

THE POSSIBILITY OF APOSTASY

The Bible says it is possible for a professing Christian to apostatize, falling away from the gospel of Christ.

An apostate is one who has adopted Christianity as his religion and advances into it to some degree, but then turns back to his original paganism or old religion. He is one who has had intellectual knowledge of Christ and experienced many of the external benefits of Christianity and yet has no true saving faith.

No true Christian can ever become an apostate because a true Christian has been born again and is numbered among the elect. No elect person can apostatize.

An apostate, however, turns completely from his profession of faith in Christ and wants nothing to do with Christ and may actively work against Him. He 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 turns away from true Christianity.

BACKGROUND FOR THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Hebrews was written to professing Hebrew-Christians who were doubting their faith in Christ and were seriously contemplating going back into Judaism. The author is convinced that the great majority of the Hebrew-Christians to whom he was writing were saved, but he is concerned about some of them, for their actions did not give evidence of true saving faith.

The author gives a 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 (cf. Heb. 3:12 - “turns away” is the Greek *apostaini* which should be translated “apostatize”).

The Bible teaches a mystery between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Sometimes the subject addressed deals with the divine side, and other times the human side. The Book of Hebrews is viewing apostasy from man’s perspective. [see Chart #1]

BACKGROUND FOR HEBREWS 6:3-9

The author wanted to teach them deep truths about the Melchizedekian priesthood but they could not take it in because they had not grown in their Christian lives (Heb. 5:7-10). They had actually gone backwards instead of forward in their Christian experience. They wanted to hold on to the elementary principles of the Old Testament (types and shadows) and not push forward into maturity (Heb. 6:1-2). They are exhorted to get off the milk of the Word and get on the meat (solid food) (Heb. 5:11-14). The author challenges these Christians to “go on to maturity.”

While most of these Hebrew-Christians were immature, they could advance into maturity, but some of them could not advance because they were mere professors of Christ on the edge of apostasy.

THE EARLY STEP TO APOSTASY 6:3-6a [see Chart #2]

“*And God permitting, we will do so.*” This literally says, “If God permits.” The author desires to take the Hebrew-Christians on to maturity but there is a definite reason why he cannot. There are some in that assembly who God will not permit to go on into maturity because they are unsaved. They were mere professors and not possessors of Christ.

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 his foundation and advance into maturity but the apostate cannot because he has no spiritual life.

There is great danger in prolonged immaturity as a professing Christian. If a professing Christian is continually and indefinitely in the state of babyhood, it could be that his faith is not genuine and he is right on the edge of apostasy.

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

"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened" "Enlightened" speaks of being taught the facts of the gospel well, so as to have a full knowledge of it. Before salvation, many sinners receive the general call to salvation (John 16:8). An unregenerate person can be enlightened with a clear understanding of the gospel without grasping these facts by faith, and he can also fall away from these facts without being genuinely saved (2 Pet. 2:20-22; 1 John 2:19).

"Who have tasted the heavenly gift" The "heavenly gift" may refer to the Holy Spirit or the person of Christ. Notice it says these professors tasted; they did not eat the whole thing, referring to the fact they never really assimilated the gift. There were some who understood the message of Christ but knew nothing of His power. They sampled spiritual realities but did not go all the way.

"Who have shared in the Holy Spirit." A broad literal meaning of "shared" is "one who goes along with," 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 which falls short of true salvation. *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only 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 drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* (Matt. 7:21-23). Judas Iscariot, who was not saved, was a partaker of the Holy Spirit in some sense because he cast out demons in the name and power of Christ (Matt. 10:5-8).

"Who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God." These professing Christians had accepted intellectually the promises of the Old Testament concerning Messiah. They had "tasted" or "sampled" but had not made a full commitment to Christ.

"And the powers of the coming age." Some of these Hebrew-Christians may have seen some of the miracles 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 a miracle, rejoice in it and still not be saved (John 2:23-25).

