office against a popular girl. Why?

Fear: It was a time of racial tension in Portsmouth. My brother was attacked without provocation by a gang of black youths and lost an eye. Years later would I understand the decades, even centuries, of frustration that were boiling over into our streets and schools.

Food: My mother used to give me 60 cents each day for lunch – 50 cents for the cafeteria line and 10 cents for an optional ice cream sandwich. Somehow I wound up staffing the ice cream sandwich freezer at Harry Hunt. I don't know if that was the excuse, but I didn't go through the cafeteria line. I bought six ice cream sandwiches.

Faith: I was baptized by immersion in my Southern Baptist church, just like some of our young people were baptized last Sunday. I had committed my life to Christ at a missionary kids' camp earlier that year while we were still in Pakistan. The Baptist

church gave me a love for the Bible and opportunities to serve through teaching younger kids, but also some confusion in my Middle School faith.

My experience was unique, but so was everyone else's. Every Middle Schooler's life is unique. There were important transitions, but I wouldn't want to go back.

The passage before us is not, in my view, as complicated or difficult as it appears to be on the surface. Let me summarize it briefly, then we'll unpack it a bit. Middle School faith is foundational and wonderful – when you're in Middle School. Twenty years later, if your faith is still in Middle School, there's a problem.

Four analogies

One of my great loves is making the Bible accessible. I'm not trying to mash every Scripture passage into baby food, but I have a little advantage over some – but not all – of you in resources and experiences.

Chalk this passage up as an advantage in "experiences." I've been pondering this passage especially Hebrews 6, almost since Middle School. That adds up to about fifty years. I was President of my high school Bible Club, which was split between Southern Baptists (including me) and Freewill Baptists. Our meetings were often held at the Freewill Baptist church, so they had home field advantage.

The primary disagreement between the two denominations was, and I presume still is, over the question of eternal security. Hebrews 6:4-6 was a favorite of the Freewill Baptists, so it came up frequently. To them it was clear that not only can a believer lose their salvation, it's impossible to win them back once they do. Freewill Baptists loved a good spiritual threat. Southern Baptists had our own way of keeping the faithful in check, but we insisted someone who fell away was never saved in the first place.

One of my favorite responses now to questions like that – and Bible passages like this – is, "PLEASE STOP!!!" You're acting like a Middle Schooler. You're trying to win a theological debate instead of asking what the Holy Spirit intends to convey in this passage. That's what I mean by trying to make the Bible accessible. If we'll stop trying to explain this text in light of what else we believe, it's not that complicated.

Making the Bible accessible is also why I like referring to our anonymous author as Barney. It's a pastoral name to me, a name that conveys warmth. Pastor Barney is preaching a sermon to Christians who are both Jewish and Greek. He loves them, and he's concerned about them, and he doesn't want them to stay in spiritual Middle School where, among other things, they only want to win an argument. What Barney does in the verses we read this morning is to use four simple analogies to encourage his congregation to move beyond Middle School faith.

Eating (5:11-14). He calls them spiritual babies. I'm quite sure he's exaggerating to make a point. But it works, doesn't it? The graphic illustration gets your attention. Barney tells them they've stopping trying to grow spiritually. They "no longer try to understand" (11). They should be feeding milk to the babies instead of taking it away because they can't stomach solid food. They hardly know what's right and wrong. Again, that's a baby v. adult analogy. You don't expect a baby not to be selfish, not to be inconsiderate, to demand a diaper change or bottle with loud cries.

Learning (6:1-3). The second paragraph takes this a little further. The phrase "elementary teachings" translates a word that means "first things" – like ABCs. It would be rather odd for a graduate student to say, "Professor, could we go over the alphabet again? I can't remember whether M follows N or the other way around." Barney gives a list of spiritual "first things." It's a strikingly similar list to what non-Christian Jews held – repentance and faith, cleansing rites and other rituals, resurrection and judgment. Pharisees believed in all of that, and debated those topics with others. They are all Old Covenant topics – which doesn't make them unimportant, just ABCs.

