

“The Danger of Falling Away”

Heb. 6:4-8

- INTRO. - We come (today) to another “warning passage” in Hebrews, and *this one* is (no doubt) the most difficult of all. George Guthrie writes, “It is no exaggeration to designate the passage we now consider as one of the most controversial in the book of Hebrews—indeed, one of the most disputed in the entire New Testament.”
- George Guthrie says that the phrase (in v. 6) “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance” has caused “a great deal of anxiety among those who read the book of Hebrews.”
- One commentator said this passage “has occasioned considerable discomfort in the history of interpretation.” There are at least six different ways of interpreting this passage – and they even have names.
- There is “the hypothetical view,” “the pre-conversion Jew view,” “the covenant community view,” “the true believer under judgment view,” “the phenomenological true believer view,” and “the phenomenological unbeliever view.”
- Now, I’m *not* going to go into all that, but suffice it to say that there has been a lot of disagreement on this passage, and this tells us we need to walk through this carefully.
- One thing I believe we can rule out immediately, is the notion that this passage teaches that a genuine Christian can lose his or her salvation. The rest of the NT is too clear on that – and even if we concluded that this is what it teaches, then we would have to say that it also teaches that someone who *does* (in fact) lose their salvation, can never get it back.
- You can’t have any of this “getting saved” and then “becoming lost” and then “getting saved” again. If you believe this passage teaches that you can lose your salvation, then it also teaches that you can’t be renewed again to repentance.
- But (of course) the Bible nowhere teaches that a genuine, born-again believer can lose their salvation. There are many passages in the NT that make that clear, including the “golden chain of salvation” in Romans 8.
- And I don’t really have the time (this morning) to make the biblical case for eternal security of believers, but this is clearly taught in passage like John 3:16, John 5:24, John 6:39-44, John 10:27-29, Romans 8:29-39, Eph. 1:13-14, Col. 3:3, and many others.
- What we have in Christ is called “eternal life,” *not* “temporary life.” The clear teaching of Scripture is that, if you become a “child of God” (through

spiritual regeneration) you can never be anything other than a child of God. Nothing can ever change that.

- So whatever view you may have of this passage – one thing is for sure – no born-again Christian ever has to worry about losing his (or her) salvation. You should *not* let this passage trouble you because it is *not* teaching this.
- *And* (as we approach this passage) there are some other things we need to keep in mind. First of all, this passage is “notoriously ambiguous.” What I mean by that, is the fact that the author uses certain terms without defining what they mean. This has created a lot of speculation among interpreters as to the correct original intent.
- Now, one of the reasons *why* this is the case (here) *may* be the fact that this is in a section of exhortation. This is *not* part of his exposition, so he may *not* be as careful about his theology (here) as he is in other sections.
- In other words, the primary purpose for this section is to motivate them to action, *not* to give them theological instruction. This may be why he does *not* stop to define his terms.
- Of course, this is *not* to suggest that the author of Hebrews is *not* thinking biblically in his exhortations, but *here* his theology is pre-

supposed. He is calling them to respond to the theology he is previously given.

- And in *this* case, we need to keep in mind, that this particular exhortation goes from 5:11 to 6:12. As I have pointed out, there are four distinct paragraphs to this exhortation, and this one (today) is the third paragraph.
- So we need to remember where this is (in context). We have seen (in the previous two paragraphs) that he launched into this exhortation because he wants to go into a deeper discussion of Christ being a priest after the order of Melchizedek, but he can't do that yet because they are “dull of hearing.”
- He says they are *not* ready for “solid food” because they are hanging on to the “elementary principles.” They are still at the ABC level, and they need to let go of that and go on to maturity.
- In 6:1-3 he admonishes them to completely leave the elementary stuff and go on to the mature. In my understanding, this is likely a contrast between the old covenant and the new. He is telling them to leave behind the pictures and symbols of Judaism and embrace the reality of the New Covenant.
- And when we get to 6:4-8 he is warning them of the great danger of apostasy, which in this case would be their returning to Judaism and rejecting the New Covenant.

