

## The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 15

October 8, 2017

## The Spectre &amp; Severity of Apostasy

Hebrews 6: 4 - 12

## The Heart of This Warning Passage

vv. 4-6

In our last lesson, we examined the lead-up to this section of Hebrews, by looking at foundational and potentially issues that the author saw in some of his readers – a stalled spiritual growth, an arrested development in growth in Christ, and a people stuck on ( & not even fully comprehending ) the basics of the faith.

Now we arrive at vv. 4-6, the crisis point of the warning passage, the 3 verses most often used to try to establish answers to some of the questions that center on every Hebrews warning passage: Can real Christians lose their salvation? Are these true Christians being addressed here? What does *“it is impossible...to restore those...who have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance.”*, mean? Have some already experienced this falling away?

This warning passage seems to have a particular mystique attached to it. If you mention warning passages, this is the one most people think about first. As a result, people tend to think that this one has a theme that varies from the other 4, and perhaps has a different target audience as well. But all five have one purpose as has been stated a number of times since lesson # 4. They are used by God this way: “The warning and promises are designed to elicit faith which perseveres to the end in order to claim the prize of eternal life.”<sup>i</sup>

V. 4 begins with the word, “For”, so what follows is an explanation for why the author considers it critical that those he writes to press forward to spiritual maturity and not remain as “baby Christians”. They are in danger of committing apostasy, and verse 6 warns that, if they do, they will not be able to come back to Christ. The author’s counsel here is not based on the fact that they have already done this, otherwise, why warn them? Rather, we should see this as a wake-up call; a shaking of someone to get their full attention.

Tom Schreiner explains the theme of vv. 4-6 well;

“If the readers apostatize and turn away from Jesus Christ, there will be no opportunity of salvation for them. Is the writer saying that they can’t come back to Christ even if they wish to do so? If we think of the context of the letter, the readers were being persecuted and were growing weary and exhausted with the trials of the Christian life. The author sees that they are at a crossroads. He perceives that if they turn away from Christ, there will be no future repentance for them. It isn’t the case that God would not and could not forgive them. Rather, the readers, if they repudiate Christ, will have no desire to return to Him.”

They will have left that “phase” of their life behind. Hence, the urgency of the current situation provokes the author to admonish them severely.”<sup>ii</sup>

It is clear from the language in these 3 verses that the sin being discussed is apostasy<sup>iii</sup>. This does not support the argument of many who say this is merely a warning about a loss of heavenly rewards, or is about people being written to who are not even Christians. The central source of dispute among theologians is whether those being described are full-fledged Christians or “almost” Christians.

“There is a group here, about whom the author says, “it is impossible...to restore them again to repentance”. Is this talking about a complete reversal of God’s gracious and irrevocable act of salvation in a true believer? If so, that is contrary to hundreds of verses which indicate clearly that salvation, once granted, can never be lost and God will never revoke it.”<sup>iv</sup>

The people that the author wrote to were certainly a mixed audience. No one would dare say that all of them were saved; so some were true believers, and a few were certainly either non-believers or those interested but not committed to Christ. All are at various stages of spirituality or a lack of it. However true this observation may be, we must look at the text for clues regarding how the writer sees the recipients – as unbelievers or believers. It seems he is describing them as Christians – that’s who this warning passage is addressed to.

Back when I believed that the warning passages were talking about and to those who were not really believers, and the warning passages’ intention was to expose such people as professors rather than possessors of true salvation, I argued this way; there is no ‘salvation’ language found here – words like ‘justification’, ‘adoption’, ‘redeemed’, ‘conversion’, ‘born again’, ‘grace’, and so on. Wayne Grudem even argues that he has discerned 18 ways the author could have confirmed them as Christians if he had wanted to.<sup>v</sup> However, the terms that are used in vv. 4-5 are definitely not fringe terms, as I once saw them to be. We can’t reasonably expect a Bible writer to utilize terms that we want to fit into our criteria.

V. 4a & 6 are the key elements of the sentence, and v. 4b & 5 are the descriptors that explain the sentence. Let’s look at these terms one at a time.

The first of these is they had “*once been enlightened*”. The word, ‘once’ points to a singular event, such as what we would think of the term, ‘justified’, so this could be a reference to conversion where a person receives the saving knowledge of God in Christ. The word, ‘enlightened’ is also found in Heb. 10:32, where it is certainly a reference to salvation, which was then followed by persecution and suffering. In the very well-known passage – 2 Cor. 4:4-6 – notice how Paul uses ‘light of the gospel’, and ‘light shining out of darkness’...‘shone in our hearts to give the light...of Jesus Christ.’ This does not seem to be describing an ‘almost’ Christian.

