

The Book of Hebrews

מֵאֲנִישׁ מִנֶּגֶד דָּא מִן תְּאֵקְלָא
צִמְאָלִיל נִתְּאֲתַצְרַח דְּרִתְסֵנִי סָק
אֵת פִּקְלָא תְּסֵנִי סֶרְבָּאֵל
רֵךְ תֵּא סֶךְ תֵּאקְסֵנִי דְּמִמֵּצ
תֵּאֲתַפְלֵשׁ נִתְּרִדְנָה רֶפֶר נִרְלֵד
תֵּאֲנִשׁ רֵלֵד מִלְּלֵצ סֵס תֵּלֵשׁ



Outline of Hebrews

“Jesus is Better”

- I. Jesus Is Better Than the OT Prophets (1:1-4)
- II. Jesus Is Better Than the Angels (1:5-2:18)
- III. Jesus Is Better Than Moses (3:1-4:13)
- IV. Jesus' Priesthood Is Better Than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-10:18)**

Outline of Hebrews

IV. Jesus' Priesthood Is Better Than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-10:18)

- A. Jesus Is a Compassionate But Sinless High Priest (4:14–16)
- B. Jesus Was Appointed By God to Be Our High Priest (5:1-10)
- C. Jesus Is Better – Don't Apostatize (5:11-6:20)
- D. Jesus Is a Priest After the Order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
- E. The New Covenant Mediated By Jesus Is Better than the Old Covenant (8:1-13)
- F. Jesus' Sacrifice Is Better Than the Temple Sacrifices (9:1-10:18)

Outline of Hebrews

C. Jesus Is Better – Don't Apostatize (5:11-6:20)

1. Warning (5:11-6:8)

- a. The Present Problem With His Readers (5:11–6:3)
- b. The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

2. Assurance (6:9-6:20)

- a. The Author's Confidence In and Desire for His Readers (6:9–12)
- b. God's Promise Is Our Basis of for Hope (6:13–20)

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

⁴ For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. ⁷ For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Introduction -

- It is no exaggeration to say that the passage we now consider is one of the most ***controversial*** in the book of Hebrews—perhaps, one of the ***most disputed*** in the entire New Testament!
- Because of the ***difficulty*** of this text and the fact that even conservative biblical scholars interpret this text in a variety of ways, I'm going to put off doing my usual verse by verse analysis of the text this morning, and begin ***instead*** with a high level overview of what I see going on in the here.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Introduction -

- Specifically, this week I am going to:
 - First, lay out the **structure** of the first three verses of this text where the main argument is made, so that you can easily understand the flow of thought.
 - Next I will then present a couple of the most common ways that people have **mis**understood the text.
 - I will then give a high level overview of what I think the text is saying and show how the category of people the author is describing here fits into the wider theological framework of rest of this book, as well as the rest of scripture.
- Then next week, I plan to go back through this **same text** (and perhaps the next section of Hebrews) in my usual verse by verse fashion.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Structure -

- *For it is impossible...*
 - Description – *for those who:*
 - *have once been enlightened*
 - *have tasted the heavenly gift*
 - *have shared in the Holy Spirit*
 - *have tasted:*
 - *the goodness of the word of God*
 - *and the powers of the age to come*
 - *and [then] have fallen away*
 - *to restore them again to repentance*
 - Explanation – *since:*
 - *they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm*
 - *and holding him up to contempt*

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- So what's going on here? The author describes a group of people who, ***on the surface*** at least, ***sound*** like saved Christians, right?
 - *have once been enlightened*
 - *have tasted the heavenly gift*
 - *have shared in the Holy Spirit*
 - *have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come*
- But ***then*** he tells us that this ***same group*** of people have subsequently "*fallen away*"
- And ***furthermore***, the author tells us, they have fallen away in such a way that it is now "*impossible... to restore them again to repentance...*" and in the Greek there is a ***strong*** emphasis on the word "*impossible*".

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- So, regardless of what their status was **prior** to falling away, it's clear that **at this point** the people in this group are **not** Christians and are **not** saved.
- And not only that, but we're told it's **impossible** for them to **repent**, so now they can't even **become** Christians!
- Some people would argue that what we have here is a group of **genuine believers** who were genuinely saved but then they fell away and **lost their salvation**.
- But there's a **big problem** with this view: the idea of a genuinely saved believer losing their salvation flies in the face of **numerous** New Testament texts.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- To give just a few examples of texts that teach that **all** genuine believers persevere to the end:
 - *[Jesus speaking:] And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should **lose nothing** of **all** that **he has given me**, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that **everyone who** looks on the Son and **believes in him** should have eternal life, and **I will raise him up on the last day**. (John 6:39-40)*
 - *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **I give them eternal life**, and **they will never perish**, and no one will 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)*

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Then, of course, there are the statements made by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:
 - *There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus... those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:1,30,38-39)*