- I believe (especially here) that the warning is being written to those who are right on the edge of committing themselves to Christ, but are in danger of falling into apostasy and returning to Judaism. I also believe the warning is, that if they do that, there is no more hope for them because there will be nothing else that can be done for them. They will have experienced every possible thing that is intended to lead them to Christ, but they have made a final and firm rejection of Him.
- Now, we'll talk about this later, but the reason why I believe this will be *final* is because of the hardness of heart that accompanies apostasy. This is why the author of Hebrews says that (in the state of apostasy) it is impossible for them to be renewed to repentance.
- So I'm taking this passage to be directed toward unbelieving Jews, who have not made a commitment to Christ, and are in danger of returning to Judaism, and thereby losing their opportunity for eternal life.
- What *does* seem certain (from this passage) is that these Jews have been very closely associated with the Christian church. The great debate has been, whether they are believers, or are those who are intellectually convinced but uncommitted.
- Now, there are two more issues (I think are important) before we move into the text. First, we need to make note (here) that he is not saying that they have apostatized – he's saying they are in danger of apostatizing. He is giving this warning in hopes that they will go on and commit themselves to Christ. He's hoping they will see the danger and heed the warning.
- That's why he writes (in v. 9) that he is “convinced of better things” concerning them. He has hope that they will listen to the warning and avoid the apostasy.
- Second, I want to mention something about the *structure* of this passage. The NASB has the word “impossible” in v. 6, while most English translations have it in v. 4. It *is* (in the Greek) the first word of the sentence (which makes it emphatic). So it should be in v. 4.
- The main part of the sentence reads like this, “It is impossible for those...to be brought back to repentance.” Then there are a series of participial clauses that modify that statement: “who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have become partakers of the HS, etc.”
- The definite article in the Greek (those who) governs all these clauses, so it refers to the same group of people. So the idea is, if all these things are true of them, and yet they have fallen away,

then it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.

- I like the way Jay Adams puts it. He says, “The entire argument runs this way: If you have had all the benefits of association with the people of God...but at length determine that this is not for you and leave, there is nothing more to say to you. You have *not only* known the truth of God, but you have seen evidence of the word of God’s Spirit...You know both intellectually and experientially all that one could be told or shown.”
- This (I believe) is the situation, so let’s move into it now. There are three main elements in this passage, and the first one consists of:

I. THE ADVANTAGES (vv. 4-5)

- We’re taking this according to the NASB, but that may be a little different if you have another translation. The Hebrews being addressed here have five great advantages, which are summarized in vv. 4-5. These are benefits for being closely associated with the church.
- Now, *some* have connected this with the wilderness wanderings that the author of Hebrews referred to earlier. Some scholars even believe that this is where the idea for these five advantages came from.

- If you think about the account of the sending out of the 12 spies at Kadesh-barnea (which ultimately led to the rebellion of Israel and the wilderness wanderings) all these things were true of them.
- They were enlightened by God, they had samples of the fruitfulness of the land, they (in a sense) tasted of its wonders, they knew the sure word of God in promising to give them the land, and they had witnessed (first hand) His mighty miracles. And yet, with all that, they still rebelled and refused to enter into God’s rest.
- The Word of God and His power are linked (in this passage) and the language is reminiscent to those who fell in the desert for their lack of faith, even though they had heard God’s voice and seen His mighty acts.
- F. F. Bruce has written, “Just as the Hebrew spies who returned from their expedition carrying tangible tokens of the good land of Canaan nevertheless failed to enter the land because of unbelief, so those who had come to know the blessings of the new covenant might nevertheless in a spiritual sense turn back in heart to Egypt and so forfeit the saints’ everlasting rest.”
- So what are the great advantages these Hebrews had? There are five of them, beginning with the advantage of:

