

SESSION SIXTEEN

**CHRISTIAN DEPARTURE FROM THE FAITH
THAT COULD RESULT IN GOD'S JUDGMENT***Heb 6:4-12***I. INTRODUCTION**

The compounding problem of their immaturity and "dullness of hearing" (5:11) could be alleviated if the readers were to "press on to maturity" (6:1). Though they desperately need to go on to maturity, the author realizes that *in some cases* that may not be possible. Hence, in 6:4-6 he describes a situation in which TRUE REGENERATE CHRISTIANS may commit an offense so serious that God may not permit them to move on to maturity. This offense is described in 6:6 as "falling away." There is nothing in the passage that states they will lose their salvation for this, anymore than the sin of the wilderness generation meant loss of salvation for them (Heb 3). By analogy, however, they may face temporal judgment and loss of their inheritance (as was true for the wilderness generation described in Ps 95). Furthermore, they will never move on to maturity.

As serious as such a sin may be, the author is not actually charging any of his readers with guilt of this, i.e., he is not saying that any of them have gone to this extent yet. Support: (1) he offers the possibility of "pressing on" in 6:1; (2) the shift from the first person in 6:1-3 to the third person in 6:4-6, and (3) his positive statement about them in 6:9. Nevertheless, he recognizes that they are on a perilous path, and they need to quickly gain their senses and realize the seriousness of what is at stake. If they do not shake out of their spiritual lethargy, they may very well end up as one of those described in Heb 6:4-8.

II. THEIR SPIRITUAL STATE (6:4-5)

Verses 4-6 are clearly one unit. The emphatic "impossible" (Ἀδύνατον) is placed first in the Greek text in 6:4, but the complement "to restore again to repentance" does not come until verse 6. In-between, we have a series of five participles describing those who cannot be renewed to repentance. The first four are positive statements of their Christian experience, while the last ("fallen away") in verse 6 is negative. Significantly, all five participles are governed by the one article τοὺς in verse 4. These are not two different situations, but a single situation in which the one who "falls away" is the same one who had been enlightened, etc. Lane is undoubtedly correct when he states, "Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed" (1:141). This is true for at least three basic reasons: (1) he had expressed statements of concern about his readers in earlier portions of the epistle (e.g., Heb 3:12) while yet referring to them as "brethren"; (2) what he has to say about them in 6:4-6 cannot be divorced from what he has said about them at the beginning of this literary unit in 5:11-14, namely, that they are spiritual babes who have not matured; and (3) the terminology in 6:4-5 is most naturally descriptive of Christian experience, not of unbelievers. To claim that they have merely

professed to believe (in response to pre-salvation enlightenment) while yet remaining unregenerate (so Nicole, Toussaint, Peterson, MacArthur and others) is to force one's theology on the text rather than allowing the text to speak for itself. Randall Gleason is quite correct when he points out that this passage must be understood in light of its Old Testament background.¹ In particular, the author is still making allusions to the event of Kadesh-Barnea:

Most important to this study is the writer's use in chapters 3–4 of the Exodus generation at Kadesh-barnea (Ps. 95:7b-11) as a type of the Christian community to which he was writing. In each case the Old Testament record of God's dealings in earlier redemptive history is used to bring understanding to the present situation of his readers.²

Gleason substantiates this claim by pointing out numerous instances following chapter six to the author's use of the pilgrimage motif.³ The fateful decision of the wilderness generation at Kadesh-barnea is the Old Testament counterpart to the decision of those under the New Covenant who would rebel and "fall away" from God.

The author's first statement about his readers in this verse is that they had been "enlightened" (φωτισθέντας). The author uses this term one other time in Heb 10:32 where he says, "after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings." The context deals with their sufferings for the faith, a situation which would surely point to their regenerate state, for it is hardly imaginable that they would suffer persecution had they not truly come to know the Savior (especially in a first century setting).