Secondly, these people are said to have “*tasted the heavenly gift*”. This could be a reference to the Holy Spirit, but He is mentioned next, making this unlikely. It is

described as a ‘heavenly gift’, so it has come down from God ( cf. James 1:17-18 ), and is most likely the gift of salvation ( Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 3:24 ). The word *taste* often means just that, however, to taste something but to not swallow it or make a meal of it. This meaning is found in a number of NT passages. But, elsewhere in Hebrews, the word is used with another meaning – “to experience fully”. That is the meaning of the word in Heb. 2:9. Jesus didn’t just try death, he died! He experienced all the horrific characteristics of human death, so it is most likely that here ‘taste’ is being used in the same way – “tasting salvation” means receiving it.

Thirdly, and importantly, “and have shared in the Holy Spirit”. This word, ‘shared’ is translated “become partakers” ( NET ); “companions with the Holy Spirit” ( HCSB ), which is not a good translation, because it suggests that believers are only ‘friends of the Holy Spirit’, and does not explain ‘shared’ or ‘partakers’ of the Holy Spirit. But does even ‘shared’ indicate that they fell short of a saving relationship with Him? In Acts 8:9-24, the experience of Simon the Sorcerer seems to be a prime example of that possibility.

The Greek word here for “shared in”, denotes full participation ( cf. Heb. 3:1 ) – believers share a heavenly calling, and in 3:14, believers are truly sharers of Christ if they persevere to the end, and in 12:8, the same word, used as a verb, says that those who are truly sons ‘share’ in discipline. In 2:14, it is used to say that Jesus fully shared human flesh and blood with us.<sup>vi</sup>

The sign that one was a believer in the NT was quite often reception of the Holy Spirit. Note these passages; Gal. 3:1-5; Acts 15:7-11; & Rom. 8:9, 16. So, ‘shared in the holy Spirit’ can legitimately only mean that one is saved.

Fourth – *“have tasted the goodness of the Word of God”*. There is nothing that hints of this being a superficial tasting either, and later on, in Heb. 13:7, it is this word that the leaders of the church taught them as new believers. Heb. 6:10 recalls their service and love for others, which was still going on, and in Heb. 10:32-34, notice again their struggle with hardships, affliction, persecution, etc. and pay particular attention to v. 34, at the end of the verse, *“since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”*

So the author is not doubting their love of God’s Word ( and what Christian doesn’t love it? ), but believes they’ve received it efficiently. It to these people the warning passage is addressed.

Finally, *“have tasted...the powers of the age to come.”* The clause, *‘have tasted’* here also is connected to this phrase in the sentence, and it becomes the 5<sup>th</sup> indicator of who the author is addressing. So whoever these people are, along with the other 4 indicators, they had experienced in some sense, God’s end-time blessings. The word, *‘powers’* suggests a real event, not just a whisper of hope. In the NT, this idea of the age to come for believers is a large indicator that one is a participant in an “already but not yet” eternal life. There are special hopes attached to Christ’s return, the

Millennial Kingdom and the heaven that awaits only believers. This is especially prevalent in Paul's epistles; cf. I Cor. 15:50-56 ( & see 15:19 ); Phil. 2:12-16; 3:20-21; Col. 3:23-24; I Thess. 1:8-10; 4:13-18; and Jesus speaks of this as well – of individuals in places like JN 6:39c,54b,57,58; MT 22:29-32; 25:34 and so on.

Why would anyone become a believer when promised the “world's hatred”, persecution, striving, pain, suffering, martyrdom, etc. unless they understood that the power of the age to come was so incredibly beautiful – worth dying for in fact?

Now, we come to v. 6 and the 6<sup>th</sup> indicator that the author is writing to Christians, to those who have “*fallen away*”. This “falling away” in the Greek is one word, and this is the only place it is used in the NT. It is, however, used in the OT ( in the LXX – the Septuagint ) – in Ezekiel 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4; where it means ‘apostasy’, and Judah suffers the consequences of forsaking God. Ezek. 18:4 is very clear, “*The soul who sins shall die.*”

Here in Heb. 6:6, the word refers to those who abandon the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, this does not mean a person who is a believer and stumbles and sins, even if that is on a semi-regular basis, but rather one who makes a deliberate choice to not to continue to participate in the spiritual gifts and insight they have been given.

Of course, it is this phrase, “*fallen away*”, that causes most of the controversy over this passage. As Calvinists, we surely understand that a true believer whom Christ has saved, cannot lose that salvation –they cannot fall away from it. Clearly, the Scriptural proof for that is extensive. We looked earlier at a few passages in John 6, but here are more to ponder; JN 10:11-18, 25-30; Eph. 1:4; Phil. 1:6; I Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 8:28-39; 9:22-24; Heb. 7:25 – and these are just a few.