A. Substance (v. 4a)

- In the NASB v. 4 reads like this, “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened...” (Stop right there.) *Many* take this as evidence they are believers, but that is *not* necessarily the case.
- The Greek word for “enlightened” is the word “photizo” and it means “to cast light upon or to make known.” It means “to reveal.” One Bible scholar says it speaks primarily of “understanding.”
- We get a good clue as to how the author of Hebrews is using this word by looking at his only other use of it (in 10:32). There he says, “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings...” Other English translations have (there) “after being illuminated” or “after receiving the light.”
- This is also how this word is used in the Septuagint. It is translated several times as “to give light by knowledge or teaching.” It means “to become mentally aware of something or to be instructed in it.”
- It carries no connotation of response – no connection at all with acceptance or rejection, with belief or disbelief. It simply means “to be informed.”
- So the “enlightenment” of Heb. 6:4 is probably intellectual perception and *not* (necessarily) genuine belief.
- An illustration of this concept is found in Jesus’ ministry to the people of Galilee. Our Lord said he came to fulfill the prophecy of Is. 9:1-2, and part of that reads, “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.” And yet, we know that *not all* who saw that great light were saved.
- Some were, but many were *not*. They all saw the light – they all were enlightened – but *not all* of them responded to the light with saving faith. This tells us that *seeing* God’s light and *accepting* it are two different things.
- It is said of Jesus (in John 1:9), “There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” Yet we know that every man is *not* saved. *Many* who saw the light of Christ were *not*.
- The concept of being enlightened is *not* limited to those who were saved. They were all enlightened in the sense that they all saw the light. They all saw Christ and heard His words and saw His miracles. They all had knowledge of Him – factual information they had experienced firsthand.
- Yet most of them did *not* put their faith in Him and follow Him as disciples. They were all enlightened but they were *not* all saved. And in the same way,

in Heb. 6:4 we would have to say that it is possible for these Hebrews to be enlightened and yet *not* be saved.

- In fact, John MacArthur makes the interesting (and important) observation that none of the typical NT words for salvation are used in this passage. You don't see anything at all (here) about justification, sanctification, the new birth, regeneration, being born again, being made holy, being made righteous, etc.
- He says, "In fact, no term used here is ever used elsewhere in the New Testament for salvation, and none should be taken to refer to it in this passage."
- I would say that it would be very difficult to make the case that these are (necessarily) believers (here) from the word "enlightened" alone. Of course, it is combined with the *other* clauses to make the case, but *none* of these *necessarily* means they were born again. (Pause) Look at the second one – the advantage of getting a *taste* of:

B. Salvation (v. 4b)

- Verse 4 goes on to say, "...and have tasted of the heavenly gift..." There has been a lot of debate as to what this "heavenly gift" is. Since there are several things referred to in Scripture as a "gift," it could be any of them.

- The HS is spoken of as a gift, but since the HS is going to be mentioned next, that is probably *not* what he has in mind here. Christ Himself is called a "gift," as well as the salvation He came to bring – so this is likely a reference to that.
- I'm using the word "salvation," but the real key (here) is what does the word "tasted" mean? Does this mean they had experienced the new birth and were saved, or that they had experienced what salvation is by being around others who were saved?
- I believe it means that latter. As John MacArthur puts it, "It was *not* accepted or lived, only examined." They just got a small "taste" of it. Tasting is *not* eating. Tasting is *not* drinking. If you taste something that doesn't taste good, you spit it out. You don't ingest it. Tasting is just getting some sort of idea of whether you want to drink it or *not*.
- This is similar to what the Israelites experienced at Kadesh-barnea. They got just a little taste of the land of promise. They got just a little taste of its fruit, but they had to decide if they were going to go in and possess it or *not*.
- And there is a sense in which a person must "taste" the salvation of God to see if it is something he wants to commit himself to. That is part of the presalvation work of the HS. You have to hear

enough about the gospel and witness enough of what the gospel is capable of doing before making a commitment to it.

