

Lesson 18
The Danger of Falling Away
Hebrews 6:3-6a

Have you ever had the experience of knowing someone who at one time was very zealous for the Lord Jesus and then over a period of time became very indifferent to Christ and finally turned completely against Christ? Perhaps this person had even been a tremendous evangelist, Bible teacher or pastor. What happened to this person? How did he get into this condition? Is he a carnal Christian or is he not a Christian at all? According to my understanding of the Bible, this person falls into the category of an apostate.

The Bible says it is possible for a professing Christian to apostatize or fall away. An apostate is one who has adopted Christianity as his religion and advances in it to some degree but then turns back to his original paganism or old religion. An apostate is one who has had great intellectual knowledge of Christ and has experienced many of the external benefits of Christianity and yet he has no true saving faith. No true Christian can ever become an apostate because a true Christian is born of God's Spirit and perseveres in the Faith. An apostate, however, turns completely away from Christ and not only wants nothing to do with Christ but actively works against Him. An apostate is one who has professed faith in Christ with intellectual knowledge of Him, but because his heart is hardened by the sin of unbelief, he refuses to genuinely believe, yield and submit to Christ. He eventually leaves Christ and denounces Christianity.

Hebrews 6:3-9 has become a battleground for varying theological interpretations. Admittedly, this is not an easy section for anyone to interpret but this section must always be kept in the context of the Book of Hebrews. These words are written to professing Hebrew-Christians who were doubting their faith in Christ and seriously considering going back into Judaism. The author of Hebrews is convinced that the great majority of the Hebrew-Christians are saved but he is concerned about some of them, for their actions did not give evidence of true saving faith. The author gives warning after warning to these professing Christians in order to cause them to examine the reality of their faith and to determine whether they are really saved. These warnings are designed to show the terrible consequences of turning from Christ and becoming an apostate.

FIVE MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS OF HEBREWS 6:3-9

While I do not have time to go into detail over the various possible interpretations of what it means "to fall away," I feel I should mention them to be fair to my brothers in Christ who understand this section differently.

Loss of Salvation

There are many who teach that Hebrews 6:4-5 teaches real salvation and Hebrews 6:6-8 teaches real loss of salvation. On the surface, it seems as though this passage does teach loss of salvation but there are some very obvious difficulties.

OBJECTIONS: There are many passages of Scripture that teach once a person is saved

he cannot be lost which is the biblical concept of eternal security.

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35,38-39).

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for (unto) the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

If this verse teaches that a person can be saved and then lost, then it teaches that once a person falls out of salvation he can never again be saved – “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.”

Loss of Rewards

The advocates of this view think that this section is talking about real Christians who lose rewards because of a backsliding state, but it does not teach loss of salvation.

OBJECTIONS: The argument of this book centers around apostates and not back-sliders. ***“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away (apostatizing) from the living God”*** (Heb. 3:12).

The language is too strong to refer to a mere backsliding Christian – “fall away (apostatize)” and “to crucify the Son of God” and “impossible to renew them again to repentance.”

A Conditional Supposition

These proponents say that if it were possible for a Christian to fall away (but it really is not possible), it would be as terrible as Hebrews 6:4-8 declares.

OBJECTIONS: The “if” is found in the King James Version but it is not in the Greek text. There is no conditional idea at all in the New American Standard. The Greek actually says, “and have fallen away,” which indicates that the apostasy had already occurred in some.

A Historical Situation

The act of apostatizing could only be done by Hebrew-Christians in the first century when the Jewish temple was still in existence.

OBJECTION: This means that much of the Book of Hebrews, especially the warning sections, have no application at all to us today.

Professing Christians Who Fall into Apostasy

This is my understanding, and I believe it to be the correct interpretation. This view asserts how far into Christianity a person may penetrate and how many unusual benefits he may enjoy of Christianity without ever becoming a true child of God. This view shows how terrible it is for a person to apostatize when he has gone so far and been so blessed.

BACKGROUND FOR HEBREWS 6:3-9

The author of the Book of Hebrews in 5:1-10 had launched into a discussion of Christ as He is related to the Melchizedekian priesthood of the Old Testament, but he stopped abruptly and began to exhort these Hebrew-Christians. He wanted to teach them these truths about Christ and Melchizedek but most of them could not take it in because they had stagnated in their Christian lives. Instead of pushing on into maturity, they digressed and regressed and were presently stagnating. They were babes in Christ when they should have been teachers of Christ.

They wanted to hold on to the elementary principles of the Old Testament and not push on into maturity. They wanted to live in the shadows and types, which pointed to Christ, instead of worshipping and serving the Christ who was the reality. The author pleads with them to get off the milk of the Word and to get into the meat of the Word – “Let us press on to maturity!”

While most were immature, they could push on into maturity and grasp deeper truth concerning Christ, but some of them could not go on because they were professors on the verge of apostasy.

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS 6:3-6a

“And this we will do if God permits.” -- The meaning of this section hangs on the three words “if God permits.” The author desires to take the Hebrew-Christians on to deeper things but there is a definite reason why he cannot. There are some in that assembly who God will not permit to go into maturity because they are not saved. Some of these Hebrews may be professors and not possessors of the truth.

An immature Christian and an apostate (professor) have trouble at the same point (inability to take in deep. truth) but with one great difference. The immature Christian can leave this foundation and advance to maturity but the apostate cannot because he has no spiritual life.

There is a great danger of prolonged immaturity as a professing babe; that is, that one fails to push on in the faith, remaining stagnant and in one place all the time. This may indicate that a person may be one of those that God does not allow to go further because there is no salvation in Christ. If a professing Christian is continually and indefinitely in the state of babyhood, it could be that he is a mere professor and on the verge of apostasy.

