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WHEN REPENTANCE BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE

Hebrews 6:4-8

By

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Hebrews Lesson 17

When Repentance Becomes Impossible Hebrews 6:4-8

We come to what is arguably the most difficult passage in the New Testament to interpret. The problem is that no view, including the one that I hold, is without problems. So you have to decide which set of problems you want to live with. If you wish to advocate a view that is different than mine, I wish you well! I consulted over 35 different commentaries or sermons, and in my judgment, no one is able to answer *all* of the difficulties that confront us in this text. So we cannot be dogmatic here, but must continue to ask God for understanding in a spirit of submission and obedience to what we do understand.

While there are dozens of views on the various details of the text, there are basically four major views when it comes to the overall interpretation. Two of these views, in my opinion, may be dismissed without much discussion, since they contradict many other Scriptures. The other two views have merit, depending on which problems you wish to live with. I will explain why the view that I hold to makes the most sense to me.

THE FOUR MAJOR VIEWS:

1. The Arminian view: True believers lose their salvation if they fall away from Christ.

Consistent Arminians deny the eternal security of the believer and the perseverance of the saints. These are not completely synonymous doctrines. The doctrine of eternal security teaches "once saved, always saved." If a person believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, he receives eternal life at that instant and he cannot lose it. The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints agrees that if a person is *truly* saved, God will keep him saved unto eternity, because salvation is from the Lord, not from men.

But Reformed theologians draw a distinction between a person's *decision* to receive Christ and God actually saving a soul. People can make decisions apart from God's regenerating power that is necessary to bring a soul from spiritual death to spiritual life. When

a person makes a decision to trust Christ, the question is, *did God supernaturally raise that person from death to life?* Did God give him a new heart? The Reformed view is that time will tell. As the parable of the sower shows, the stony ground seed and the seed among the thorns looked good for a while, but did not bear fruit to eternal life (Matt. 13:20-23). In other words, the Reformed view is that there is such a thing as false faith. The false believer seems to be saved for a while, but later reveals his true condition and falls away.

Consistent Arminians, however, teach that salvation depends on man's will to believe in Christ. Since man does it, man can undo it. Serious sin (Arminians are hard pressed to determine *which* or *how much* sin) results in a loss of salvation. They say that Hebrews 6 describes a believer who loses his salvation.

But they have two big problems. First, many biblical texts teach that true believers cannot be lost (John 6:39-40; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-39). Second, if true believers can be lost, then our text teaches that it is impossible for them to regain their salvation. Most Arminians do not want to go there!

2. Non-lordship salvation view: Genuine Christians can deny the faith and yet remain saved, although they lose their rewards in heaven.

Zane Hodges (*Bible Knowledge Commentary, Hebrews* [Victor Books]) and the Grace Evangelical Society are the main advocates, along with R. T. Kendall. They hold to a decisional view of salvation and they reduce saving faith to a notional ("mental") assent that does not include repentance. Once a person believes in Christ, he is eternally secure no matter what his subsequent life is like. He may later become an atheist or he may live in gross sin for the rest of his life. But because he once "believed," he is eternally secure.

The problems with this view are too numerous to deal with in this message. The biblical books of James and 1 John, and John MacArthur's *Faith Works* [Word] refute this view. The Bible is clear that a true believer may sin grievously (David & Peter are examples) and yet be restored. But it is also clear that some profess to believe and yet are not truly saved (Balaam, Judas, Simon Magus, 1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 6:1; 13:5; Titus 1:16). "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one

who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). A person who falls away and crucifies again the Son of God, putting Him to open shame, who cannot be renewed to repentance, is not a believer who loses his rewards!

3. The hypothetical view: The author is speaking of something that cannot happen, but is using it as a warning to press on.