THE ACT OF APOSTASY (6:6a)

"If they fall away." Literally this says, "having fallen away," assuming it to be a fact. Who is it who falls away? It is not the true, possessing Christian, but the false, professing Christian. These professors had all the benefits and privileges of the external work of the Holy Spirit and still turned away (apostatized) because of unbelief, hardness of heart and rejection. This verse does teach it is possible for a professing Christian to fall away (apostatize) but it is not possible for a true Christian to apostatize.

THE DANGER OF APOSTASY (6:6b)

"(It is impossible) to be brought back to repentance." An apostate is in a terrifying position, for once he falls away into apostasy, he cannot under any circumstances be saved ("brought back to repentance").

These professing Hebrew-Christians had outwardly and externally repented once and turned to Christianity from Judaism. They had made an initial profession of faith but it was not genuine and their repentance was external. They appeared to be saved for awhile, but when the persecutions came from the unbelieving world, they could not take the pressure. They progressively moved away from Christ, compromising their convictions and became more and more hardened in unbelief so that it was impossible

for them to be brought to repentance a second time. By going back into Judaism, they were going back into a religion which was apostate, for Christ fulfilled all the types and shadows of Old Testament Judaism.

The impossibility of bringing an apostate to repentance does not rest with God, for God has the power to save whom He pleases, but it is not God's purpose to save an apostate because of his hardness of heart in unbelief. God only saves those who in genuine faith turn to Christ. The apostate himself is the one who makes it impossible for him to be saved. In his state of complete rejection and unbelief, it is impossible for God's people to restore him again to repentance. He simply will not turn back to Christ no matter how much any Christian works with him.

It is impossible for any human being to dogmatically say a person is an apostate. We may assume but we can't be sure. Only God knows when a person goes backward to the point of apostasy. Other portions of the Book of Hebrews makes it clear that for an apostate there is "*no sacrifice for sins*" and only a "*fearful expectation of judgment and a raging of fire*" (Heb. 10:26-31).

"Because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace." These professing Hebrew-Christians, by leaving Christianity to go back under the Old Testament Jewish system were placing themselves in a position where there was no forgiveness of sin because Christ fulfilled the Old Testament system. Now salvation is only in the reality of Christ who has come. By going back into Judaism, they show their ignorance of the shed blood of Christ and openly admit Christ and His sacrifice are useless and not needed. By going back into Judaism, they declare the first crucifixion was of no avail, and they place themselves under the types and shadows which pointed to Messiah. They would need a second crucifixion which is impossible because Christ has already come to die "once for all" for sin.

An apostate rejects Christ and his own attitude puts Christ back on the cross, stating His death had no purpose or meaning whatsoever. In this act of rejection, the apostate declares openly that Christ's death was worthless.

AN ILLUSTRATION TO PROVE APOSTASY (6:7-8)

"Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it." Rain falls on two kinds of ground—non-productive and productive. The rain pictures the Holy Spirit and the ground represents two kinds of responses by men who receive the general work of the Holy Spirit.

"And that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God." The rain falls on one plot of land and brings forth fruit or vegetation. The reason for the vegetation is the land was tilled, the seed was planted and made ready for the rain. The Holy Spirit enlightens many people but only those who are prepared by God and truly believe in Christ are saved. The evidence of this salvation is the fruit of good works. This person was enlightened with the general call to salvation, believed in Christ and advanced on in Christ, producing good works. This person could not apostatize because he is a true believer (the elect).

"But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned." The rain may fall on another plot of land which is untilled, unseeded and the result is a field covered with weeds which will one day be gathered and burned, indicating a curse on the land.

The Holy Spirit enlightens many men to the general call of God to salvation. They reject the truth of Christ and each rejection of Christ puts them deeper under God's curse and if they continue to reject they shall be burned in eternal judgment. An apostate has only eternal judgment facing him. Apostasy is a serious matter.

THE MARKS OF A TRUE BELIEVER (6:9)

"Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation." Now the author stops talking about "those" (cf. 6:4), the possible apostates, and begins to speak to those in that assembly he thought were truly converted. He calls them "dear friends" (beloved), and was convinced they were doing better things than the apostates were doing. These true believers had spiritual works in their lives which accompany salvation. They gave evidence with their works that they were truly saved.