

Moving on to Maturity and the Consequences of Falling Away

Hebrews 6:1-8

Hebrews 6:1-8 - *“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,² of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.³ And this we will do if God permits.*

⁴ For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,⁶ 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.⁷ 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;⁸ but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.

Background Notes

Hebrews 6 is not an easy chapter to interpret. In fact, the first half of Hebrews 6 has contributed to major denominational differences throughout Church history, and I’m certainly not going to give you the “final word” on this widely debated chapter. However, in our Doctrinal Points I’ll discuss what I believe is the proper interpretation.

When interpreting this chapter, it’s important to remember that this letter was written primarily to a Jewish audience: to “Hebrews,” as the title of the book indicates. They had come out of Judaism, and had at least professed Christianity. However, some of them were not fully committed Christians. In fact, some of them were in danger of falling away and sliding back into Judaism. Turning back would prove that they had only made a profession of the Christian faith, and were not truly believers at all.

So the purpose of this epistle was to encourage the professing believers to examine their hearts, to make sure of their salvation, and to recognize that all the Messianic hopes and promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Doctrinal Points

1. True believers are expected to mature in the faith.

Verses 1-2: *“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”*

In verses 1-2, the author was not saying to throw out or abandon the basic principles of the faith! No, his point was that the believers should grow – they should move on from the basics to maturity in the Christian faith.

Here's an illustration of his point. When you move on from learning the ABCs to reading and writing, you don't throw out the alphabet! The ABCs are foundational and necessary, but they're not the goal. In the same way, God expects us to move on from the ABCs of biblical truth to full maturity in the Christian faith. Where are you in your growth and knowledge as a believer? Are you still "memorizing the alphabet"? True believers are expected to grow and mature in the faith.

Were the specific "*elementary principles*" or basic items "New Testament ABCs" or "Old Testament ABCs"? They're Old Testament ABCs. All those elementary teachings are found in the Old Testament. The author's point was that all those foundational teachings pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah and New Testament truth.

The "*foundation of repentance*" was the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices. But the Old Testament sacrifices could not cleanse the conscience from dead works. They were only foundational. They *pointed forward* towards the coming Messiah who would come as the Lamb of God and provide an efficacious sacrifice for sin – once, for all time. "*For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*" (Hebrews 9:13-14).

The baptisms (or washings) and the laying on of hands were all Old Testament rituals connected with the sacrifices (v2). The "laying on of hands" mentioned here was a part of the ritual when presenting the Old Testament sacrifices (not the same as the New Testament "laying on of hands").

What about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment (v2)? Those basic truths were also mentioned in the Old Testament. But what was only partially revealed in the Old Testament is now fully revealed with the coming of Christ and New Testament truth.

All these Old Testament rituals connected with the sacrificial system pointed forward to the Person and work and perfection of the coming Messiah! The Messiah has come, wrote the author, and all those basics were fulfilled in Christ. So let's not lay the foundation again by turning back to Judaism. Let's move on to Christian maturity!

So the writer encouraged the Hebrew believers not to slide back toward Judaism. He challenged them to prove the reality of their Christian faith by moving on from the foundation to full Christian maturity. If you're a true believer, you're **expected** to do this (v3), so let's move on from the Old Testament ABCs to full Christian maturity. True believers are expected to mature in the faith.

2. True believers may backslide, but they will not fall away.

Verses 4 -6: *“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.”*

Over the years, Christians have interpreted this passage in three primary ways:

a. Christians can lose their salvation.

The problem with this view is that it doesn't harmonize with other Scriptures that clearly teach “once saved, always saved.” John 3:16, for example, says that when you believe you **have** eternal life. It doesn't say you'll only have eternal life after you die. Is it **eternal life** - or isn't it? Furthermore, in this view you must believe “once lost, always lost” - a point that those who hold this view don't like to admit.

b. This was only a hypothetical case.

This interpretation proposes that **if** you could fall away, it would be impossible to be renewed to repentance. But of course it's not possible for a true believer to fall away, so these verses were only a hypothetical case. The problem with this view is that the word “**if**” *does not appear in the Greek text*. The people in view here *do* (not “if”) fall away from the faith. They *do* become apostate. So it can't be a hypothetical situation. And that brings us to the third interpretation, which I believe is the proper interpretation.

c. Those described here are not really true believers, but only professed Christian faith. They have come close to the Christian faith. They left Judaism and joined in with the Christians and participated in their church gatherings - but they were never truly converted. They had come to the threshold of salvation but they had not crossed over.

They certainly had been **enlightened**. They had “partaken” – they had even participated in what the Holy Spirit was doing in the Church. But notice that it doesn't say they were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, or born of the Spirit.

They had tasted the good Word of God. They were like the rocky ground and the thorny grounds in the Parable of the Sower. Remember - the good seed did indeed have an initial effect in those grounds – but it didn't last.

These professing believers had seen the good work of the Messianic promises fulfilled in Christ, and they had seen and known of the signs and miracles that God had used to confirm His Word in the 1st century - but they had never stepped across the line to belief.

Notice that these people of verses 4-6 were not said to be born again, or saved, or justified, or to have faith. Like Judas, they had come close - but they were not true believers. The other disciples thought Judas was a true believer right up to the very end. He appeared to be a true follower of Jesus, but he was not.

Verse 6 indicates that when these “tasters” fall away and abandon the faith, a hardening process takes place so that they are no longer able to repent – thus they cannot be “renewed to repentance.” Going back to Judaism would be like putting Jesus Christ to open shame, and crucifying the Son of God all over again.

Folks, the people in view here are not true Christians who have “backslidden.” These people are apostates. They were never true believers.

In verses 7-8, the author used different types of ground and what each produces to illustrate the difference between a true believer and an apostate. A true believer brings forth a useful crop and is blessed by God (v7). An apostate (one who has only professed faith, was never a true believer, and has abandoned their profession of faith) brings forth only thorns and briars. The apostate is rejected by God (v8). This would never be said of a true believer.

True believers may backslide but they will not fall away.

Practical Application

If you're worried about it, you don't have to worry about it.

After reading a Bible warning passage like this one, sometimes Christians feel uneasy -or even scared. They wonder if they were ever truly saved, or if they have possibly fallen away and are eternally lost.

Well, if you're not at all concerned about this warning in Hebrews 6 - then ***you should be worried***. You should make sure of your salvation.

Recently I read the story of Charles Templeton, who was an evangelist with Billy Graham in the early days of Billy Graham's ministry. But Charles Templeton turned away. He abandoned the faith! He became apostate. He has written a book entitled “Farewell to God.” He is apostate - and he couldn't care less. He's not worried in the slightest about the warning in Hebrews 6.

However, if you ***are*** worried about it, your concern indicates that you haven't fallen away, and you're ***not*** lost. The fact that you care, and you're concerned, is a very good indication that you're a true believer - and you don't have to worry about it.

So remember - if you're not worried and you couldn't care less about the warning in Hebrews 6, you'd better start to wonder if you're truly saved. But if you're concerned about it, you don't have to worry about it!