Secondly, he points out that they had "tasted" (γευσαμένους) the heavenly gift. Some have tried to argue that they had only "tasted" but had not fully partaken of, and hence were only *professing Christians*. The Greek verb γεύομαι, however, does not restrict itself to such a limited meaning. Furthermore, the author has already used the same verb in Heb 2:9 in reference to Christ having "tasted death for everyone." We would have quite a theological dilemma on our hands if Christ merely tasted death for us but did not fully undergo it. No! The Scripture is quite clear that He fully experienced death for our sins. As Ellingworth has noted (320), the author is using the word to mean "eat," not merely taste, and hence figuratively to 'experience (to the full)'. Possibly, the author has in mind by the phrase "tasted the heavenly gift" that they had partaken of God's free gift of eternal life in Christ (cf. Jn 4:10; Rom 6:23). As the wilderness generation ate of the heavenly provision of manna, so these New Covenant believers had eaten the greater heavenly manna—the "bread of life" (Jn 6:33).

Thirdly, he states that his readers had been made "partakers of" or "partners with" the Holy Spirit. The word "partakers/participants" (contrast the *NIV* "shared in the Holy Spirit") is the Greek word μετόχους, a word that was used earlier in 3:1 of the "holy brethren" who were participants in a heavenly calling and in 3:14 of those who had become partners with Christ by holding fast their confidence. In Heb 6:4, the readers are "partakers of the Holy Spirit," because they had received

¹ Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998). According to Gleason, the Old Testament is cited at least 38 times in Hebrews, and Longenecker has identified at least 55 additional allusions to the OT (Richard Longenecker, "Hebrews and the Old Testament," in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), 166-70.

² Gleason, 66.

³ See especially pp 72-75 in Gleason.

the Holy Spirit when they believed. The Holy Spirit was God's "pledge" (or earnest payment) until the day of redemption when they would receive their resurrected bodies (Eph 1:13-14; Rom 8:23).

Fourthly, he says in 6:5 that they had "tasted (γευσαμένους) the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come." The word "tasted" is the same Greek word as used in verse four. The Christian message had come to them accompanied by miraculous confirmations (recall 2:3-4).

III. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A RENEWED REPENTANCE (6:6)

The final participle of the series indicates that it is possible that one who had truly been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift (i.e., a truly regenerate person) can "fall away" (παραπεσόντας, from the verb παραπίπτω). For such a crucial verb, one could wish that this was not a *hapax*! Nevertheless, we are not completely empty-handed. The verb is used eight times in the LXX.⁴ It is used to translate several different Hebrew words (most often מַעַל). Frequently, παραπίπτω has the meaning of "transgressing" against the LORD, though not in the sense of apostasy. In Ezek 20:27, for instance, the LXX reads "your fathers provoked me in their trespasses in which they transgressed (παρεπεσον) against Me." In the preceding context, the main issues to their "transgressing" were the profaning of the Sabbath and turning to idolatry. From Moulton and Milligan (488-89), we find a few other examples from after the 1st century AD. For example, "if the terms of it (i.e., a contract) should be broken or it in any other way be rendered invalid."⁵

A better clue of the author's intention, however, may be found in his use of the cognate form πίπτω (*fall*) earlier in the book. In Hebrews 4:11, he had warned the readers, "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall (πέση, Aor Subj of πίπτω) through *following* the same example of disobedience" (cf. 3:17). For our author, one could "fall" in contrast to being diligent to enter God's rest. There is also a strong connection to his warning of "falling away from the living God" in Heb 3:12. In the case of Heb 3:12, the verb is ἀφίστημι rather than παραπίπτω, but they are still related. As mentioned above, most of the instances of παραπίπτω in the LXX translate the Hebrew verb מַעַל, but the same Hebrew word is also rendered by ἀφίστημι (note 2 Chr 26:18). Though the expression "falling away" in Heb 3:12 is not lexically related to our verb παραπίπτω, *conceptually* it is. Lane (1:142) concurs that it is "equivalent to the expression ἀποστῆναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος . . . in 3:12." We can thus conclude that "falling away" in Heb 6:6 is to transgress against the Lord in a way that parallels what happened at Kadesh-barnea when the Hebrews rebelled against the Lord with a heart of unbelief, the end result of their hearts becoming hardened against the Lord. More specifically, this would mean (in the context of what the author has stated thus far in the epistle) to cast off one's confession of faith in Christ . . . the very thing he had exhorted them to hold fast in Heb 4:14 (cf. 3:6). This is a major concern of the author, for he reasserts this again in Heb 10:23. Of course, any drastic renunciation of faith was unlikely to happen without some prior development. They must be equally concerned about the root cause. Already, there was a passive drifting away from the word of Christ (2:1), they were *sluggish hearers* who had not moved on to maturity (5:11-14), and some were already avoiding Christian fellowship (10:25). Such a situation, if not soon corrected, would only bring on more hardening of heart until (like the Hebrews that fell

⁴ For παραπίπτω in the LXX, see Est 6:10; Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4; Wisdom of Solomon 6:9; 12:2).

