

SERMON
SERIES

AND WITHOUT FAITH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE HIM, FOR WHOEVER WOULD DRAW NEAR TO GOD MUST BELIEVE THAT HE EXISTS AND THAT HE REWARDS THOSE WHO SEEK HIM.

HEBREW'S



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HEBREW'S
VERSE BY
VERSE STUDYLET US DRAW NEAR IN
*Faith***SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 6:1-8**

To understand what it means to “fall away” from the community of faith.

Read the Text:

“Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits. 4 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. 7 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.” (Hebrews 6:1-8, ESV)

Study the Text:**Am I Secure?**

Hebrews 6 presents one of the most difficult passages to interpret, leading many Christians to wonder: “Can I lose my salvation?” There are a number of interpretive decisions that must be made, and a variety of interpretations have been offered by Christian thinkers as far back as the second century. While this study will not be comprehensive, it will offer some insight into these unique challenges before giving what I think is the proper understanding of the passage in light of the context of Hebrews thus far.

The passage begins with “therefore,” indicating that it is a carryover from the previous chapter, namely, the issue of spiritual maturity (“solid food”) versus spiritual immaturity (“milk”). In other words, in light of the need to press on to eat solid food, the author of Hebrews exhorts his audience (himself included, as indicated by the first person plural, “us”) to “leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). However, one may wonder: “What is the elementary doctrine of Christ?” The author provides six nouns, all of

which are subordinate to the elementary doctrine just mentioned. They are as follows: 1. Repentance from dead works, 2. faith toward God, 3. instruction about washings (likely a reference to Jewish rituals, given the audience is a group of “Hebrews”), 4. laying on of hands, 5. resurrection of the dead, and 6. eternal judgment.

While some debate exists over the exact meaning of these six issues, they were likely the most widely discussed within early Jewish-Christian communities. If that is correct, the author is encouraging them to leave behind these frivolous debates and move on to maturity. It is not good to have debates and dissensions in the church (Titus 3:9), and therefore, by God’s help (“if God permits”), the church is to be committed to such growth. In light of that, there is a warning given in verses 4 through 8, and it is on these verses that the rest of this study will focus. There is one major question that must be answered: “Who is this passage talking about? Christians or non-Christians?” The answer to that question greatly influences how we understand everything else in this passage.

Who is the Audience?

There is significant disagreement, both historically and currently, over who the audience is in this passage. Some have argued that this passage is referring to believers because of the way they are described. Others have pointed out that these terms are ambiguous in their broader usage, and therefore, it is unclear whether they are Christians. Still, others have maintained for a multitude of reasons that the audience is not Christian. Attention will be paid to each descriptor.

THOSE ONCE “ENLIGHTENED”

First, they are described as those who have “been enlightened.” Some have argued that this term clearly refers to the “initial illumination that results from a response... to the Gospel.”¹ Others argue that it refers to those who were catechized and baptized into the church but never truly believed, though they did bear witness to the Light who is “the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12).²

THOSE WHO HAVE “TASTED THE HEAVENLY GIFT”

Second, they are also described as those who have “tasted the heavenly gift.” The “heavenly gift” is almost certainly synonymous with the gift of salvation, but the fact that they have “tasted” it has led to multiple interpretations. Allen rightly notes that the same term is applied to Christ in Hebrews 2, who “tasted death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9).³ Hughes and Bruce, however, argue that it could just as convincingly be applied to someone who has been baptized, but does not actually believe, and Bruce even notes that the usage of the word “tasted” might allude to Communion.⁴ In this sense, it would refer to those baptized and who participate in communion, but are not genuinely born-again Christians.

THOSE WHO HAVE “SHARED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Third, they are those who have “shared in the Holy Spirit.” The term “shared” is the Greek μέτοχος (metochos), and elsewhere it is translated as “partaker.” Some have argued that it’s difficult to imagine

¹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, eds., vol. 35 of *The New American Commentary*, E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2010), 348.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews Volume 1: An Anchor for the Soul*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 158.

³ Allen, *Hebrews*, 349.