Remember, this section, as is the whole of the Book of Hebrews, is looking at salvation from the aspect of man's response, not God's sovereignty. Man is responsible to push on and if he does not, it is not God's fault.

“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened ...” -- “Enlightened” speaks of being taught the facts of the gospel so as to have a full knowledge of it. Before conversion, many sinners receive the general call to salvation. ***“And He (Holy Spirit) when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment”*** (John 16:8). An unregenerate person can be enlightened with a clear understanding of Christ and His work and still not be saved. Men can accept intellectually the facts of the gospel without laying hold of these facts by faith, and they can also fall away from these facts without being genuinely saved.

“For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge (full knowledge) of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

“And have tasted of the heavenly gift ...” -- The “heavenly gift” may refer to the Holy Spirit or to the person of Christ. Notice carefully it says that these professors only tasted; they did not eat or assimilate the gift. There were some Hebrew-Christians who understood the message of Christ but did not possess the person of Christ. They knew of the truth of Christ but not the power of Christ.

These professors are like the stony ground hearers in the Parable of the Sower, who, when they hear the gospel, get all excited about Christ but later fall away. They have an external religious experience about Christ but they do not internally experience Christ. They have a real experience but it is only temporary. An unregenerate person can taste the heavenly gift of salvation and still not be saved. ***“As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him any more”*** (John 6:66).

Does it not say, however, that Christ tasted death for all of God's people? ***“...He might taste death for every one”*** (Heb. 2:9). Did he just taste death or go all the way in death for the sons of God? Surely the idea of “tasted” must refer to Christians, people who are genuinely saved and not professors. Not necessarily so, for when it says Christ “tasted death” it means he sampled death. The tasting is merely a pledge, assurance or guarantee that all who have been redeemed by Christ shall be with Him in His kingdom. The idea behind the concept of “to taste” is to have a “personal experience of something.” Christ had a personal experience with death; it was a real death, and a professor may have a personal experience of Christ that does not result in true saving faith. The word “taste” means to sample and not assimilate. ***“They gave Him (Christ) wine to drink mingled with gall; and after tasting it. He was unwilling to drink”*** (Matt. 27:34).

“And have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit ...” -- A crass literal meaning of the Greek word for “partaker” is “one who goes along with” which means a companion or fellow-traveler, indicating an external rather than an internal relationship. Apparently, it is possible to have the influences of the Holy Spirit upon a person without having the work of the Holy Spirit in a person. One can have a relationship with the Holy Spirit that falls short of true salvation.

“Not every one who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS” (Matt. 7:21-23).

Even Judas Iscariot who was not saved was a partaker of the Holy Spirit in some sense because he cast out demons by the power and authority of Christ.

“These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, ‘Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give’” (Matt. 10:5-8).

“And have tasted the good word of God ...” -- These professing Hebrew-Christians had accepted the promises of God in the Old Testament concerning Messiah. They had tasted or sampled but had not gone all the way with Christ.

King Herod is a perfect example of a man who at one time loved to hear the preaching of John the Baptist but he was not converted. ***“For Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him”*** (Mark 6:20).

“And the powers of the age to come ...” -- Some of the Hebrew-Christians may have actually seen some of the miracles that Christ and the Apostles performed and these miracles are but samples of the miracles Christ will do when He comes in His second advent to establish His kingdom on earth.

It is quite possible for a person to see and rejoice in a miracle and still not be saved.

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs (miracles) which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need any one to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man” (John 2:23-25).

It should be noted that in Hebrews 6:4-5 there is not one mention of regeneration, calling, justification, adoption or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which are clear works of God for a converted person. These professors had none of these salvation works,

“And then have fallen away ...” -- These professors had all the benefits and privileges of the external work of the Holy Spirit and still turned away because of unbelief, hardness of heart and rejection. This verse does teach that it is possible for a professing Christian to fall away and apostatize but it is not possible for a true Christian to fall away and apostatize.

This falling away does not refer to a Christian who falls into sin, for any Christian is capable of falling into sin. Nor is this falling away related to just a nominal professor, for a nominal professor has very little to fall away from, except an empty name. This person here described is one who has been given much light about Christ, his conscience has been stirred, his affections moved and yet he was not regenerate. Apostasy is total renunciation of all truth and principles of Christianity and this not secretly but openly.

This apostasy had already happened to some of the professing Hebrew-Christians, for they were leaving the assembly. ***“Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near”*** (Heb. 10:25).

To reiterate, these verses assert how far into the Christian life a man may penetrate and how many unusual benefits he may enjoy without actually becoming a true child of God:

CONCLUSION

Saved. Those who know they have genuinely trusted in Christ as Lord and Savior and have a desire to follow Him need never fear that they will fall away and apostatize. Apostasy is impossible for the true child of God because God has elected, called, regenerated and indwells every real Christian, and a true Christian will push on in the Faith, never perfectly, but he will push on because he has God dwelling in him.

Unsaved. However, it is quite possible that you may only be a professing Christian with no genuine reality of Christ in you. Perhaps you have given mental assent and have all the externals of Christianity but no real commitment to Christ. Perhaps you have felt the wooing power of Christ in your life as He has convicted you of sin. Perhaps you have witnessed the great change Christ makes in the lives of true believers and know that it is real but you have not been changed yourself. If this is your condition, you are in great danger. You could easily fall away from Christianity and be on the verge of apostasy. Turn now to Christ before it is too late! Turn to Christ, for the eternal destiny of your soul is at stake! Turn to Christ, lest you die in your sins!

“As I live!’ declares the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die...”” (Ezk. 33:11).