The impossibility is variously interpreted as either apostasy or getting saved again. Dr. Ryrie explains (and seemingly advocates) this view in the footnote in *The Ryrie Study Bible* [Moody Press]:

To "fall away" is impossible (since, according to this view, true believers are eternally secure), but the phrase is placed in the sentence to strengthen the warning. It is similar to saying something like this to a class of students: "It is impossible for a student, once enrolled in this course, if he turns the clock back [which cannot be done], to start the course over. Therefore, let all students go on to deeper knowledge."

This view has the advantage of understanding the phrases in 6:4-5 to refer to genuine conversion, which they certainly seem to be describing. Charles Spurgeon advocated a version of the hypothetical view (*The New Park Street Pulpit* [Baker], 2:169-176, "Final Perseverance," although different than Ryrie's view), because he could not accept that the phrases in 6:4-5 describe false believers. He explained that true believers *cannot* fall away because God keeps them from doing so. But Paul (whom he thinks wrote Hebrews) is arguing that the reason they cannot fall away is because it would negate the efficacy of Christ's atonement on the cross. Thus restoration would be impossible. Others argue that the hypothetical warning is not against falling away from the faith, but against going back and starting the Christian life all over again ("relaying the foundation," 6:1-2, which is impossible).

I reject this view because of two problems. First, it is an utterly confusing way to make the point. Every time I hear the view explained, I think, "Huh? Why would the author explain something in such a convoluted way?"

Second, a hypothetical warning is no warning at all. If it is impossible to do something, you don't need to warn me not to do it. Spurgeon tries to counter this objection by saying that God uses the warning ("you can never be restored") to prevent Christians from falling away. He uses the illustration of a deep precipice. God tells His children, "If you fall over this precipice, you'll be dashed to pieces." This leads the believer to cry out, "Father, hang onto me so that I don't fall over!" The warning keeps the believer in holy fear and dependence on God, because he knows that if he were to fall over the edge, there could be no restoration (p. 175).

But his analogy is valid only if the possibility of falling actually exists. If there were an impossibly high fence around the precipice, and no one could ever climb over it, even if he tried, then what need is there to warn someone not to fall over the edge? A hypothetical warning is not really a warning at all. The same thing applies if the warning is against going back and getting saved all over again (which is impossible). Why warn against something that you cannot do? Besides, this variation ignores the serious implications of the term "fall away." Something more serious than trying to start over in the Christian life is at stake.

4. The false believer view: The author is speaking of those who are associated with the church and its blessings, but are not truly saved.

This view, which I hold to (in spite of the problems), says that the people described in 6:4-5 are in the Hebrew church and appear to be saved. But at some point, usually a crisis, their true colors come through. They repudiate their faith in Christ, go back either to Judaism or to the world, and side with those who crucified the Son of God. In so doing, they put Christ to open shame. In effect, their lives, if not their words, say to people, "I tried faith in Christ, but it didn't work! It was a sham! I was on the inside, so I know what I am talking about. The Christian faith is worthless!" For such apostates, the author says, "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance." They have hardened their hearts against the truth that they were exposed to. Although they looked for a while as if they were saved, their lives now show that they never were saved.

There are two major problems with this view. First, the terms in 6:4-5 sound as if they are describing true believers, not false be-

lievers. Why would the author pile up all of these terms if he is describing false believers? Second, if they were not truly saved, then what is there to fall away from? How can they be *renewed* to repentance if they never truly repented in the first place? I admit that these are difficult problems. That's why I said at the first that no view is problem-free. You have to pick the problems you can live with. Some principles for interpreting these verses that I will now explain help to mitigate these two objections.

HOW DO WE DECIDE WHICH VIEW IS CORRECT?

There are two main factors:

1. Which view best fits with the argument, context, and situation that the Book of Hebrews addresses?

As we've seen, the Book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish believers in Christ who were tempted under the threat of persecution to return to Judaism. The author is arguing for the superiority of the person and work of Jesus Christ. To abandon Christ for the old Jewish system is to turn from God's supreme and final provision in His Son to that which is inferior.

