

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

A Catholic Journey Through the Letter to the Hebrews

Session 5 · An Anchor of the Soul · Hebrews 5:11–6:20

LEADER'S GUIDE · NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Part 1 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group takes the preacher's rebuke on the chin (milk when they should be eating meat), faces the most frightening warning in the New Testament with the whole tradition's honesty, and discovers where the sermon lands after the earthquake: an oath God swore by himself, and a hope that anchors the soul behind the veil, where a forerunner has already entered. The night ends on a cliffhanger at 6:20.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church's ancient answer to rigorism. Hebrews 6:4–6 was the favorite text of the Novatianists, who denied that the Church could ever absolve the lapsed and restore them to her communion, leaving them to God alone; the Church condemned them and kept absolving, and the Fathers (Chrysostom, Ambrose, Cyprian) show how the text was read without either blunting the warning or barring the door. Also: the sacramental echoes of 6:4–5 (enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit) that the tradition has heard as Baptism, Eucharist, and the gift of the Spirit.

What You Need to Know

The rebuke (5:11–6:3). “About this we have much to say,” the preacher begins, meaning Melchizedek, “which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Then the scolding: by this time you ought to be teachers; you need milk, not solid food. Two notes for the room. First, the diagnosis is become dull: regression, not incapacity; these are people who once knew better, which is drift's signature again. Second, the milk list of 6:1–2 (repentance, faith, ablutions, laying on of hands, resurrection, judgment) is a startlingly recognizable catechesis: the basics the preacher assumes look like a baptismal formation program. The sermon's cure for dullness, note well, is not remediation but ambition: “let us go on to maturity.” You grow by being fed past your comfort, which is a fine word for a Bible study to hear about itself.

The warning (6:4–6), read whole. “It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit... if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.” Three anchors for honest reading. First, the descriptions are real: the ancient Church heard her sacraments in them: enlightened, *phōtisthentas*, was her own settled word for the baptized (Justin Martyr already calls Baptism illumination, First Apology 61, and Chrysostom reads 6:4 this way), and Catholic readers early and late have heard the Eucharist in the heavenly gift tasted and

the gift of the Spirit, later distinguished as Confirmation, in partakers of the Holy Spirit: these are fully initiated Christians, not almost-believers, or the warning is noise. Second, the sin in view is apostasy: the deliberate, knowing repudiation of Christ by his own, described in present participles, which the Church's tradition has long read as ongoing action: while they are crucifying the Son of God on their own account, restoration is impossible. The grammar permits that reading; the tradition and the Church's settled practice of absolving the penitent confirm it: the impossibility attaches to the persisting repudiation, not to God's arm or the Church's keys. Third, the tradition's verdict, forged in fire: when the Decian persecution produced actual apostates by the thousand, the rigorist Novatian read this text as a locked door, and the Church condemned him and absolved the penitent lapsed. Chrysostom's reading became the classic patristic answer: the impossible thing is a second baptism, renewing the apostate again through the once-for-all bath, not the door of penance, which stands open. The Catechism's astonishing sentence is the session's north star: there is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest (CCC 982).

The turn (6:9–12), and the oath (6:13–18). Immediately after the thunder: “though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things.” Beloved, the sermon's only use of the word, placed one verse after its harshest paragraph: mark the pastoral craft, and note the Better Tally wakes up (6:9). Then the ground of assurance: God, wanting to convince the heirs of promise beyond doubt, “interposed with an oath,” swearing by himself as he did to Abraham (Genesis 22:16–17, the live discovery), “so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we... might have strong encouragement.” The chapter that contains Scripture's scariest impossible ends on a sweeter one: it is impossible for God to lie. Two impossibilities, and the second outweighs the first for every penitent on earth.

The anchor, and the cliffhanger (6:19–20). “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” Unpack the image for your own preparation: an anchor that holds not by going down but by going in, behind the veil, into the Holy of Holies (Leviticus 16, especially verses 2, 11-19, and 34: the room one man entered, one day a year, never without blood; log the veil quietly). And a forerunner, *prodromos*: the advance runner who enters so the rest can follow, a word never used of Aaron, who entered alone so that no one else would. Then the name, third time, and the chapter ends. You end there too: not one verse further. Chapter 7 opens the file the group has been sealed against for five weeks, and next session opens it together with the guesses. Enforce the cliffhanger with the same good humor and total resolve as always.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 22:16–17. After the binding of Isaac: “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD... I will indeed bless you.” God, having no one greater, swears by himself. The live discovery grounding 6:13–18: the promise to Abraham runs on a divine oath, and 6:17 says the heirs of the promise (us) were the oath's intended beneficiaries all along.