This passage is one of the key arguments of Arminians who claim that we can lose our salvation. Many Calvinists recognise this, and as Wayne Grudem and many others, must change the terms so that those being addressed here are not Christians ( either not yet, or not really ), but are fringe participants in a church, or are professors ( hypocrites ) rather than actual possessors of salvation. Some suggest this is just a hypothetical warning, as in “If anyone should apostatize, it would be impossible to restore him.”<sup>vii</sup> This implies such a thing could never take place, but if that is true, why warn people about it? Hughes argues this way;

“What, in any case, would be the point of warning them of the danger of apostasy and then assuring them that, after all, they are in no danger of falling into apostasy? Any such procedure would be self-defeating. The confidence expressed in 6:9 and 10:39 arises from the certitude that a true work of God has taken place in their midst; but this does not exclude the possibility that some of their number are rebellious at heart and, unless there is a radical change, will find that they have reached the point of irremediable apostasy.”<sup>viii</sup>

The warning is real, and must be taken seriously by all believers, to ensure that they understand the value of their salvation and tread through life carefully, circumspectly, not casually, realizing that if our salvation ( and only God knows this )

is a shallow belief like one of the seeds in the un-nourishing soils in the parable in Matthew 13:1-23<sup>ix</sup>, then we may have been fooling ourselves or playing a role. Realistically, haven't we all seen people we were certain were believers who then walked away after years of service, perhaps even preaching and teaching before they left? John, in I John 2:19 says *"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."* [ MT 7:21-23 ]

True believers are warned here, but theologically, and biblically, they cannot 'fall away', but theoretically, they might, in the sense that they believe they are believers but are not – cf. 2 Cor. 13:5, *"examine yourselves"*. The author next mentions the horrible state that would arise if one ever did 'fall away', picking back up on Heb. 6:4 – "it is impossible"; and then 6:6 is stark – *"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."*

The idea that, 'should one fall away' it is impossible to restore them to repentance is probably the harshest aspect of this warning passage. Does this mean that if a Christian commits some heinous sin, they lose their salvation and are now an apostate? If so, how many heinous sins qualify for that? One...two...a dozen..1,237? Well, consider David. He committed adultery, murder and yet the Bible considers him saved – cf. Rom. 4:6-8. So there is forgiveness for sin available, so something more must be in sight, and that something is the heart, the attitude one has towards God and Christ. David's true attitude – his heart – is revealed in Psalm 51, and in Psalm 32. David was repentant, though it took some time and a prophet's revelation to get him to repent. So he was not an apostate, despite his great sins.

An apostate is, according to Philip Hughes, "A life that once professed obedience to Christ but now openly blasphemes His name and denies His gospel is the mark of an apostate."<sup>x</sup>

One Puritan commentator has said, "Apostasy is a perversion to evil after a seeming conversion from it." – cited by Art Azurdia III in a sermon on apostasy in Hebrews 6.

We are provided with an example of what constitutes a sin attitude that warrants the impossibility of repentance in Matt. 12:22-32 ( par, MK 3:22-230 ). The problem here is far worse than simply sin itself; it is the attitude or world-view believed that creates this sin. The claim of the Jewish leaders here that Jesus' obviously God-wrought miracles were empowered by Satan betrayed those who claimed to be the most godly people in Israel, as having an attitude of wickedness and a hardened hostility to God's truth and to Christ. However, as we saw in our earlier lengthy excursus on the Person of Christ, their real ( perhaps unintended ) target of hatred was actually the Holy Spirit, in whose power Jesus was doing the miracles. They refused to glorify God for the evidence that His promises were being so obviously fulfilled before their very own eyes!

Hughes, citing John Calvin, comments here;

“The apostle is not talking here about theft or perjury or murder or drunkenness or murder. He is referring to a complete falling away from the gospel, in which the sinner has offended God not in some one respect only but has utterly renounced His grace.” - Calvin -  
 “This sin, then, or sinful disposition, is sin against the light. It is sin committed, not in ignorance, but in the face of knowledge and even experience of the truth – not the sin of those who are “ignorant and wayward” ( Heb. 5:2 ) but of those who “sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth” ( Heb. 10:26 )...The man who rebels as an apostate after professing faith in Christ and entering into the sphere of evangelical blessing is not acting “ignorantly in unbelief,” but by a deliberate and calculated renunciation of the good he has known he places himself beyond forgiveness and renewal.”<sup>xi</sup>

Consider Paul, who was saved ( Acts 9 ) as a murderous spy for the Sanhedrin, as he was on his way to Damascus in order to follow after Christians who had fled for their lives from Jerusalem. In I Tim. 1:12-17, he records his repentant attitude, realising the immense grace bestowed on him despite his heinous sin. He highlights 3 things which are pertinent to our current discussion: (1) v. 13 – “*But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief*”; (2) v. 15 – he recognises that he is “*the foremost of sinners*”; and (3) v. 16 – he gives the reason he was given God’s mercy.