- As John MacArthur writes, “The Spirit of God placed the blessing of salvation to their lips, but they hadn’t eaten it yet.” (Pause) Then there is the advantage of the:

C. Spirit (v. 4c)

- Verse 4 continues, “and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit...” Again, what does it mean to be made “partakers”? Does this mean the HS had taken up permanent residence in them, or that they had some *association* with the work of the Spirit? And again, in this case I believe it means the latter.
- The Greek word “metochos” has to do with association, *not possession*. It is used in Luke 5:7 to refer to fishermen who had association with other fishermen. It is used in this book (in 1:9) to refer to Christ having association with the angels.
- It has to do with sharing in common associations and events. Here (in Heb. 6:4) it has to do with being around the work of the Spirit. It has to do with witnessing the work of the Spirit. It is possible to do that without being born again.
- Jay Adams writes, “To see the evidences of the HS at work all around you, to see lives changed,

prayers answered, people saved is to taste and share in what is happening among God’s people as the HS moves in their midst.”

- MacArthur writes, “Like...most of the multitudes whom Jesus miraculously healed and fed, they partook of the Holy Spirit’s power and blessing, but they did *not* have His indwelling. They did *not* possess the HS, not did the HS possess them.” Fourthly we see the advantage of:

D. Scripture (v. 5a)

- Look with me at the first part of v. 5, “...and have tasted the good word of God...” Again, you have that word “tasted” (there). They had gotten a little taste of God’s Word.
- Interestingly, the word for “word” (in that verse) is *not* the normal Greek word that you might expect. It is *not* “logos” but “rhema” – which refers to a *portion* of the Word instead of the Word as a whole.
- I believe this is referring to the fact that they had been under the teaching of the Scripture in the church, but they had not come to fully understand God’s Word because they were *not* born again.
- The Bible tells us that “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them,

because they are spiritually appraised.” (That’s 1 Cor. 2:14.)

- A lost person can “taste” the good word of God by going to church and sitting under the preaching of it. They can learn a lot about God and about the gospel without being born again. But they can never fully understand it until they are spiritual regenerated.
- I think that is what the author of Hebrews is describing here. These are Jews who have been associated with the church and have heard the teaching of Scripture – and yet they had *not* made a commitment to Christ. Then (fifthly) we see the advantage of:

E. Signs (v. 5b)

- Verse 5 goes on to say, “...and the powers of the age to come...” This is a reference to the miracles that were part of the Apostolic age. These were a foretaste of the miracles that will characterize the Millennial Kingdom.
- These Jews had witnessed these powers. They had seen the same kind of miracles as Jesus had performed from the “signs and wonders” of the Apostles. They had “tasted” this miraculous power.
- As we saw back in 2:4, “God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by

various miracles...” They saw healings and resurrections from the dead. They tasted these amazing powers that the Bible says will be prominent during the Millennial Kingdom of Christ.

- And yet, with all these advantages, they had *not* made a firm commitment to Christ. In fact, there guilt was increased greatly by having all these advantages without saying “yes” to Jesus.
- The Bible indicates that the more we are exposed to these kinds of things (the Word of God, the work of the Spirit, the witness of changed lives, etc.) the more guilty we stand before God if we reject the gospel. And that’s whole message here. So we need to move on to:

II. THE APOSTASY (v. 6)

- Look with me at v. 6, “and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.”
- Again, he is *not* saying that his hearers have “fallen away.” He is saying that if they did (after having all these advantages) it would be impossible to renew them again to repentance.
- Some have tried to soften the word for “fallen away” (here), to say that it doesn’t necessarily

mean apostasy, but the terminology that is used of re-crucifying the Son of God and putting him to an open shame (along with the analogy in v. 8 of being “burned up”) makes it clear that apostasy is in mind.

- Others have tried to soften the word “impossible” but I would say it is “impossible” to do that. This same word is used in 6:18 to say, “It is impossible for God to lie.” You really can’t say, “It is difficult for God to lie.” NO, it is IMPOSSIBLE.
- Another example is in 10:4, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” That means exactly what it says. There is *no way* the blood of bulls and goats can take away our sins.
- You see the same thing in 11:6, “without faith it is impossible to please [God].” It has to be read that way. All three of these passages are nonsensical if you make the word “impossible” mean “difficult.”
- The word “impossible” (in Heb. 6:6) clearly means this is something that cannot happen. What is it that cannot happen? Apostates cannot be renewed again to repentance.
- The word for “renew” (there) means “to bring back to original condition.” It means “to restore.” The original condition of these Hebrews is that they were excited about the gospel. They had moved

away from Judaism and they were right on the edge of repentance and saving faith.