⁵ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri I*, 95³⁴ (AD 129), ed. B. P Grenfell, A. S. Hunt *et al.*, 1898-.

in the wilderness) it was too late. That is to say, God's judgment would fall . . . it would not be averted.

The author is telling them that there is a point beyond which it is impossible to restore them to a state of repentance.⁶ This would presume that their hearts would be gravely hardened. At this point (which only God knows), the guilty one does not recover a repentant state, for this would be tantamount to recrucifying the Savior and a severe public humiliation of Him. Instead, the guilty one must face God's judgment. However, we must be careful what we conclude as to the form this judgment will take (and when it will take place).

IV. AN ILLUSTRATION OF TWO MAIN ALTERNATIVES (6:7-8)

A. Orientation

The author realizes that his audience could gravitate in one of two directions: they could either move on to maturity (6:1) or they could continue on their slippery slope that ultimately leads to "falling away" (6:6). Though in reality different individuals may be at different points of the spectrum, the author is primarily concerned about the direction they are headed. One will lead to God's blessing, while the other may result in disaster. To help them see his concern, the author now draws upon an illustration from agriculture involving the response of the ground to the care that it receives.

To understand the illustration, we should notice two important observations: (1) it is not "two grounds" being described but two possible outcomes of the same ground, and (2) regardless of the outcome, the ground has received the rain and what it needs for growth. Regarding the first point, we should notice that the *NIV* has obscured this matter:

7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. **8 But land that produces** thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

In the Greek text, the word ground (γῆ) only occurs once (namely, in vs 7). So the point is that the *same ground* can have two possible outcomes, and by analogy there can be two possible outcomes for any individual's life.

The falling of the rain upon the ground probably speaks of God's divine care and provision for the ground. God gives what is needed for growth. In this illustration, the ground should never be devoid of vegetation, because it is watered and sustained. This is what God does for the life of each believer. He waters and cares for him so that there will be fruitfulness. If

⁶ The participles "crucify again" (ἀνασταυροῦντας) and "publicly humiliate" (παραδειγματίζοντας) are adverbial participles. The question is how they should be classified: (1) temporal (after, while); (2) causal (since, because); or (3) conditional (if). Some would understand them as *temporal*, such that the impossibility is only true as long as they do this, implying that restoration and moving on to maturity is possible. I regard them (as most Bible translations) as *causal*, implying that restoration is not possible. While the temporal option is a legitimate way to understand them syntactically, this does not make sense *logically* in the context. Why would the author describe it as "impossible" if it is not really impossible for them to be restored after committing this offense?

fruitfulness does not result, it is not because God has not given His care and done His part.

B. Interpretive Options

The illustration of vv 7-8 could be interpreted in one of three ways:

- 1) A contrast between a true believer and an unbeliever
- 2) A contrast between a faithful enduring Christian and an "apostate Christian" who has lost his salvation
- 3) A contrast between a faithful believer (who is fruitful) and an unfaithful believer [salvation is not at stake]

The decision about which interpretation to choose should not be based upon one's preconceived theology *as primary resort*, but first and foremost upon the exegetical details of 6:7-8 and the general context.

In regard to context, nothing absolute has been said about loss of salvation, and the details of 6:4-6 do not seem directed at unbelievers (not withstanding the fact that several have opted for this suggestion). Context is more in favor of option #3 above, especially since mature and immature believers have been in view since 5:11.

C. Exegetical Details of Heb 6:7-8

Most of the concern is with vs 8, so attention will primarily be given to this.

1. An allusion to Gen 3:17-18

The author of Hebrews is not simply making an illustration, but seems to word his illustration in such a way to allude to Gen 3.