In Paul’s letters, he makes reference to other ‘believers’ who had in fact, committed apostasy. Note 2 Tim. 4:9-10 ( Demas ); I Tim. 1:18-20 ( Hymenaeus & Alexander ), and so on. Consider also Judas, whose brilliant acting fooled all but the Lord Jesus. He masqueraded as a true believer for the better part of 3 years! It is also possible that John refers to apostasy in I JN 5:16-17.

In general terms, repentance leading to restoration is not possible because of the apostate himself. It is not as if Jesus is unwilling ( Calvinistic doctrine notwithstanding ) but the apostate is unwilling to retrace his steps and return to Christ.

The author of Hebrews explains what the attitude of unrepentance is in the last part of v. 6. The re-conversion of those who leave Christ would be tantamount to crucifying Him all over again – an outrageous idea that is explained perhaps even better in another warning passage – Heb. 10:26-31. He also says that, in doing so, they’d be “*holding Him up to contempt*”. In other words,, they’d be bringing shame on His name. Schreiner says this;

“To abandon God’s Son is to say that his death didn’t save, that it was for nothing. Or to put it another way, apostasy concedes that Jesus should have been crucified, that the penalty was warranted. Instead of finding salvation in Jesus’ death, they reject it and thereby confess that the shame and dishonor Jesus received was deserved.”<sup>xii</sup>

Philip Hughes reminds us, and I think a reminder here is practical;

“Finally, when the redeeming blood of Jesus is applied by the Holy Spirit to the very heart of a man’s being, it is a work of God that cannot fail. This means that those who are genuinely Christ’s do not fall away into apostasy. Where there is a work of God, whether in creation or re-creation, whether in judgment or in grace, that work, simply because it is

God's work, cannot fail to achieve its purpose in accordance with the divine will. Thus Paul is assured that God who began a good work in the Philippian believers will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ ( Phil. 1:6 ); and he encourages Timothy, at a time when he is faced with the defection of Hymenaeus and Philetus, with the reminder that God's foundation is firm and secure, bearing this seal" "The Lord knows those who are His" ( 2 Tim. 2:19 ). The mystery of divine election is the guarantee that Christ will not have died in vain and that the purpose of His coming into the world will be fulfilled without any hint of frustration."<sup>xiii</sup>

Before we move on to vv. 7-8, I wanted to point out two passages that I believe go along with what Hughes says in the quote above, except in a negative way – as in reprobation. ( a theological term for those who are not part of the elect, who are NOT chosen before the foundation of the world )

The first is about Judas – JN 17:10-12; the second is 2 Peter 2:1-3 ( par. Jude 4 ) regarding false teachers and false prophets. Here in both cases, are examples of those who were among God's people, seemingly believers, even teaching, preaching and prophesying ( in Judas' case, even exorcising demons? cf. LK 10:17 ), yet they were lost.

Yet, in both passages, ( & the parallel passage in Jude 4 ) it is clear that the resultant apostasy was planned out as part of God's decree – cf. Rom. 9:22-23. In JN 17:12, Judas was lost, though Christ could have saved him, so that *"the Scripture might be fulfilled."* He was chosen by the Father ( in fact, the Trinity – Eph. 1:11 ) to be among the saved, but was not 'drawn' by the Father to be in Christ; and the Holy Spirit thus did not regenerate him ( he was not born again ), he did not exercise faith because he was not given it, all because he was not among those given to Christ by the Father ( see throughout JN 17 – *"those you have given Me"* - 7 times in JN 17 ) – so he was not saved by Christ.

In Jude 4, the false teachers were *"long ago designated for this condemnation, ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."* Peter says, in his parallel passage, *"even denying the Master who bought them"*, and in v. 3, *"Their condemnation from long ago is not idle and their destruction is not asleep."* A full exegesis of these verses is warranted, but time won't allow that, so let me just summarise why I point these passages out.

Since God has chosen to elect only some FBTFOTW, but not all, those not chosen will not be saved ( as is quite obvious in Judas' case ) but according to Rom. 9:22-23, God chooses to use the wickedness of those who are reprobates to further His purposes ( cf. Gen. 50:20 ) which will result in the ultimate glorification of Himself, and the manifestation of *"the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy which He has prepared beforehand for glory."* What is my point here?