Leviticus 16:2. “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil... lest he die.” The veil as mortal boundary: behind it, one man, one day a year, with blood. Verse 2 gives the veil and the mortal danger; the once-a-year rule and the blood come from the rest of the chapter (16:11-19, 34). Read it for yourself before the session and log it; 6:19 sends our hope precisely there, and the sermon will live behind that curtain for chapters to come. Tonight it is scenery; do not develop it.

Numbers 23:19. “God is not man, that he should lie.” Leader background for the two unchangeable things: the oath adds nothing to God's reliability; it condescends to ours, the way a father crosses his heart for a child who has been lied to before.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*

Preaching this very warning to his congregation, Chrysostom asks the frightened question aloud: is repentance then excluded? By no means, he answers: what is impossible is to be renewed again through baptism, to crucify Christ afresh in a second washing; the bath is once for all, but penance remains open all our days. The reading that became the tradition's touchstone on 6:4-6 comes from the pulpit, addressed to people who needed the door left open, by a preacher who refused to blunt the warning to do it.

St. Ambrose of Milan *Concerning Repentance*

Writing directly against the Novatianists who wielded Hebrews 6 to bar the fallen forever, St. Ambrose defends the Church's power and duty to restore the penitent: Christ gave his Church the keys, and those who deny pardon to the repentant make God's mercy smaller than his justice. The book exists because this text was misused, which makes it the session's expert witness.

St. Cyprian of Carthage *On the Lapsed*

When the Decian persecution left the Church full of Christians who had actually denied Christ under threat, St. Cyprian walked the narrow road: full seriousness about the fall (no cheap certificates of peace), and full restoration through real penance. The lapsed did public penance and knelt again at the altar. The Church read Hebrews 6 with the apostates standing in front of her, and she absolved them.

Catechism Connection

CCC 982. There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive; no one, however wicked, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided repentance is honest. Christ died for all: the door of forgiveness stands open to anyone who turns away from sin. Read it verbatim in the session; it is the night's north star.

CCC 1446. The Fathers called Penance the second plank after the shipwreck of lost grace: the Church's ancient metaphor conceding the shipwreck is real and providing the plank anyway. The exact both/and the warning requires.

CCC 1819. Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of Abraham, purified by the test of the sacrifice of Isaac: hoping against hope on the strength of God's promise and oath. The anchor's pedigree.

CCC 2091–2092. Despair and presumption, the two sins against hope: the twin ditches this chapter is engineered to steer between. The warning breaks presumption; the oath forbids despair.

Thread Watch

THE CLIFFHANGER (TONIGHT'S ONE COMMANDMENT)

The session ends at 6:20 and not one verse further. Do not open chapter 7, do not open Genesis 14, do not characterize Melchizedek. Announce exactly this much: "Next session, we open the file, and we open your sealed guesses with it. Bring your memory of what you wrote." If anyone has read ahead, deputize them into the conspiracy.

THREAD 2 · THE BETTER TALLY (PUBLIC: IT WAKES UP)

After three empty weeks, the board scores: "we feel sure of better things in your case" (6:9). Tally stands at two. Tell the group the drought is over and the flood is coming.

THREAD 3 · THE WE-HAVE INVENTORY (LEADER ONLY)

Second entry tonight, and it is a beauty: "we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (6:19). The list reads: a great high priest; an anchor. Keep it private.

Session Goals

1. The rebuke is received with humor and honesty: dullness is regression, and the cure is solid food, which this study intends to keep serving.
2. The warning is read whole: sacramental descriptions, present-tense apostasy, and the impossibility located precisely.
3. The steelman is run with both horns, and the Church's lived answer (the lapsed restored, Novatian condemned) lands as history, not theory.
4. The two impossibilities are weighed, and CCC 982 is read verbatim into the room.
5. The anchor image lands (an anchor that holds by going in), and the night ends at 6:20 with the room leaning forward.