- They were just a step away from the Kingdom of God. But if they fell away, after having all these advantages, and after being this close, they could *not* be brought back to this point again because this would mean that their hearts had become hardened.
- They had seen it all and heard it all and experienced it all – so if they rejected it and turned away from it in unbelief – there is nothing more that could be done for them.
- It would be impossible to bring them back again to that place where the gospel was new and sweet and hopeful for them. They could never get back to that place again.
- Now, here’s the principle: When a person rejects Christ at the peak experience of knowledge and conviction, he will *not* accept it at a lesser level. You’d better receive Christ when you are first made aware of the gospel and convicted by the HS of its truth – because the more you say “no” after that, the harder your heart will become.
- The Bible clearly teaches that it is possible to get to a place of hardening in which a person no longer has an opportunity to be saved.

- Now, there is a whole lot here, and I would love to spend more time on this, but we are running out of time, so let me give this to you quickly.
- Notice *why* (he says) it is impossible to renew them again to repentance: “since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” This simply means, that as far as they are concerned, Jesus got exactly what He deserved. In their apostasy they are siding with the crucifiers of Christ.
- In other words, they are saying, “We agree with the verdict of the Jews who put Him on the cross.” They are saying, “We agree, He is *not* the true Messiah.”
- Apostates cause the shame of the cross to be re-enacted. O’Brien says, “They *not only* show *their* contempt for Jesus, but they *also* make him contemptible in the eyes of *others*, deterring *them* from coming to faith.”
- And notice, it’s *not* that they are taking up a hammer and nails to put Him on the cross (literally) – they are doing that by virtue of their apostasy.
- My friend listen, it is a very dangerous assumption to think that you can just stay on the sidelines, and do *nothing* in regard to Christ, and to think that just because you do *not* openly *oppose* the gospel you will be OK.

- Jesus said, “He who is not for Me is against Me.” The longer you know the truth and put off receiving Him, the closer you come to full apostasy. The closer you come to joining in with the crucifiers of Christ and share their guilt.
- Any person who fails to put their faith in Christ for salvation will ultimately end up in apostasy. Eventually their hearts will become completely hardened to the gospel and their fate will be sealed. They will “again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” They will incur the very guilt of those who nailed Him to the cross. This is how serious it is to continue to reject Christ. (Pause) Well, there is one last thing we see in this passage, and that is:

III. THE ANALOGY (vv. 7-8)

- In vv. 7-8 he gives an analogy to summarize his point. Look at it with me, “For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.”
- This is a simple analogy (and we need to be careful that we don’t read too much into it). It is very similar to Jesus’ parable of the soils. The “rain” is

the gospel, and the soil represents the hearts of men.

- Some are like the good soil, and they receive the message of the gospel and respond with saving faith. As a result, their lives are filled with blessings from God.
- But those who reject the message (and fall away) will end up with thorns and thistles and weeds. Ultimately they will face the judgment of God and be good only for burning.
- And the point is, it is the very same rain, but it falls on different soils. The gospel is proclaimed to all, but *not* everyone embraces it.
- So what is the warning, and how should we respond today? The warning is, that it is never enough to accept the truth of the gospel intellectually while failing to commit yourself to Christ in saving faith and genuine repentance.
- The very same situation is common in the church in America today – there are thousands (and perhaps millions) who have heard the truth of the gospel over and over and over again – but have *not* experienced true spiritual regeneration. They are just like these Jews who were right on the edge of salvation, but were in danger of missing it altogether (forever).

- Don't be like them. Don't side with the ones who put Christ on the cross. Don't fall away and miss eternal life through faith in Christ.
- I'll close with these words from John MacArthur: (He says) "Don't you ever put off the decision to receive Jesus Christ when it still sounds sweet; when it still sounds fresh. With all your doubts and all your misgivings and all your misunderstandings and the things you'll never be able to understand till you know Him, come to Jesus Christ just as you are, lest you get to the place where hardness and callousness and impossibility sets in."
- MAKE APPEAL
- PRAYER