⁴ Hughes, *Hebrews Volume 1*, 159; see also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 363.

someone believing the Gospel and presumably receiving the Spirit (in some way, at least), and then eventually “falling away.” However, Acts 8:9-25 reports a story of a man named Simon Magus who “previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria” (Acts 8:9), which was attributed to “the power of God” (Acts 8:10). Simon eventually believed the Gospel, was baptized, and “continued with Philip” in ministry (Acts 8:13). However, he eventually attempted to bribe Peter, saying: “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:19). Peter, outraged by this, calls Simon to repent, declaring that he is “in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). Simon presents an example of someone who has seemingly (outwardly) believed, been baptized, worked miracles, and yet clearly did not *truly believe*. He was akin to those who had done many signs and wonders in the name of the Lord and yet “did not know Him” (Matt. 7:21-23).

THOSE WHO HAVE “TASTED” GOD’S GOODNESS AND POWER

Fourth, they have also “tasted” God’s goodness and power, indicating that they had observed verifiable and likely supernatural works of God. Perhaps they are those to whom “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:4). Either way, it is inconclusive whether this entails actual faith. Allen and Grindheim argue that it does; Bruce and Hughes argue that it might not.⁵

THOSE WHO HAVE “FALLEN AWAY”

Finally, they are described as having “fallen away,” a term that is overwhelmingly interpreted to mean apostasy. In other words, these are individuals who have, by all outward measures, become Christians, and yet they repudiate the name of Jesus as they reject what they once professed as true. Allen has presented a formidable argument from the Greek Old Testament (LXX) and the Greek extra-biblical books that “fall away” should not be interpreted as apostasy, but simply as “transgression.” However, the history of interpretation and the context of some Greek Old Testament passages that include the term “fall away”, along with verses 7 and 8, strongly suggest that the author intends to convey the idea of full-blown apostasy.

Up to this point, it’s worth noting that there is no real consensus among the interpreters referenced on any of these details. Allen and Grindheim agree that these descriptors refer to Christians, but they do not agree that “falling away” means apostasy. Bruce and Hughes agree that these descriptors do not necessarily mean they are Christians, but they do not agree on whether or not real apostasy is actually theologically possible. Hughes sees these people as outward Christians, but inwardly not born-again (also known as the “Apparent” position). Still, others argue that it is referring to Christians who can fall away, and thus, one can lose their salvation! There is no good consensus on these issues. What that means, for our sake, is that wherever we land, we must land with humility, recognizing that various great minds have come to various conclusions.

With that said, there are a few additional details that lead me to a specific conclusion. I will now humbly argue for what I think is correct.

A CHANGE IN PERSONAL PRONOUN

Note that up through the first three verses, the audience has been described in the first person plural form (“us”), which includes the author of the work. He identifies as part of the church because, like them, he is a believer in Christ. Notice, however, that in verses 4 through 8, the central focus changes from “us” to “them.”

⁵ Allen, *Hebrews*, 350; Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 313-314; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 147; Hughes cites King Herod, who regularly enjoyed listening to John the Baptist preach, though he ultimately rejected its warnings. See Hughes, *Hebrews Volume 1*, 159;

It seems as if this change in pronoun indicates a shift in audience. This is consistent with the Book of Hebrews as a whole. It seems like the author often switches from encouragement to warnings, almost as if he is speaking to two different groups within the church. This would indicate the possibility that within the outward, visible church, there are those who genuinely believe and those who *appear to believe* but *do not*.

THE TWO KINDS OF LAND

Verses 7 and 8 continue by giving an example of “land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it.” Sometimes, land will produce “a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated,” and that land “receives a blessing from God” (Heb. 6:7). However, “if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned” (Heb. 6:8). This strengthens the idea that there are two groups within the covenant community. One that believes and produces good fruit, and one that “believes” and produces “thorns and thistles.” Both look the same at first. Both are recipients of God’s Word and blessing. But only one produces a useful crop.

THE WILDERNESS GENERATION CONNECTION

To further strengthen the “two groups within the community” argument, consider that throughout the first five chapters, the author repeatedly returns to the example of the so-called “wilderness generation” in Exodus. They are the ones who witnessed the plagues, tasted the Passover meal, walked through the Red Sea, ate the manna from heaven, and still did not enter God’s rest because of unbelief (Heb. 3:19). Some interpreters have suggested that their example is in mind here, as well, and I agree. The wilderness generation is both an example and a warning to the new covenant community. Consider that the wilderness generation was enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, participated with the Spirit of God, tasted the goodness of God’s Word, witnessed God’s power, and still fell away. That does not mean that all of the wilderness generation was not saved; certainly, Moses and the other faithful followers were. It does mean that as a whole, the corporate old covenant community failed because of unbelief, though they had every reason to believe.