God is not surprised by apostasy. The elect will not fall away, even though they are addressed in this warning passage so they'll recognise the horrific fate should they decide to leave Christ, but those who do fall away were never His ( although they did

not know that – only God knows the heart ) in the first place. Our mandate is to be diligent to persevere so we are not counted among the fallen.

But what possible good is there for God to allow apostasy to form in His church? A possible answer is found in I Cor. 11:18-19. Steven Lawson points out:

“In His sovereignty, God allows apostasy as one way of purging the church. The Head of the church allows false teachers to rise up within the church to draw away bogus believers, thus cleansing and purifying the bride of Christ.”<sup>xiv</sup>

“God allows heresy in the church to serve as a magnet to draw away false disciples from the church. Ironically, God uses error in the church to separate the chaff from the wheat. The presence of polluted pastors and lying leaders serves to reveal who is unconverted in the church. Such men are allowed by God to draw ungodly people to themselves and, eventually, out of the church as a part of God’s purging the bride of Christ.”<sup>xv</sup>

## Apostasy: The Impossibility of Being Restored to Repentance

This section has been adapted from 2 sermons by Art Azurdia III on Hebrews 6. He has done an amazing job in describing apostasy in these 2 sermons, and although he believes this warning passage is directed at unbelievers who have been in a church setting for a long time, remaining uncommitted to Christ, and not to true believers, I agree with his description of apostasy, that true believers cannot commit apostasy, but if they could, they could not be restored to repentance. That’s where I will begin to use his concept here to help us understand especially what vv. 4-6 are referring to when they say that for the one who has been blessed by the list of things we have already looked at in vv. 4-5, it is impossible to restore them to repentance.

Committing apostasy places a person beyond the reach of divine grace for eternity. “impossible” in the original language is located in v. 4, although many translations place it at v. 6. It is in v. 4, as the ESV and NIV have it because it is the most important point the author of Hebrews wanted to make here, and so, as in Greek grammar, it is front and center. In English, to emphasize something like this word, we’d make it bold or underline it, or change the font size. Since it is God who graciously grants repentance in the first place [ cf. Acts 11:18; 5:31; II Tim. 2:25; Rom. 8:7-8; 2:4; Ezek. 36:26-27 ], in this case He will not do so.

There is a tendency of some to argue that “impossible” here can’t mean that – it must mean “very difficult”, so trying to soften the blow of this word. However, the word ‘impossible’ appears 4 times in Hebrews: here, 6:18; 10:4 & 11:6. As an exercise, let’s look at all the other 3 verses and see if “very difficult” can be substituted for “impossible”. None of these verses make sense if we make such a substitution, do they?

So, once a person, who, by all of our powers of observance, is a Christian, walks away from Christ and the church, they, having seen all the evidence, lived among God’s people and ‘tasted’ the blessings of God’s people, place themselves in the extremely

dangerous position of being unable to come back to Christ, because God will not grant them the repentance they need in order to do so.

When such a person walks away from such obvious truth as the Gospel, back to the darkness of Christlessness, they line themselves up ( symbolically of course ) with those who murdered Christ – cf. Heb. 10:26-39. The crime committed by an apostate is far worse than those who crucified Christ in ignorance, because the apostate has much more evidence of the person and work, deity and humanity, and the glory of the risen Christ, and all the changed lives around them and the 5-fold blessings we already examined.

We in the church age live in the wake of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. No one at Calvary knew about these things, God not openly having revealed them yet, and the author's argument in v. 6b – "*...since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*" Why "*the Son of God*" here, and not "Jesus"? Notice how Hebrews begins – Heb. 1:1-5. This is the One you think it's OK to reject? God's Son!? This highlights the enormity of their sin in rejecting Him. God rightly says of them, "This I will not forgive!" Apostasy is fatal. Cf. II Peter 2:20-21.

We have to think this through. An apostate is not someone who desperately wants to return to Christ, but God won't let him. An apostate has no desire to repent. They have considered their position if they commit to Christ, and have said in their own minds, "I will not have this Man to rule over me." This lack of appetite to repent is evidence of the judgment of God – notice Romans 1:22-24, 25-26, 28.

Also, apostasy is better considered as a display of an inner attitude, rather than the commission of one particular sin. Look at David – adulterer & murderer, yet not an apostate; Abraham was a liar, but not an apostate, Noah was given God's grace, but at the end of the voyage of the ark, he was a drunkard; and Jacob ( for whom Israel is named ) was a scam artist, but not an apostate. Now, we can never just shrug our shoulders at sin ( Romans 6:1-4 ) . Sin is still an affront to God, and so we can never take it lightly. He will forgive us if we are Christians, or becoming a Christian, but the consequences of your sin may dog you for the rest of your life. But that is not apostasy.

