

A Study of the Book of Hebrews

Jesus is Better

Sermon # 11

“Is It Ever Too Late To Repent?”

Hebrews 6:4-8

In our last study the author of Hebrews had told the church that many of their number were “*dull of hearing*” (5:11) and were in need of someone to again teach them the ABC’s of the faith. He removes the complacency of those who hide behind the doctrine of the security of the believer while continuing to live a lifestyle that is anything but Christian. He calls for Christians to act like Christians, and to move on to maturity. The stark reality of the warning is that you are either pressing on to maturity as a believer or you are in danger of having tasted the gospel yet turning away in callous rejection.

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, (5) and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,(6) if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. (7) For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; (8) but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.” (NKJV)

Let me begin by saying that this is an important text because we can all think of those we have known who were once radiant witnesses for Christ who were sidetracked and are now no longer a part of the church.

First, it is important because we can all think of someone who made a profession of faith in Christ and seemed to go on energetically for a while, but then something happened in their life. Perhaps they experienced some difficulty or tragedy. Perhaps they fell into immorality. Or perhaps they went off to college and were shaken to the core by the anti-Christian arguments of unbelieving teachers. Yet with a knowledge of the truth, they deliberately turn away from it. They completely turn their back on Christ and seem set on trampling on everything they once held sacred.

We have all struggled with the pain and confusion of seeing those who have come into the church suddenly turn and walk away as if their profession of faith in Christ were meaningless. What happened? Were they ever really saved?

Secondly, today's text is important because it has caused untold agony to many sensitive Christians. It's as if Satan uses scriptures such as these to create hopelessness and despair. So what do these passages teach? *This morning we are going to examine this passage in a little different manner, by asking and seeking to answer four important questions.*

The First Important Question Is, Can A Christian Really Know They Are Saved Forever?

There are strong differences of opinion that swirl around about how to interpret verses four through six. In fact this passage is one of the great theological battlefields of Scripture. The difficulty lies in determining whether the "*enlightened*" ones (v. 4) who "*fell away*" (v. 6) were believers or unbelievers?

The first interpretation of this passage is that it is used to support those who believe that you can lose your salvation. The four verbal actions of verses four and five - "*enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God*" - do seem to express authentic Christian conversion experience (Heb. 6:4,5). Yet those who are described within these verses have received profound spiritual blessings whether saved or not..

Interestingly enough those who teach that we can lose our salvation also teach that such a person can be "saved again." But this passage teaches just the opposite, that in fact it is "*impossible.*" (v.4) So if this passage teaches that a person can lose his salvation, it also must teach that he can never be saved a second or third time. In other words if this refers to apostasy, once a saved person turns his back on Christ, he cannot be restored to salvation. He is lost forever.

I want to make it crystal clear that I believe we have a secure salvation because Scripture is very emphatic on this point. There are many Scriptures that assure the believer that once he is saved he can never be lost again.

"The Lord Jesus Christ ... makes some tremendous statements about our absolute security. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life" (John 10:27-28). What kind of life? Eternal life. If you can lose it, it is not eternal! "And they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's

hand" (John 10:28–29). It is not a question of your ability to hold on to Him; it is His ability to hold on to you." [J. Vernon McGee. *Thru The Bible Commentary*. (electronic ed.- 1997.) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1981)]

There is a second interpretation which contends that this is a hypothetical case. In this view, "If they shall fall away" is only the presentation of a hypothetical situation, it is the classic "what if" line of thought. The writer does not say that it does happen, or even can happen, only what if it was possible? *"The obvious problem with this view is that is that if the sin cannot be committed, it is absurd to offer it as an argument against falling into it."* [R. Kent Hughes. *Hebrews: An Anchor For the Soul*. Vol. 1 (Wheaton, ILL.: Crossway Books, 1993) p. 156]

The third interpretation points out that in verse six there really is no "if" in the Greek. It is a participle and should be translated "*having fallen away.*" According to this interpretation, what this passage is speaking of is mere professors, and they are not genuine believers. They only profess to be Christians.

Is this passage teaching that you can lose your salvation or is it teaching that you can have the experiences outlined in verse four and five and still be lost? Either possibility should be both shocking and sobering.

I agree with Ray Stedman who writes "... *they are a mixed assembly, among whom were many genuine believers needing a degree of prodding to go on in their experience of truth. There were also some who professed faith in Christ but who gave no evidence in their behavior or attitudes that they were truly saved (regenerate).*"

[Ray Stedman. *IVP New Testament Commentary Series : Hebrews*. (Downer's Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) p. 72]

The First important question was, Can A Christian really know they are save forever? And answer is unequivocally, Yes!!!

The Second important question is, How Is It Possible For Anyone To Come So Close And Still Not Be Saved? (vv. 4-6a)

Verses four through six tell us that those, "... *who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, (5) and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,(6) if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance...*"

But it is true as John MacArthur points out to have just enough exposure to Christianity to become immune. *"A vaccination immunizes by giving a very mild case of the disease. A person who is exposed to the gospel can get just enough of it to immunize him against the real thing. The longer he continues to resist it, whether graciously or violently, the more he becomes immune to it. His spiritual system becomes more and more unresponsive and insensitive. His only hope is to reject what he is holding onto and receive Christ without delay – lest he become so hard, often without knowing it, that his opportunity is lost forever."* [John MacArthur. The MacArthur

New Testament Commentary: Hebrews. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983) p. 147]

How is it possible for anyone to experience all that described in verse 4 and 5 and still not be saved, we ask? Scripture provides with a couple of examples.

Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24) is an illustration of those who experience such convincing proofs who nevertheless stop short of salvation and rather turn to apostasy. Simon professed to believe

Jesus, was baptized and yet was severely rebuked by Peter because *"his heart was not right before God"* (Acts 8:21).

But perhaps the best example is Judas. Judas as one of the Lord's disciples, walked and talked daily with the Lord, heard his preaching, witnessed his miracles and was one those sent out to preach the "good news." Yet Jesus called him the *"son of perdition"* and a *"devil"* (John 6:70). Judas did not lose his salvation, he never had it. In spite of all the advantages he possessed and his enormous exposure to the truth, it is plain that he resisted and ultimately rejected Christ and turned away to a sad death and eternal judgment.

When verse six states, *"if they fall away"* we must remember there is a great difference between *"falling"* and *"falling away."* The word translated *"fall away"* (*parapito*) means simply to stumble or to fall down. Falling away isn't just falling into some sin; it is actually departing from Jesus Himself. *"For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity."* (Proverbs 24:16) The difference is between a Peter and a Judas. If you depart from Jesus, there is no hope!

We need to make something very clear. Does God ever reject anyone who comes in genuine repentance? The answer of course is, No! He is always ready to save the sinner who turns to Him for grace. *"God has pledged Himself to pardon all who truly repent, but Scripture and experience alike suggest that it is possible for human beings to arrive at a state of heart and life where they can no longer repent."* [F. F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Hebrews. The NIV Commentary on the NT. (Grand Rapids, _____, 1964) p. 124]

A good example of this would be the Biblical character Esau in Hebrews 12:16-17 we read, "*(Let) there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. (17) For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.*"

Don't make the mistake of thinking that Esau genuinely repented and was rejected by God. God does not reject genuine repentance, the text plainly says "*he found no place for repentance.*" In other words he could not repent. He was so hardened, that he cried out for things to go better in his life, but inside he would not submit to God's terms.

You may be asking, *Is this true of me?* Satan uses these verses to unsettle believers who are having physical, mental, or emotional difficulties. They fear that they have fallen away from Christ and that there is no hope for restoration. They worry that they have drifted beyond redemption's point. The fact that they are even concerned about it is conclusive evidence that they are *not true of you!* If this is even a concern of your heart, then this is not you.

Yet, it is possible to get just enough of the gospel to make you immune but not allow it work deeply enough to save you!

The Third important question is, How Can Anyone Crucify Christ Again? (v. 6b)

Verse six says, "if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame."

John Piper says, "It is one thing for a stranger to the faith to resist Christ. But it is another thing for a person who has been in the church and has been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit and tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come—it's another thing for that person to say after all those blessings and all those experiences: I think what the world offers is better than this. That is a re-crucifying of Jesus a putting him to public shame worse than any outsider could, who never tasted the truth." [John Piper. "When Is Saving Repentance Impossible.

www.soundofgrace.com/piper96/10-13-96.htm. p. 2].

What Hebrews 6 reveals is that one who has come this close to the gospel and turned away is actually worse off than someone who never heard in the first place. We see it in the world around us. Many of the harshest critics of Christianity, like Ted Turner, are those who were once professing Christians!

When anyone has heard the gospel and then turns away, he has done exactly as those Jews who condemned Jesus to the Cross. Though they never literally take a hammer and nails and physically nail Jesus to the cross, they nevertheless agree to the justice of his crucifixion.

The Fourth important question is, Is It Possible To Truly Be A Christian And Have No Fruit? (vv. 7-8)

Verses seven and eight state, "*For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; (8) but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.*"

Now the writer turns to the world of nature to find a counterpart to the true believer (v. 7) and to the unbeliever (v. 8). In both cases the person is likened to the land. The privileges listed in verses four and five are compared to the invigorating "*rain.*" The crop of vegetation speaks of the ultimate response of the person to the privileges received. This in turn determines whether the land is blessed or cursed.

The true believer is like the land "*which drinks in the rain,*" brings forth useful vegetation, and is blessed by God. In verse eight the one who refuses to believe is like land that also is well watered but it "*bears*" nothing but "*thorns and briers,*" the fruit of sin. It receives but never produces useful plants. Such land is worthless. It is condemned already. Its destiny "*is to be burned.*" There was an ancient practice of burning the ground to destroy the weeds and make the field useful again. Land that produced nothing but weeds faced nothing but fire! The threatened judgment refers to loss of *reward* not loss of salvation (see 1 Cor. 3:12–15).

The author does not believe one can lose his salvation, or that his readers had (6:9); but he speaks to demonstrate the folly some might have in imagining that they can turn back to the old ways without suffering loss.

Conclusion

Failure to heed a warning can have disastrous effects. A tragic illustration of this occurred on January 16, 2005 on the ski slopes of Park City, Utah. Officials carefully monitor the mountain for danger of avalanches. Signs are erected clearly marking certain dangerous

areas "out of bounds." The signs read, "You Are Leaving The Ski Resort, YOU COULD DIE!" Yet in spite of the warning, one skier, Shane Maxiner skied out of bounds and was crushed to death by a massive avalanche.

True Christians pay attention to spiritual warnings. Don't leave God's clearly marked path, to do so is to invite disaster.

You may feel the Spirit of God prick your heart and yet when the invitation is given we refuse to budge. We say to ourselves, *"Now is not a convenient time. I will take care of it when I get my life in order. I know I need to get right with God, but I am going to do it on my own terms at my own time. I know I need God to forgive my sins, but I am enjoying my life, even though I know it is displeasing to God."* We need to be careful about toying with something so important. Who knows when the door will close. Who knows what will be our last opportunity? The time to act is now!!!