Heb 6:8 - ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους,
ἀδόκιμος καὶ κατάρας ἐγγύς

NASB	LXX
<p>17 "<u>Cursed</u> is the <u>ground</u> because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life.</p> <p>18 Both <u>thorns</u> and <u>thistles</u> it shall grow for you;"</p>	<p>17 ἐπικατάρατος ἡ γῆ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου, ἐν λύπαις φάγη αὐτήν πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου,</p> <p>18 ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους ἀνατελεῖ σοι;"</p>

Not only do we have the exact words for "thorns and thistles" (ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους), but the noun "curse" (κατάρας) in Heb 6:8 has similarity to the adjective

ἐπικατάρατος in the LXX of Gen 3:17.⁷

In the context of Gen 3:17-18, the first man Adam had to taste of "curse" for disobedience. This is reflected in the words "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground." Hence, the allusion to Gen 3:17-18 (despite the fact that the order in Hebrews is inverted) brings to our mind the *temporal judgment* that fell on the first man's disobedience.⁸

2. Blessing-Curse Motif

Given the Jewish nature of the audience, the words *blessing* and *curse* would no doubt have particular significance to them in light of their Old Testament orientation. These words were juxtaposed in Deut 27–30, in which *blessing* was promised for obedience and *curse* (i.e., discipline) was promised for disobedience. Notice the use of the same word καταρα in Deut 28:15,45; 29:26; 30:1,19. The word "curse" should not be taken as a technical term in Heb 6:8 for those who are unregenerate. From an OT perspective, this designated God's discipline on His own children who were disobedient.

3. "If it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless (ἄδόκιμος) . . ."

The Greek adjective ἄδόκιμος does not prove the case one way or the other. The adjective could be applied to unregenerate people, for Rom 1:28 speaks of those of "depraved mind," and Titus 1:16 speaks of those who are "worthless for any good deed." On the other hand, the Apostle Paul used the term of himself when he said in 1 Cor 9:27, "lest . . . I myself should be disqualified." According to BAG, the word means "not standing the test" and [then] "unqualified, worthless." The point in this context is that the ground is simply not suitable, since it does not produce edible vegetation as it was intended to.

4. "whose end (is) for burning" (ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν)

The end or outcome (Gk τέλος) of the ground that yields thorns and thistles is burning. Is the author trying to suggest (by analogy) that the individuals that "fall away" (6:6) are destined for hell? If so, then those who are in danger are either

(1) Christians who lose their salvation (so I. Howard Marshall)

or

(2) professing Christians who were actually never regenerate (so P.E. Hughes, Toussaint, John MacArthur, etc.)

⁷Note that Gal 3:10 closely links the adjective ἐπικατάρατος with the noun καταρα.

⁸There may also be similarity to the *song of the vineyard* in Isa 5. In that passage, ἄκανθα is used 3x (5:2,4,6). God's discipline came upon it, because it did not produce good grapes.

The Greek noun καῦσιν is a *hapax* in the NT (fire is mentioned as a judgment in Heb 10:27), but it occurs seven times in the LXX. In Isa 4:4, it is used of God's judgment and purging of the land (inc. Jerusalem) for the Millennium "by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning." In Dan 7:11, it is used of the destruction of the Antichrist who is "given to the burning fire." The latter is certainly *hell* (compare Rev 19:20), though the word itself does not have to mean this.

Basically, *fire* in Scripture is often used to speak of God's judgment (sometimes of purifying something or someone). Though "fire" can be used to speak of the ultimate judgment of the unregenerate in hell, "fire" is also used to speak of God's judgment in connection with regenerate Christians. The latter is clearly the case in 1 Cor 3:10ff. where Paul is concerned about the "works" of believers in regard to God's church:

12 Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is *to be* revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test **the quality of each man's work**. 14 If any man's **work** which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. 15 If any man's **work** is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. [1 Cor 3:12-15]

In the case of 1 Cor 3:10ff., the fire is used for revealing the *quality* of the believer's works. The purpose is for assessing whether these are *rewardable good works* or not, but the person's eternal destiny is not the issue.

Hence, the motifs of "fire" and "burning" can speak of judgment in regard to the unregenerate (hades/hell) as well as in regard to the regenerate (examination of our works for the purpose of giving rewards). In the case of the latter, works that are unsuitable for reward are burned up.

In the case of Heb 6:8, is the author using "fire" to speak of the ultimate destiny of individuals in hell for their rejection of Christ, or is he concerned about their "works" (i.e., a worthless life without rewardable good works)? Two things in the following context argue for the latter: (1) he mentions their "work" in Heb 6:10, and (2) rewards are in view in Heb 6:12 when he speaks of those who "inherit the promises" because of their faith and patience.