Well, what about denying Christ? Haven't we all had times when we should have spoken up and defended Christ's honour and didn't, or laughed at a coarse joke? We feel shame and despair afterwards, but does such behaviour make us an apostate? If so, then Peter's 3 X denial of Jesus Christ makes him as much an apostate as Judas Iscariot. He was silent, cursed and swore that he did not know this man on trial for his life, ostensibly to save his own skin.

To fall away means to abandon a former relationship – to forsake someone. It is not a moment in time, as if, when we are grieving or hurt, we lash out and tell God "I don't want you in my life!" Later on, we repent and confess our sinful outburst. Instead, it is a deliberate, calculated, conscious, intentional repudiation of Jesus Christ in the face

of wonderful gospel living. It presupposes a full knowledge of Jesus Christ, an awareness of the Gospel, and full awareness of gospel benefits. Apostasy is not committed in ignorance & it only occurs in the context of a decisive rejection of the gift of God – IOW – “I don’t want it.”

Apostasy is not some kind of hypothetical possibility for a true believer, not relevant to us, but a unique susceptibility to people just like us – people who hang out with us, who sit next to us in the pew. It occurs in people who have professed to be saved, and may even have been baptized. This makes the most likely place for a person to commit apostasy is in a church. In Matt. 7:21-23, the people depicted here are not lying to their judge. They really did these things, and believed they were believers, but their hearts were never changed, and now, in the moment of final judgment, they do not know Christ, and He does not know them.

In a church like ours, it is more than a remote possibility that someone we know will commit apostasy – in fact, many in our past have done so. Apostasy is more likely to happen in a church where God’s Word is going out, and the Gospel is being presented biblically, rather than in a Mega-church setting where entertainment, soft preaching, and very little pure gospel is being preached. In those cases, there is nothing to ‘fall away’ from. The context of the message will never save anyone, because it is not Word or Christ centered. Apostasy assumes a nearness to Christ, and an understanding of His message, etc.

This makes the warning passages, especially this one, quite relevant for us at Emmanuel, because we need to recognise the deadly consequences of not committing our lives to Christ. We cannot sit on the fence – we cannot serve two masters.

## The Illustration

## vv. 7-8

These 2 verses serve to illustrate the consequences of apostasy, using an agricultural viewpoint. Each verse takes a different position as we will see.

v. 7 – “For” the land receives – and again, from God is implied – and if it produces a useful crop ( whatever was planted, with some measure of success – cf. MT 13:23 – the good soil produces a yield of 30-60-100-fold ), thus showing that God has blessed that crop and therefore, the farmer that planted it. Notice the order in v. 7; the “*receives a blessing from God*” comes after the successful crop. This is the reverse of what we would expect to see. Normally, we’d say that God blesses the land, and then it yields a useful crop. But it is worded the way it is to enhance the warning further. The land represents the believers ( readers ), and the refreshing rain that falls is God’s blessing.<sup>xvi</sup> If they produce good fruit, and persevere, then God will bless them.

V. 8 – “But” – so here is the opposite of. V. 7. If the land ( reader ) bears thorns and thistles ( some rain and source of rain is implied ), then it ( the land ) is worthless and near to being cursed, and will be burned. ( cf. LK 13:6-9; Gen. 4:10-12; JN 15:5-6; MT 13:24-30 ). The Bible uses the seed/soil. Crop analogy often to reveal the result of how

people who profess Christ as Saviour live their lives and the consequences of those lives.

“But if it...” is a conditional introduction, again showing that the warning passage is still in force. I believe Schreiner’s comments here are appropriate;

“If the readers yield weeds in their lives after receiving God’s blessings, then they are worthless. The word “worthless” is regularly used in the NT for those who are disqualified on the last day, for those who will not be saved, but judged by God ( cf. Rom. 1:28; I Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor. 13:5-7; 2 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:16 ). The HCSB’s “about to be cursed” captures well the meaning of the text. Another way of translating the phrase is “near to being cursed” ( ESV ). The author is not thinking spatially, as if they are near to being cursed but will actually avoid it. Instead the expression has a temporal dimension. If one’s life is dominated by weeds, if one falls away, when one will be cursed by God, the day of judgment is coming. The reference to the judgment is confirmed by the words, “and will be burned at the end.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Since the verse says the land will be burned, not the weeds, and the land represents the people in the illustration, then it is the people who will be consumed. Thus, the idea that rewards are what is lost does not match the illustration, although those who think that appeal to this verse for their support. There is no doubt, however, that the threat is eternal punishment, not a loss of rewards – or it would be the weeds being burned, not the land.