Time Note

Built for 75 to 90 minutes. If the night runs short, compress the milk-and-meat opening (Questions 1 and 2 into one) and cut the Dig Deeper box, in that order. Do not cut the warning's careful reading (Questions 3 and 4), the steelman (Question 5, capped at fifteen minutes), or the oath and anchor close (Questions 7 through 9). No ANSWER box is a script, and tonight of all nights, tone matters more than coverage: someone in the room has a past, and this session is aimed at their hope.

Part 2 · Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Father of mercies, you swore by yourself because you had no one greater, and it is impossible for you to lie. Tonight your word will frighten us before it anchors us; let both do their work. Break any presumption in us, forbid all despair, feed us solid food, and moor every drifting soul in this room to the hope that has entered behind the veil. Through Christ our forerunner. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. Tell us about a coach, teacher, or mentor who scolded you and was right. What made the rebuke receivable, and what did it change?

W2. What is something you were once sharp at and have let go dull: a language, an instrument, a skill? How does dulling actually happen, and how did you notice?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 5:11–14

1. The preacher wants to talk about the Genesis name and stops himself: “hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Notice the verb: become dull. What does that tense tell us about the congregation, and how does the milk-and-meat image diagnose them? Be honest: where does our group sit on that scale?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Become: they regressed. These are not new believers who never learned; they are veterans who ought by now to be teachers and have slid back to needing the alphabet. Dullness of hearing is drift's dining habit: milk only, forever, because meat requires chewing. And the diagnostic in 5:14 is practice: the mature have their faculties trained by exercise, like athletes; discernment is a muscle, and muscles unused soften. Let the group self-assess with humor and without flinching; the fact that they are five weeks deep in Hebrews on a weeknight is already an answer, and the preacher's cure is coming in the next verse.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 6:1–3

2. The cure for dullness surprises: not remedial review, but “let us leave the elementary doctrines and go on to maturity.” Look at the milk list itself: repentance, faith, ablutions (washings), laying on of hands, resurrection, judgment. What does that list resemble, and what is the preacher's growth strategy?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The list reads like a baptismal catechesis: conversion, faith, baptism, confirmation's laying on of hands, the last things. These are the foundations, and the preacher honors them as foundations: you do not re-pour a foundation every spring; you build on it. His strategy is ambition: dull hearers

grow by being fed past their comfort, not by softer food. Which is a word to every parish that never graduates its adults past milk, and a mission statement for this study: we are going on to maturity, tonight, into the hardest paragraph in the New Testament.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 6:4–6, slowly, twice.

3. Before any interpretation: inventory the people described in verses 4 and 5. What five things have happened to them? The ancient Church heard her own sacraments in these phrases; “enlightened” (phōtisthentas) was her standard word for the baptized. Who, then, is this warning about, and why does that matter for how seriously we take it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Once enlightened; tasted the heavenly gift; made partakers of the Holy Spirit; tasted the goodness of the word of God; tasted the powers of the age to come. The tradition heard Baptism in the enlightening (the Fathers' own word for the baptized), and Catholic readers have long heard the Eucharist in the heavenly gift tasted and the gift of the Spirit in partakers of the Holy Spirit: fully initiated Christians, the real thing, not spectators or almost-believers. That is precisely what makes the warning weigh something: a caution addressed to people who were never really in would be noise. The sermon is talking about people like the people in this room, which is why we will read it carefully instead of quickly.

4. Now the frightening clause: “it is impossible to restore again to repentance... if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.” Two precision questions. First: what sin is in view: is this about big sins generally, or something specific? Second: look at the since clause: the crucifying and holding-in-contempt are ongoing, present-tense actions. If that is right, where exactly does the impossibility live?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The sin is apostasy: not weakness, not a bad year, not even grave sin as such, but the knowing, deliberate repudiation of Christ by one of his own: re-crucifying him, publicly, on one's own account. And the present participles support the reading the tradition made its own: restoration is impossible while the repudiation persists. The grammar alone does not settle it (the participles can also simply give the reason), but the logic and the Church's practice do: repentance and ongoing contempt cannot occupy the same heart. The verse describes a state, not a life sentence: a heart that is actively holding Christ up to scorn cannot simultaneously be turning to him, and no mechanism exists to repent someone who will not repent. What the verse does not say, and the whole tradition will now testify it does not say, is that God refuses the apostate who turns back. Hold that; the next question is where the Church bled over exactly this text.