Based on these two contextual observations and taking this together with the other matters mentioned in points 1-3 above, the danger of "fire" does not seem to be related to hell. This probably looks at the discipline and judgment that can come upon an unfaithful Christian's life who has not brought forth fruit (as he should) but rather a life of worthless works (thorns and thistles). Such a person stands in jeopardy of receiving the Lord's discipline in this life ("near curse") and will certainly see his works burned up when examined at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10ff.; cf. 2 Cor 5:9-10, Rom 14:10-12). In contrast, the believer that is moving onward to "maturity" and walking in obedience to the Lord can expect to receive God's "blessing."

V. THE ENCOURAGEMENT AND HOPE FOR THE READERS (6:9-12)

Despite the rebuke for being "dull of hearing" as spiritual babes and despite the ominous warning given in 6:4-6, the author has better hopes for his readers. It may be possible for these wayward believers to "fall away," but the author apparently does not think they have gone to that extreme yet. So, his warning of the fatal consequences is balanced by an encouraging note and exhortation to faithfulness in vv 9-12.

A. An Affirmation of His Confidence in the Readers (6:9)

In the previous illustration, the unsuitable vegetation was burned off the unfruitful ground. That should not be seen as the normative outcome of the Christian life, and the author is concerned of "better things" for them, i.e., things that "accompany salvation." Most likely, "salvation" (σωτηρία) is being used in the same eschatological sense that it has had previously in the book (cf. 1:14; 2:3,10; 5:9) and in which it will be used in regard to the Second Coming in 9:28. Earlier in the epistle, the author anticipated Christ becoming heir of all things (1:2) and spoke of those who would "inherit salvation" (1:14). In chapter two, the author connects this concept of *inheriting salvation* with God's plan to regain the right for man to exercise dominion. This is the time when man shall be crowned with glory and honor . . . in resurrected state ruling jointly with Christ. This is the glorious destiny of believers who are faithful to Christ in this life (cf. Rev 2:26-27). These are the "better things" that the author has in mind for his readers. Faithfulness does bring a rich reward, both now and in the eschatological future.

B. The Reason for His Confidence in Them (6:10)

The illative γὰρ in vs 10 signals the reason for his confidence in his readers. Apparently, the author has firsthand knowledge of this group of believers, and he knows that they have been faithful to the Lord in days past. Notice that his commendation is not in regard to their personal justification, but in regard to their faithfulness *as Christians*. Their faithfulness is evidenced by their "work" (ἔργου) and their love. Later in the book (10:32ff.), he will commend their past faithfulness again. They had begun their Christian pilgrimage well, but they must not divert from the pathway of faithfulness.

C. The Exhortation to Remain Faithful (6:11-12)

They are to be diligent to have the "full assurance of hope" until the end. The word *diligence* is the Greek σπουδή, the cognate to the verb σπουδαζω in Heb 4:11 - "Let us be diligent to enter that rest." The word means "diligence, earnestness, or eagerness." They are to be diligent and eagerly making every effort to maintain a "full assurance of hope" until the end. The author has in mind the same concern as in 3:6 - "if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end" (cf. 3:14; 10:23). The author is concerned that *each one of them* (ἕκαστον ὑμῶν) maintain their confession of Jesus as Messiah and be diligent to remain faithful to Him.

Not only must they be careful to not abandon their confession, the author does not even want them to be *sluggish* (νωθροί). This is the same word he used to describe them in 5:11 when he charged them as being "dull of hearing" (νωθροὶ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς). Unfortunately, the *NIV*

obscures the connection by its translation "we do not want you to become lazy."⁹ Indeed, they are *sluggish* at the present moment, but they must not remain so.

Alternatively, they can be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." *Inheriting the promises* is not automatic for any Christian. This is based on faith and patience. The idea of "inheriting" is found four times in Hebrews, namely 1:4; 1:14; 6:12; and 12:17. In the context of Hebrews, the *inheritance* in view is the "eschatological salvation" and participation in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, entering God's rest and ruling jointly with Christ. Disobedience and unbelief may jeopardize these future promises (cf. Heb 3:12,19; 4:1,3,11), but faith and patience help bring them about.

⁹The verb γίνομαι can mean either "be" or "become." Note that the *NASB* chose the translation "be," which is better in light of the use of νωθρος in 5:11. The *NIV*'s "become lazy" suggests they had not already entered into this state.