In chapters 3 & 4, the author used the negative example of Israel in the wilderness (from Psalm 95) to warn these Hebrew Christians not to fall away because of an evil, unbelieving heart (3:7-12, 15; 4:3, 5, 7). He urges them not to fail to enter God's rest through disobedience and unbelief (3:18; 4:6, 11). He tells them, "We have become partakers of Christ, *if* we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end" (3:14).

As I pointed out in our study of those chapters, the entire nation had put the blood on their doorposts, which is analogous to saving faith. They all passed through the Red Sea, which is a type of baptism (1 Cor. 10:2). They all ate the same spiritual food and drank water from the rock, which was a type of Christ. They all lived under the illumination and protection of the cloud and the pillar of fire. They all enjoyed these many spiritual benefits, and yet most of them were not genuinely saved. In his wrath, God laid them low in the wilderness and they did not enter His rest. They had the gospel preached to them (4:2, 6), but it did not profit them because of their unbelief and disobedience.

There are many parallels between Israel's experience in the wilderness and the terms that the author uses in 6:4-5. They had been "enlightened," in the sense of being exposed to God's ways and to the gospel. They had "tasted the heavenly gift," spiritually in the deliverance from Egypt, and physically in the manna that God provided. Probably in 6:4 "heavenly gift" refers to salvation, or to Christ Himself.

To be "partakers of the Holy Spirit" means to be sharers in the Spirit, probably with reference to the blessings of salvation and the gifts of the Spirit that were manifested in the Hebrew church. Israel in the exodus corporately experienced the miraculous signs of the plagues and the other miracles connected with that momentous time. To taste the "good word of God" refers to His good promises to His people, especially in the gospel. Again, this was a *corporate* experience of Israel in the wilderness. All of them had tasted God's good word of promise by coming out of slavery in Egypt. But not all were saved through *personal* faith.

They also had tasted "the powers of the age to come." Israel experienced many miracles, both in the deliverance from Egypt and in God's sustaining them in the wilderness. In the Hebrew church, it refers to the miraculous sign gifts that God gave to confirm the gospel (2:4). But it's possible even to perform miracles and yet be lost. Jesus predicted that many on judgment day will say to Him that they had cast out demons and performed miracles in His name, and yet He would say, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:22-23).

The analogy that the author uses in 6:7-8 to explain 6:4-6 is a major key to interpreting this text. He talks about ground that drinks in the rain (symbolic of God's blessings). If it bears a crop, it fulfills its purpose and is blessed by God. But if it yields thorns and thistles, "it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned." This fits with the story of Israel in the wilderness and the point of his warning in 6:4-6. God poured out His blessings on the nation in the exodus and during their wilderness experience. Their lives should have brought forth the fruit of faith and obedience. Instead, they were faithless and disobedient, threatening on several occasions to return to Egypt.

Some in the Hebrew church were in danger of precisely the same sin. They had participated in a corporate sense in God's abundant blessings of salvation, but now they were tempted to return to Judaism. But to do that would be to fall away from Christ, and even worse, to join those who had crucified Him! In so doing, they would be crucifying Christ all over again, and putting Him to open shame by agreeing with the unbelieving Jews that He is not their Savior and Messiah. To do that would put them close to being cursed, and if they died in this state of renouncing their faith, they would face the fires of eternal judgment.

Verse 9 reinforces this interpretation, when the author says, "We are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation...." The word "and" is exegetical, or explanatory. It may be translated, "that is." "Better things" most likely refers back to the five things mentioned in 6:4-5 (Wayne Grudem, in *Still Sovereign*, ed. by Thomas Schriener & Bruce Ware [Baker], pp. 158-159; Grudem's 50-page treatment of the Hebrews warning passages is the most comprehensive defense of the false believer view that I read). The implication of 6:9 is that the terms in 6:4-5 refer to those who do not possess genuine salvation.