Cultivating (6:4-8). To get to the point of the next section, skip the verses that tend to create the most difficulty and debate (4-6) and get to the analogy. A farmer, Barney says, has two kinds of fields – the kind that produces a useful crop and the kind that grows worthless weeds. You can argue that there are more than two kinds of soil – Jesus identified four – but you'd be missing the point. Over time, if the farmer doesn't eliminate the weeds, fertilize and irrigate, even good land will become infertile. What it grows will be good for a bonfire, and that's it. Again, the image is dramatic and visual because he wants it burned (pun intended) into your mind and heart.

Running (6:9-12). The final image is from the race track, and it won't be the last time Barney employs it. What he does, though, is to tell his congregation that he's not talking about them in verses 4-8. He doesn't downplay the theoretical possibility that they might fall away, but he now does what his name implies. Barnabas means "Encourager," and he says to them, "You can do this. I'm convinced of it. You work hard and you love well. Don't stop. Finish the race. Don't be the hare racing the tortoise, lying down for a nap. Imitate those who persevere in faith and patience. He'll offer an entire list of faith heroes in chapter 11.

His point is that faith doesn't stagnate. It either grows or fades. Keep yours growing so you don't spend a lifetime in Middle School.

Grace

So where's the grace in all of this? Why doesn't Barney remind them that God loves them where they are, gives second chances, forgives their sins in Christ? If you want that lesson, come back last week or next week. Let Barney focus this week on challenging you never to be content with Middle School faith. Middle School faith is for Middle Schoolers – not for you. Grow up.

But I would argue there is grace in all he says.

There's grace in truth. When you see someone faltering, it's kind to point it out. Barney tells them, "You're not even trying anymore. You're not going to progress without effort."

Middle Schoolers are so full of life and enthusiasm, but they're starting to make their own choices. It's the way it should be. Parents start testing and developing their wisdom when given a little freedom. If I'm not checking on you constantly, are you experimenting with illicit substances, abusing the Internet, bullying other kids, eating well, doing your homework? Any one of those areas if not managed well in Middle School, can destroy your life. The reason I tell you that is because I love you. There's grace in truth.

There's grace in partnership. Barney loves to frame his exhortations with "Let us." Come on – you and me, we'll do this together. I'm in it with you. I'm not going to tell you what to do. I'm going to show you. Barney's a player-coach who's out on the field working just as hard as the team. He's a general who leads his army from the front. He's a teacher who's earning a graduate degree. "Come on, let's keep learning together." There's grace in partnership.

There's grace in warning. Yes, I know verses 4-6 sound harsh, and you want Barney to soften it. He says, "It's impossible to repent if you fall away." He's stating a fact, not trying to frighten anyone. If you've come to Jesus because you needed him so desperately but then disgraced him by forsaking him, you're not coming back. Barney's seen it happening. Your heart gets hard, and you say to yourself, "Been there, done that. It didn't work for me." This is Barney setting you up for a much deeper look at Jesus as high priest in the chapters to come. The problem wasn't that Jesus wasn't enough for you, it's that you didn't go deep enough into him.

There's grace in promise. If you only read through verse 6 or verse 8, you missed the good stuff. You've got so many models of those who stayed with Jesus even when life was unbearably hard, even when life ended unbearably hard. They are the ones who look back in time and eternity and say, "It was worth it. I'd do it all again." They're like the married couple who made it to 50 years, the Ph.D. who got the dream job, the rock climber who made it to the top. Of course you're going to suffer through the struggle along the way. In the middle of it, Barney's going to say, "Keep going. Get to the end. A prize awaits." There's so much grace in those words.

All that grace flows from the cross. It all emerges from grace through the high priest who suffered with us and for us and has passed through death into resurrection and now sits at the right hand of the Father. It all makes sense when we filter life through the table of the Lord. Let's gather around and remember him. Amen.