5. Now the steelman, and this one has two horns, both held by serious people. Horn one, the Calvinist reading: true believers cannot finally fall away, so the people of 6:4-6, however real their experience of the Spirit's work, were never regenerate: the five clauses describe genuine covenant privileges short of saving faith, and the warning itself is one of God's

appointed means of preserving his elect, who persevere precisely by heeding it. Horn two, the rigorist reading, held by the ancient Novatianists: the warning means what it appears to mean, so Christians who lapse can never be restored: the Church must bar the door. Give each its strongest form: the first guards God's preserving grace; the second guards the warning's teeth. Then bring the evidence: the descriptions of verses 4 and 5, the present-tense grammar, and one piece of history: what did the Church actually do when the Decian persecution produced thousands of real apostates?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Horn one at full strength: John 10:28, Romans 8, God finishes what he starts; and at its strongest this reading does not call the people of verses 4 and 5 fakes: it says they had real but non-saving participation in the Spirit's work, and that God keeps his elect persevering precisely by means of warnings like this one. But we just inventoried verses 4 and 5: enlightened, fed, Spirit-indwelt: the text spends five clauses establishing that these are the real thing, precisely so the warning has weight. A warning about counterfeits would need none of it. And a warning that works as a means of perseverance only works because the fall it names is really possible for the people it describes; a hypothetical danger moves no one. Horn two at full strength: the text says impossible, and the ancient Novatianists, men of terrifying moral seriousness, took it straight: the Church may never absolve the lapsed; they stay outside her communion, commended to a mercy she is forbidden to administer. But the grammar locates the impossibility in the persisting repudiation, and here history testifies: when Decius' persecution filled the Church with actual apostates, the Church faced this exact verse with the lapsed weeping at her doors, and she condemned Novatian and absolved the penitent, through real and weighty penance (St. Cyprian's whole treatise; St. Ambrose's book against the rigorists; St. John Chrysostom preaching on this passage: what is impossible is a second baptism, not penance). The Catholic reading keeps both horns' treasures and drops their errors: the warning is real, because the fall is possible, against horn one; and the door is real, because it is impossible for God to refuse honest repentance, against horn two. The Catechism says it without flinching, and it deserves to be read aloud right now, verbatim: CCC 982. There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. Read it. Let it sit.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 6:7–12

6. Watch the pastoral pivot at verse 9: after the hardest paragraph he will ever write, the preacher says “beloved” for the only time in the sermon, and “we feel sure of better things in your case.” What is he modeling about how to warn people you love? And what evidence does verse 10 cite for his confidence in them?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The full severity, then the embrace: he warns like a father, not a prosecutor: the thunder is real and it is not the last word, and the beloved lands one verse after the lightning. His evidence for hope is disarmingly concrete: “your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” Not their feelings, their doctrine quizzes, or their certainty: their persevering charity. God is not so unjust as to overlook it. (And the Better Tally scores: better things, 6:9. Board

to two.)

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Genesis 22:16–17.

7. After what event does God swear this oath, and notice the strange formula: by whom does God swear, and why? Then Hebrews 6:17–18: for whose benefit was the oath interposed, and what are the “two unchangeable things”?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

After the binding of Isaac, Abraham's darkest obedience, God swears “by myself,” having no one greater. An oath adds nothing to God's reliability; it condescends to ours: a father crossing his heart for children who have been lied to by everyone else. And 6:17 says the beneficiaries were always “the heirs of the promise”: us. The two unchangeable things are God's promise and God's oath, and “it is impossible that God should prove false.” Mark the word: this chapter contains two impossibilities. It is impossible to repent a heart that will not stop crucifying him; and it is impossible for God to lie about receiving the heart that turns. For every penitent who ever lived, the second impossibility outweighs the first.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 6:19–20, and not one syllable further.

