

FALLEN AWAY - HEBREWS 6:4-8



by Grant Hawley

One of the most misunderstood passages in all of Scripture is Hebrews 6:4-8. This passage has been used to bring fear and anxiety to so many people, but it is actually a great comfort.

The passage reads:

“ **For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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. 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; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. (Heb 6:4-8)**

Some take this passage to mean that people can lose their everlasting life, and some take it as proving that those who fall away never really had salvation to begin with. But if we look closer, we can see that neither of these views fits what is being said.

The first thing we need to address is, "who is in view here"? We can see that he is talking about "those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." Now, let's set our theology aside for a moment and ask who must be in view here. Looking over it carefully, it has to be genuine believers. Only holding to a theology that says a genuine believer cannot "fall away" would prevent us from coming to this conclusion. In fact, is there any more robust description of a believer anywhere in Scripture?

Many recognize this and have declared that this is talking about an impossible hypothetical. There is one important translation issue here that causes a lot of confusion. It's found in the phrase "if they fall away." Leading up to this phrase is a list, and each aspect is joined by the Greek conjunction, "kai" (usually translated "and"). "Those who were once enlightened, **and** have tasted the heavenly gift, **and** have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, **and** have tasted the good word of God and [a different Greek word for this one] the powers of the age to come." In the Greek, the list doesn't stop there. It adds, "and have fallen away." There's no word for "if" here. So these people are people "who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, **and have fallen away.**" Some people have taken the "if" in the English translations and used it to say the author of Hebrews is describing an impossible hypothetical, but that doesn't make sense because there is no "if" in the passage.

So if we are talking about real believers who have fallen away, the question is, what happens to these people? They have fallen away from the basic elementary doctrines of Christian freedom (see vv 1-2). The eternal destiny of these believers is never mentioned in the passage and is simply not the point. All believers are secure in their eternal destiny, no matter what (John 6:39-40; Rom 11:29).

The phrase "since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" from v 6 refers to the fact that by returning to law, they are actually denying the value of Christ's crucifixion and "insult[ing] the spirit of grace" (Heb 10:29). This shames the Son of God. Because of this, falling into legalism is one of the most destructive sins a believer can commit.

The text says it is impossible to renew these brothers to repentance (turning from dead works toward faith in God, see v 1). The word "impossible" here has the place of emphasis in the Greek and is the emphasis of the passage. This is not describing something that is impossible with God, however (nothing is, Matt 19:26), but something that is impossible for us to do. If a brother falls away from grace into legalism, we cannot convince him to return to grace. Only God can do that, and it must come through chastisement. This is what vv 7-8 are about.

Hebrews 6:7-8 is describing by illustration the experience of the believer described in vv 4-6. That believer is like the earth drinking in the rain, and actually bearing useful herbs, and receiving blessing from God, yet still going on later to bear thorns and briers (useless plants that choke out the good). Like that field, this believer needs drastic measures to recover it. The Greek word translated "end" here does not mean eternity, but the "conclusion of an act or state." The state of falling away is concluded with chastisement. A field is not burned in order to destroy the field, but to return it to productivity. This is an illustration of chastisement for the good of the fallen believer. A parallel concept is found in First Corinthians 5.

So what happens to true believers who fall away? They have to go through chastisement in order to be renewed, just like a field that bears thorns and briers must be burned to be renewed. This passage is a warning of chastisement, but it is also one that expresses the love that God has toward His erring children which is demonstrated through chastisement to bring renewal. Like any loving parent would, God will discipline us when it is necessary, and that discipline is for our good.

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