In the same way, the new covenant community has even more reason to believe. And while I think the New Testament is clear that the new covenant community of faith will not fail to enter God’s rest (1 Tim. 1:6), it does not mean that everyone “in” the community is actually “of” the community. There *are* those in the church who participate in baptism, discipleship, communion, and service, yet they eventually *fall away* because they are not truly part of the body of Christ. As the apostle John reminds us: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 Jn. 2:19). Recall the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 for a moment. I imagine it would be very difficult to recognize any visible differences between the rocky ground and the good soil at first. They both produce plants (Matt. 13:5, 8). They both seem to respond to the Gospel. But only one endures.

What About Now?

Hebrews reminds us that those who “fall away” are impossible to restore to repentance because they have experienced every bit of evidence there is of the goodness of God, and yet they still reject Him eventually; thus, there is nothing left to convince them. F. F. Bruce has perhaps said it best: “Those who have shared the covenant privileges of the people of God, and then deliberately renounce them, are the most difficult persons of all to reclaim for the faith.”⁶ That is not to say that God couldn’t save them, or that if they had a change of heart and repented, they wouldn’t be accepted. It *is* to say, however, that a change of heart is highly unlikely.

⁶ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 144.

The big question on the table is: “Which group are you in?” And the only way to know that for certain is by how you endure. In the words of the 3rd-century church father, Tertullian: “People are not Christians unless they persevere to the end.”⁷ This is perhaps why the New Testament emphasizes the importance of perseverance (2 Tim. 2:12; Rom. 5:3-5; Heb. 12:1). Do not get tripped up on whether or not you are “disqualified” from faith because of your sin. If that were the case, we’d all be disqualified. The Christian life is lived in the habit of repentance and confession of sin (Ja. 5:16). The question is, “Will you confess and repent until the end?” Time will tell.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Hebrews 6:1. What are “we” to “leave?” According to the notes, what does the elementary doctrine of Christ include?

2. Read Hebrews 6:2. What else does it include?

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 6:3. Who do we depend on to press on to spiritual maturity?

2. Read Hebrews 6:4. What does it mean to be “enlightened,” to “taste the heavenly gift,” and to “share in the Holy Spirit?” (Hint: See above notes)

Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 6:5. What does it mean to “taste the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come?”

2. Read Hebrews 6:6. In your own words, what is verse 6 saying?

⁷ Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 3 (ANF 3.244).

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 6:7. What does the “land” represent? What does the “rain” represent? What do the good crops represent?
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2. Read Hebrews 6:8. What do the “thorns and thistles” represent? What is waiting for those who bear bad fruit?
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Discuss the Text!

Session 13 Discussion: Perseverance

Hebrews 6:1-8 is a warning against the danger of the same kind of unbelief the wilderness generation fell into. Though it is aimed at an unbelieving group within the larger community, the warning is still for the whole community. Talk as a group about the importance of persevering in your faith until the end and what you need to change to finish well.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever known someone who was, by all measures, a born-again Christian, and suddenly departed from the faith? What went wrong? How did that impact you and your community?
2. What do you think lures people away from the faith? (e.g., hard questions, problem of evil, etc.)
3. What practices are important to you personally to maintain your faith consistently?
4. Would people describe you as land that bears good fruit, or land that bears bad fruit? Why?
5. How important is regular church participation in persevering in your faith?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Do a larger puzzle with your child, one that takes maybe several days to finish. Talk along the way about how even though you can start to see it come together, it isn't yet complete. Once it is finished, make the connection: the puzzle is the Christian life, and it isn't finished until it is completed (death). Then and only then can you say it was successfully completed.

Takeaways:

1. There are two groups within the covenant community of faith: those who believe, and those who outwardly appear to believe, but inwardly do not.
2. Those who fall away from the community reveal they are not part of it and are impossible to restore to repentance, since there is nothing left for them to see or experience to convince them.