8. The image: “we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” Every other anchor holds by going down. Where does this one go: through what, into where? (Someone may recall what room lies behind a temple veil, and who was allowed there, how often.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It enters “into the inner shrine behind the curtain”: through the veil, into the Holy of Holies, the room one man entered one day a year, never without blood, on pain of death (Leviticus 16:2, with 16:14–15 and 16:34). Our anchor holds not by gripping the seabed of circumstances but by being fastened inside the innermost presence of God. Storms operate on the surface; the anchor point is behind the veil, where no storm has ever been. That is why the hope is “sure and steadfast”: not because our grip is, but because of where the other end is tied.

9. And who tied it there? Read verse 20 once more: Jesus has gone behind the veil “as a forerunner on our behalf.” Aaron entered the Holy of Holies alone so that no one else would; a forerunner (prodromos) enters so that the rest can what? And then the verse ends with a name, for the third time in this sermon, and the chapter ends. LEADER: close the Bibles.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Follow. A forerunner is the advance man of a company that is coming behind him: the word overturns the entire logic of the old Holy of Holies, where the high priest's solitary entrance protected everyone else's exclusion. This priest went in to hold the door. And he did it “having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” LEADER: stop the room. “That is the third time this sermon has said that name and refused to explain it. Five weeks ago you sealed a guess about him. Next session, we open Genesis, we open the psalm, and we open your guesses.

Bring everything.” End in prayer. Answer nothing.

SPOILER GUARD: The session ends at 6:20. No chapter 7, no Genesis 14, no characterizations of Melchizedek. The unsealing is next week, and it is earned by tonight's restraint.

DIG DEEPER

“We who have fled for refuge” (6:18): the phrase evokes Israel's cities of refuge (Numbers 35), where the manslayer who had killed without intent could run inside and be safe from the avenger of blood as long as he remained within; the deliberate murderer had no such refuge (Numbers 35:16-21, 22-25). The old refuge protected until the death of the high priest (Numbers 35:25). Ask the group, only if there is breath left: what happens to that time limit when the high priest lives for ever?

SEND • TAKING IT OUT THE DOOR

S1. Two impossibilities: a heart that will not turn cannot be restored, and God cannot lie to the heart that turns. Which impossibility have you been living as if it were the bigger one, for yourself or for someone you have written off?

S2. The preacher's evidence for hope in his people was their persevering, unglamorous charity (6:10). If someone audited your last month for that evidence, what would they find, and what one act this week would you want in the file?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray for one person you or others have quietly written off as too far gone, daily, by name, with CCC 982 open beside you.
2. Eat solid food: take the hardest question this study has raised for you so far and spend twenty minutes with it: Catechism, a trusted book, or a note to your leader.
3. Read Hebrews 7 before next session, with Genesis 14:17–20 alongside, and refresh your memory of what you sealed in Session 1. Do not revise it. The seal comes off.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

HEBREWS 6:19 (RSV2CE)

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain.”

CLOSING PRAYER

God of Abraham, who swore by yourself because there was no one greater: you have warned us tonight and anchored us in the same hour. Keep us from the drift that dulls, the presumption that never trembles, and the despair that calls your mercy smaller than our sin. Our hope is moored behind the veil, where our forerunner holds the door. We will follow him there. Amen.

Part 3 · Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or assigned in Session 5, in order of appearance.

PRIMARY TEXT

Hebrews 5:11–14 · 6:1–3 · 6:4–6 · 6:7–12 · 6:13–20 (ending at 20)

LIVE DISCOVERY PASSAGES

Genesis 22:16–17 (the oath) · Leviticus 16:2, 11–19, 34 (behind the veil, leader background tonight)

STEELMAN MATERIALS (QUESTION 5)

Hebrews 6:4–6 with both horns · CCC 982, read verbatim · CCC 1446 (the second plank) · the lapsi history: St. Cyprian, On the Lapsed; St. Ambrose, Concerning Repentance; St. John Chrysostom on this passage

LEADER BACKGROUND

Numbers 23:19 · Numbers 35:9–28 (cities of refuge) · Hebrews 10:26–31 (the sibling warning, later)

CATECHISM

CCC 982 · CCC 1446 · CCC 1819 · CCC 2091–2092

MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 6:19

NEXT SESSION

Session 6 covers Hebrews 7 and opens everything: Genesis 14, the whole psalm, and the sealed guesses. Bring the slips. It is the study's hinge; prepare joyfully.