

A TIME TO GROW UP!

Today's Text: Heb. 5:1-14

Extracts:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracle of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age; that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil [Heb. 5: 12-14].

*In the movie, **Dr. Doolittle-2**, a 2001 sequel to the 1998 American movie, John Doolittle (played by Eddie Murphy) was a doctor who had the natural gift of talking to animals.¹ He became interested in environmental protection issues when animals informed him that their habitat was about to be cleared by a developer. Doolittle planned to save the forest for an endangered female bear, Ava. The only male bear of her species available was Archie who was a circus bear. A circus is a company of performers who put on diverse entertainment shows that use clowns, acrobats and trained animals, among other stunt-oriented artists.² Reintroducing a circus bear into the wild became a major challenge. Archie was used to human foods and habits which did not make any sense to Ava! After much effort over a very long time, Ava produced three baby-bears through Archie. Thereafter, Archie made himself no longer accessible to Doolittle!*

What was Archie's problem in adjusting to life in the wild? He was learning late what his "age mates" raised in the forest had taken for granted. It was time for him to grow up. Believers also find themselves in a similar situation. Many of us received water baptism a long time ago and yet, we still behave and operate as babies in need of milk. We remain spectators instead of being active players in doing God's work.

*In today's Bible verses, the writer of the book of **Hebrews** enjoins us to go for solid food instead of being hooked on milk, to become teachers instead of remaining students. It is time to grow up! What a challenging study we have for today!*

¹ Based on the following sources: "Dr. Doolittle 2," from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr._Doolittle_2; Anthony Pereyra, "Dr. Doolittle-2" <https://www.amazon.com/Dr-Doolittle-2-Eddie-Murphy/dp/B00005NRNV>; and Signy, "Dr. Doolittle-2: Plot Summary," http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0240462/plotsummary?ref_=tt_stryp_l

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circus>

1. Background: Can you spot the kids among the elders?

According to an African proverb, all vultures are bald-headed but they are not all elders! Who is an elder? Ordinarily, an elder is an old person. S(he) has been on earth for a long time with grown children, grandchildren and even more.

However, it takes much more than longevity to be regarded as an elder.

According to the word of God, “The silver-haired head is a crown of glory if it is found in the way of righteousness” [**Prov. 16:31**]. In other words, the hood does not make the monk. *If an elder is not a moral authority, s(he) is like an amoral dwarf among 5-year old children!*

There are today prominent people in leadership positions around us- in politics, family or church- who have hardly grown beyond underaged boys and girls. They behave like spoilt brats or adults with underdeveloped faculties for principled conduct, diligence, wisdom, mutual respect or self-discipline. But time is running out. End times are here. Impunity is spreading like wild fire. Institutional checks and balances are being stretched beyond limit due to corruption and wickedness in high places. Who is going to speak truth to authority?³ What legacy are we passing to the next generation?

The writer of the book of **Hebrews** has in the 5th chapter given us hope by addressing such issues and more. In the church of God, maybe by reason of longevity (or influence), some of us are occupying prominent positions as overseers, elders, pastors, bishops and shepherds [**1 Tim. 3: 1-13; Tit. 1: 5-16; 1 Pet. 5: 1-4**]. Some of us are apostles, evangelists and teachers [**Eph. 4: 11**]. To such and more, the author has challenged them to answer the following questions:

a) *Are you still on milk or now on solid food?*

He writes, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age” [**Heb. 5: 13-14**]. Babes have not yet developed the teeth or the stomach to deal with solid foods. So, we raise them on milk. In due season, however, we wean them off liquid foods and introduce them to solid foods because the little feeding bottle can no longer supply the quantity and quality of foods needed by their growing bodies.

The word of God, set out in the Scriptures, is the food that we are to feed to believers for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness so that they may be “complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” [**2 Tim. 3: 16-17**]. For example, when Joshua was about to assume the major responsibility as successor to Moses to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, God said to him, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it.

³ http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_13/Canyouspeaktruthtoauthority.pdf

For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” [Josh. 1: 8]. Unfortunately, most of us read the Bible only on prescription by our pastors and bishops. We keep it up there on the shelves but spend the greater part of our time on church rituals and prescriptions! Most of us are thus still taking milk, refusing or reluctant to move on to solid food.

b) *Are you still a pupil or now a teacher?*

The author writes, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God” [Heb. 5: 12]. Oracles of God refer to the Scriptures. Elsewhere, Paul talks of people who are *always learning but not able to come to the knowledge of the truth* [2 Tim. 3: 7]. Therefore, it is not so much the inadequacy or absence of programmed studies of the Bible in your place of worship or home but of God’s word in your daily living. It is the extent to which you are applying it to yourself and those you interact with. *It is your ability to organize and integrate your total daily living around the word of God that makes you a teacher, that is somebody others want to learn from.*

Take the case of Apollos, described as “an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures,” but his knowledge was based on the baptism of John. When he came to Alexandria and began to speak boldly in the synagogue, Aquila and Priscilla (elders in that congregation that had heard him) took Apollos aside “and explained to him the way of God *more accurately.*” When the young man then went on to Achaia, “he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” [Acts 18: 24-28]. That is the same young man that Paul later eulogized as follows, “I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” [1 Cor. 3: 6]. The pupil had become a teacher!

c) *But it is time for you to grow up!!*

The author writes, “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” [Heb. 5: 14]. Unless and until you have grown to a stage when the word of God becomes a lamp to your feet and a light to your path [Ps. 119: 105], you have not yet attained full age! Unless and until the word of God is now near you, on your lips and in your heart [Rom. 10: 8], you have not grown up.