Schreiner again comments,

“Warnings and admonitions are integral to the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. The gospel not only provides comfort and consolation. Those who have received the stunning blessings of salvation, who have seen and known the power of the gospel, who have received the Holy Spirit, are warned that if they fall away there will be no turning back. If they renounce Jesus Christ after embracing Him and after tasting the power of God’s Word, they in effect crucify him again. To receive such blessings and then to repudiate God’s goodness leaves no other option but irrevocable judgment. Those who reject what is supremely good will find that they have welcomed evil, and it will be their destiny.”<sup>xviii</sup>

## The Encouragement

### vv. 9-10

These next two verses form the basis for an even stronger argument that this warning passage is prospective – a warning, a condition to be satisfied, rather than a polemic against those who had fallen away. The author, in their case, feels sure of better things for them, “*things that belong to salvation*.” He is convinced they will not fall away, that they will heed his warnings and not apostatize. This phrase, “*things that belong to salvation*”, is not meant to contrast with vv. 4-5. As if those addressed are merely ‘almost’ Christians. Verse 10 supports the contention that those addressed in this warning are indeed believers.

Richard Phillips, citing A.W. Pink, makes a lot of sense;

“The point of Hebrews 6:10 is that God does not regard our condition and treasures every petition of prayer, every deed of love, and every act of fidelity. With regard to the idea of rewards, the Scriptures teach that God will reward us for what we do in this life. Having been saved by grace alone, apart from works, we are now called to works. God, like any loving father, will reward the works we do for him. A.W. Pink sums up the matter, “What God rewards is only what He Himself has wrought in us: it is the Father’s recognition of the Spirit’s fruit...It may look now as though God places little value on sincere obedience to Him, that in this world the man who lives for self gains more than he who lives for Christ; yet, in a soon-coming day it shall appear far otherwise.”<sup>xix</sup>

Why is the author convinced that these people are believers and that they will persevere? Because of what he already recognises in their lives in v. 10. *“For God is not unjust to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do,”* His appeal is to God’s justice here, and that appeal is ( at least loosely ) related to the analogy in v. 7. God righteously rewards those who obey Him, and He will not forget the work and love they have shown for His name, as they served the saints. And apparently, the end of the verse confirms they are still doing that. So it is a horizontal love and service ( for the saints ) but it is also vertical because it says, *“the love you have shown for His name”*, thus identifying their motives.

Apparently, their service was not just a result of duty felt, but because they loved God. A key indicator that a person is a genuine believer is that they love God and honour His glory, and that is best expressed in obedience ( cf. JN 3:36 where belief and obedience are equated, as well as Heb. 3:18-19 ); and note I JN 2:3-6; 3:23-24; 4:19; 2 Thess. 1:5-17 & I Cor. 15:58.

## Strive

## vv. 11-12

These 2 verses serve to explain why this warning was given. The author’s desire ( he uses “we” to include all believers ) that they not falter – that they continue down that narrow road right to the end. Assurance of faith is obtained by our actions, thoughts, desires and hopes. We must be diligent and intentional as we strive to honour God. This goes along very well with what Peter says in 2 Pet. 1:5-11, and notice v. 11 here especially. That’s the goal. It is achieved by what Peter tells us in vv. 5-10.

The Christian life cannot remain stagnant. It must be marked by progress and perseverance to the end ( cf. Heb. 10:23,39 & 12:14 ). Hope is a distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian because it is firmly founded on God’s promises and power. It is a dynamic impulse that drives us toward the upward call of God – cf. Phil.3:8-14; Rom. 5:1-5.

V. 12 – It was the spiritual sluggishness which was the impetus for this particular warning passage. The readers have to be diligent so they do not fall prey to ‘sluggishness’ for this can be a precursor to falling away entirely. Schreiner says, “The

promises are reserved for those who endure in faith. Initial 'faith' does not guarantee the reception of the promises if they do not believe until the end."<sup>xx</sup>

Steve Lawson says it like this, "the faith that fizzles before the finish had a flaw from the first."<sup>xxi</sup>

Richard Phillips again comments re: verse 12;