The question remains, "But if they did not possess genuine salvation, why does the author say that it is impossible for them to be *renewed* to repentance? If they had never repented in the first place, why talk about renewal?" Here we turn to the second factor:

2. Which view best fits with other biblical texts and examples?

There are many other biblical texts that talk about insincere repentance. Balaam seemingly repented when the angel confronted him, but it was not a repentance unto salvation (Num. 22:34; 31:16; compare 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). Judas felt remorse for betraying Jesus and even returned the silver, but his "repentance" was not unto salvation (Matt. 27:3-5). Peter condemned the apostates who, "after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the 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 handed on to them" (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

Thus I believe that both the broad and immediate context of Hebrews, plus other biblical texts and examples about apostasy, support the view that the author is talking here about false believers who were associated with God's people and the blessings of salvation, but who were not truly saved. To *fall away* means deliberately to reject and repudiate the substantial light that they have been given about Christ and the gospel. In so doing, repentance becomes impossible—not for God (Matt. 19:23-26), but rather, it is *morally* impossible because by this deliberate rejection of the truth, they harden their hearts and place themselves beyond repentance. Thus we can sum up the main idea of our text:

Repentance becomes impossible when a person has been fully exposed to the blessings of God's people, but falls away through deliberate unbelief and denial of Christ.

In spite of the difficulties, I believe that this interpretation best fits with the tenor of the warning, the context, and the other biblical warnings and examples of apostasy. Now, some brief...

APPLICATIONS:

1. It is dangerous to traffic in Christian matters, but to reject or disobey the light that God has graciously given to us.

One reason that the author piles up these many terms that sound as if these apostates were converted is to warn us about how far we can go in matters of the faith and yet not be genuinely converted. I remember when I first read Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* [Banner of Truth], although I had been a pastor for many years, it caused me to examine my own heart to make sure that I was saved! It also opened my eyes to the fact that many in evangelical churches "profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him" (Titus 1:16).

2. It is dangerous to profess faith in Christ but to have no evidence of fruit in your life.

God is raining His blessings all around, but each of us needs to ask, "Am I bringing forth thorns and thistles, or fruit unto God?" Read through the lists of the deeds of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-23) and ask, "Which most characterizes my life? Am I progressively denying the deeds of the flesh and growing the fruit of the Spirit?"

3. It is dangerous not to practice frequent repentance.

Repentance isn't a one-time thing that you do at conversion and then move on. Nor is it simply a change of mind, not of behavior. Turning from sin ought to be a chief identifying mark of the believer. As I've said before, in Eastern Europe, unbelievers call evangelicals "repenters." That's not a bad label! If you're in God's Word daily, it confronts you with ways that you are not pleasing to God. Repentance is the proper response.

4. It is dangerous not to worry about this warning if your heart is callused, or to worry excessively about it if your heart is tender.

Again, one reason that the author uses such strong terms is to shock those whose hearts are becoming callused so that they wake up before it's too late. This isn't just a warning to believers to grow up in their faith (although it *is* that). It's a warning to those who *think* that they are believers, but are not, not to fall away into eternal judgment. True believers do not go back to their old way of life. True believers persevere in faith and obedience. We will see the same thing emphasized again in 10:36, where he tells them that they have need of endurance. Believing the best about them, he says, "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul" (10:39).

In other words, there is only one way for those who have truly believed in Christ as Savior and Lord: to move ahead in faith and obedience, even in the face of trials or persecution. To give up the Christ who sacrificed Himself on the cross and go back to the pleasures of this evil world or to the empty shell of religion is extremely dangerous and possibly spiritually fatal!

If your heart is tender towards God, and you are striving daily against sin, then you should be concerned about this warning, but not *excessively* concerned. Keep walking with the Lord and He will bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18)!

Discussion Questions

1. In light of the context and other Scriptures, which of the four views makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. Where is the balance between examining yourself properly versus excessive introspection (2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Cor. 4:3-4)?
3. Should we give assurance of salvation to a professing Christian who is not walking with Christ? Why/why not?
4. Explain the difference between "once saved, always saved," and the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

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