Take the case of what Paul found when he came to Ephesus. There were some disciples there who had received John’s baptism of repentance. When Paul asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit, they said that they had not so much as heard anything about the Holy Spirit! Yet, that

was long after the Pentecost experience. After Paul had laid hands on them in the name of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit fell on them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied [Acts 19: 1-6]. You can be sure things were never the same again for them from that point on. They had grown up!

In sum, you are an elder if you have come to the stage in your Christian life where you walk by faith, not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. You have become a new creation in Christ and His ambassador on earth [vv. 17, 20]. Are you ready for that challenge?

2. Implications for today's believers

A lazy person dismisses challenges with, "It is easier said than done!" Our challenge for you is that you make it easier done than said! Here are some helpful hints on what you can do to come of age:

a) *Be a contributor not just a consumer!*

The bulk of the work in an average congregation is done by church workers, that is, those who get paid- wages, stipends, or whatever they call it. The rest of us sit in padded pews, whining and complaining about the quality of service or the lack of transparency in the church accounts. But is that why you are in that congregation?

Take the example of Philip. He was one of the 7 deacons appointed by the apostles for administrative duties. They were recommended by the congregation that was mandated to choose "seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Their work was to take over administrative chores from the 12 apostles who were to concentrate on praying and the ministry of the word [Acts 6: 1-7].

Look at Philip's ministry. It was not confined to that congregation or administration. Following the death of Stephen, the first martyr, Philip fled to Samaria where he preached Christ and "unclean spirits... came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed" [Acts 8: 4-7]. He was the one that the Holy Spirit led into the desert to meet the Ethiopian eunuch, a man in charge of the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He baptized the Ethiopian after he had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour [vv. 26-40]. Thus, it was Philip that first spread the gospel to black Africa. The last time we read about Philip, it was when Paul came to Caesarea on his way back to Jerusalem. Philip had become an evangelist with four virgin daughters who prophesied [Acts 21: 7-9]. That is the story of a man who was more of a contributor than a consumer.

God has given you multiple talents, some of which may still be latent (not yet developed or recognized) that you can use to glorify Him. For example, you may be living or working among non-believers. Do they see the mark of God in you? Are you caring or forgiving? In your church, do you do only the things that will impress your pastor or overseer or to earn you promotion to higher ranks? For members who see themselves as materially poor and needy, what are you doing to help keep the church premises clean and in order? According to a Ghanaian proverb, if you want to receive more, your outstretched hand must be empty! For your hand to be empty, you must let go of what is there. That suggests that the more you give, the more you receive.

b) Place more emphasis on the hereafter

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His listeners [**Matt. 6: 19-21**]:

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

Is your focus on earthly/material things or on the hereafter? Remember the Parable of the Rich Fool. God blessed him with so much material abundance. Instead of using it to glorify God, he said to himself, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink and be merry.” God called him a fool and that night he died [**Lk 12: 13-21**].

Many of us concentrate on the pursuit of enjoyment (material comfort) and lose their joy (peace of mind).⁴ Only God can give you joy because His joy is your strength [**Neh. 8:10**]. Therefore, it is better for you to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness so that He can guide your earthly choices in that regard [**Matt. 6: 33**]. At the end of life on earth, all we get is a coffin and no more. The palaces and bank accounts belong to those left behind! Therefore, ***you are a successful elder and teacher when you know that God will say to you on the day you are called to eternity, “Welcome home, son.”***

c) Cultivate an attitude of gratitude

A mark of spiritual maturity is the ability to say, “Thank you!” Remember that you do not deserve the blessings God has poured on you because the race is not to the swift nor bread to the wise nor riches to people of understanding, nor favours to men of skill “but time and chance” (that is,

⁴ http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_11/Joyorenjoyment.pdf

God's grace) "happen to them all" [Eccl. 9: 11]. The word of God says we should give thanks in everything because that is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us [1 Thess. 5: 18]. When Jesus healed ten lepers and only the stranger (non-Jew) among them came back to thank Him. He said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned *to give glory to God* except this foreigner?" [Lk 17: 11-19].

When you give thanks to God, even during moments of disappointment and failure, you confuse Satan and your enemies. Why hurt somebody who does not feel it? For example, after the nation of Judah had been sent into exile in Babylon, Jeremiah's eyes failed with tears and his heart was troubled [Lam. 2: 11]. Yet, he said, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" [Lam. 3: 22-23].

Here is the heart of the matter. Until you grow up spiritually, you cannot see the full picture of God's purpose and plan for your life. The enemy can see it before you do and will try every deception to lure you in a different/opposite direction. The moment you start taking the solid food of total obedience to the will of God and live righteously, God will make a way for you where there is no way. By Him, you can now "run against a troop" and "leap over a wall" [Ps. 18: 29]. Then, you have graduated from a babe to an elder, from a student to a teacher! You have grown up.

3. Conclusion: Wake up!

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John as He agonized in the Garden at Gethsemane. Sorrowful and deeply distressed, He moved a little distance from them with the following instruction, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." But when He came back, He found them sleeping. Jesus exclaimed, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. *The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak*" [Matt. 26: 38-41]. Indeed, a few hours later, when the enemy came for Jesus, all His disciples "forsook Him and fled" [v. 56] and Peter denied Him thrice [vv. 69-75]. A few months down the road, after the disciples had received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, they became a new breed! Peter preached openly and about three thousand people gave their lives to Christ in one day [Acts 2: 1-41]. James was the first apostle to be martyred [Acts 12: 1-2] and John lived to a ripe old age to write the last book of the Bible.

God knows that your body is weak, but if your spirit is willing, you can grow up and do exploits. So, wake up! It is time for you to grow up.