"If you have long been a student of the Bible, then you know the fellowship you have with its heroes. You find yourself struggling to leave behind the pleasures and treasures of this sinful world and then as a result encounter the reproach of God's people. Then you realize that this is just what Moses endured, and you enter into fellowship with him. You engage in lonely service, unnoticed by those around you, and you recall David's experience tending his father Jesse's flocks in the field. You find yourself surrounded by a pagan culture, struggling to be useful in the world while not becoming part of it, and you think of Daniel. You read his account in the Bible, and your heart draws close to him with thanks for the example he set. You come to a trial of some sort; perhaps it is a thorn in the flesh. You cry out to God time and again, and He tells you, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Then you realize that you are sharing the very experience of the apostle Paul in II Corinthians 12. Or perhaps while being persecuted by an unjust authority, you find grace to stand fast, and your mind turns to the fourth chapter of Acts where Peter and John rejoiced to have been "counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." Someday we will see them, and we will have much to talk about, all the saints in the Lord who have fought this good fight of the faith! But even now, on the peaks and in the valleys of our lives as believers, we see evidence of their passing, and we are encouraged to remember that their faith and patience have earned them a share in all that God has promised.

If that is true of the merely human figures of the Bible, how much more true is it of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, although God, entered into our very struggle so as to lead us through this barren world to a paradise with Him in heaven. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus came into this world in part because he wanted to gain sympathy for us in our weakness. He wanted to know us intimately, to experience for himself the pains and trials of human life. Therefore, in all our trials and sorrows, our chief aspiration should be to have fellowship with him, to draw near to his heart, to know him through obedience, following the example that he set. This was what the apostle Paul set down as his chief ambition: "I [ want to ] know him and the power of his resurrection, and [ to ] share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means I may attain the resurrection from the dead" ( Phil. 3:10-11 ).

What Paul had realized – and this changed everything in his life – is that in every valley and on every peak he traveled, he saw marks of Jesus' prior passage. It was a path Jesus walked so that he could leave a trail for us, so that he could open the once-barred way to heaven, and so that he could encourage us with strength along the way. "Jesus was here" is etched into the rock of every trial, tribulation and sorrow we can ever know. So, Paul reasoned, if Jesus wanted to love me and know me like that, then I want to love him and know him in his sorrows as well, because I see that path that leads to the cross takes me to the light of an open tomb, the dawn of a new creation in the glory of Christ.

“[ Be ] imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises”, says our author ( Heb. 6:12 ). This is great advice with regard to all those who walked before us in faith. How much more is it true with regard to our savior himself. Through faith in him, with patient endurance on the trail he blazed before us, we will inherit all that God has promised in him. And we will come to know him, to be his disciples, and to know forever the reality of his love, which is the greatest gift of all.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Let’s close this study off with II Tim. 2:11-13.

<sup>11</sup> The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

<sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he also will deny us;

<sup>13</sup> if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

Let’s trust in Christ for our lives now, and for the life he has promised is to come.

There is danger on every side for the believer; temptations of all kinds, but – we must keep our eyes focused on Him.

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<sup>i</sup> See lesson # 4, pg. 8

<sup>ii</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 180-181

<sup>iii</sup> Definition of Apostasy – see the end of this lesson

<sup>iv</sup> Art Azurdia III – from a sermon on Apostasy in his series on Hebrews – accessible on the Internet at [spiritempoweredpreaching.com](http://spiritempoweredpreaching.com) ( Hebrews 6:4-7 )

<sup>v</sup> Wayne Grudem, in essay, “Perseverance of the Saint”, in “Still Sovereign”, Tom Schreiner, Bruce ware ( eds ); Baker, 2000, p. 133-182

<sup>vi</sup> Schreiner, p. 184-185

<sup>vii</sup> Hughes, Hebrews, citing C. Spicq, p. 212

<sup>viii</sup> IBID, p. 212

<sup>ix</sup> See especially MT 13:18-23, which is the explanation of the various soils, and the dangers of false or incomplete belief. 3 of the 4 soils bring forth non-Christians who look like for a time, and profess for a time to be real, true Christians, but are not.

<sup>x</sup> Hughes, p. 215

<sup>xi</sup> Hughes, p. 216 – citing John Calvin at least in the first half of the quote

<sup>xii</sup> Schreiner, p. 189

<sup>xiii</sup> Hughes, p. 221

<sup>xiv</sup> Steve Lawson, Absolutely Sure, Multnomah, 1999, p. 120

<sup>xv</sup> IBID, p. 129

<sup>xvi</sup> Schreiner, p. 189-190

<sup>xvii</sup> IBID, p. 190-191

<sup>xviii</sup> IBID, p. 191

<sup>xix</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, Reformed Expository Commentary, P & R, 2006, p. 202

<sup>xx</sup> IBID, p. 196

<sup>xxi</sup> Lawson, p. 81

<sup>xxii</sup> IBID, Phillips, p. 205-206