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Some people say, “Yes, yes, we agree with that, but if we only had this passage and the book of Hebrews all by itself, then we might come to that conclusion that these believers ***could***, in fact, lose their salvation.”
- But I’m not even convinced of that, because before you get to Hebrews, chapter 6, you’ve got to read Hebrews 3:6b and 3:14, where we saw that one of the ***essential definitions*** of a genuine believer is that they ***persevere*** to the end!
- Some people, knowing that a genuine believer cannot lose their salvation, have tried to argue that this passage simply refers to a group of genuine Christians who are ***backsliding*** – but ***without*** losing their salvation.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- But clearly the description given here is much too **severe** for that to be the case.
- What's at stake here is **apostasy** and **the renunciation of salvation**, the same thing that was at stake in the **earlier** warning passages that we looked at in this book.
- We saw in in chapter 2 the readers were warned about **drifting away** (Heb 2:1) and **neglecting salvation** (2:3).
- Then, in the warnings given in Heb 3:12-4:11, it's even **clearer** that the issue is apostasy:
 - The readers warned not to “*fall away from the living God*” (3:12).
 - They are warned against the **hardness of heart** (3:13, 15; 4:7), **rebellion** (3:15-16), **disobedience** (3:18; 4:6, 11), **unbelief** (3:12, 19; 4:2-3), and **falling short** (4:1)

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- But even if you thought you could get away with calling the people here in chapter 6 backsliding believers, there's no way you'll be able to get away with saying that when we get to chapter 10 where the author makes these same kinds of warnings again and then concludes by saying:
 - *For if we go on **sinning deliberately** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there **no longer remains a sacrifice for sins**, but a fearful expectation of **judgment**, and a fury of **fire** that will consume the adversaries.* (Heb 10:26-27)
- Clearly the author is not talking about some backsliding believers who are experiencing a little temporal judgment!

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- There are one or two other ways that people have of understanding this difficult passage, but let me just tell you how I understand it.
- Back in Heb 3:6 we were told: “*But Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And **we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.***”
- So we see from that verse that part of the **essential definition** of what constitutes a member of Christ's household is **perseverance**.
- Then in Heb 3:14 we were told: “*For **we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.***”
- The same idea, right?

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- You may recall back when I covered those texts, I showed that this ***same idea*** is clearly taught in a number of ***other*** passages in the New Testament.
- For example we looked at John 8:31 where Jesus says, ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.”***
- We also saw the same idea in the Apostle Paul’s writings:
 - Rom 11:22 – *Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, **provided you continue** in his kindness...*
 - Col 1:22-23 – *He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, **if indeed you continue in the faith**, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard...*

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- I also reminded you how back when we studied 1 John we read that certain people had **abandoned** the church, and John says concerning them:
 - 1 John 2:19 – *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are **not** of us.*
- In other words, it seems that in all of these cases, the New Testament writers, including the author of Hebrews, insists that genuine saving grace, **by definition, perseveres**.
- So that means, then, that when you see a case like those talked about in Hebrews 6:4-8 where the people do **not** persevere, you are **not, by definition**, talking about genuine believers.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Now, the **difficulty** with that interpretation is figuring out how the people talked about in Hebrews 6:4-8 can be **described** the way they are in the text, and yet **not** be saved.
- As we have already noted, these people were **once enlightened**, they **tasted of the heavenly gift**, they were made **partakers of the Holy Spirit**, they **tasted the good Word of God**, and they tasted **the powers of the coming age**.
- At face value, anyone who has experienced these wonderful things must surely be a Christian, right?
- But that's where I'm not convinced.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- The reason I'm not convinced is partly because of biblical examples where we see similar kinds of people, but partly, also, because already in this book the author has made a very careful distinction between those who were "saved" from slavery by the exodus and those who actually got into the Promised Land.
- In other words, it was possible for a whole generation to be "saved" from slavery by the exodus and, in that sense, participate in "salvation" and its benefits, but **not** to get into the Promised Land.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- When you start looking around in the Bible, you can find a quite a few examples of this sort of thing.
- There is Judas, for example.
- He stands among the Twelve, and he's performing miracles with the best of them and preaching the good news of the kingdom, and when Jesus sends out people on a trainee mission, they come back, according to Luke 10:18, and Jesus says, "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven...*" and so on. "Except in your case, Judas, nothing of what you did was any good."
- Is that what he says?

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Then you have the parable of the sower, with seed falling on rocky ground. (Mat 13:5)
- Rocky ground in Palestine is earth with limestone bedrock not far under the soil, and so when the seed falls in it, because it's such shallow dirt, then in the spring sunshine **that** dirt warms up the **fastest** and the seed there germinates the quickest.
- But then the first rains stop, the latter rains don't come for a few months, the roots look down to try to find moisture, they hit the limestone bedrock, and the plant keels over and dies.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- How does Jesus interpret this parable? He says, “*this is the one who hears the word and **immediately** receives it with joy.*” (Mat 13:20).
- The point is, not only do they **seem** to be converted; they seem to be the **most promising** of the crop!
- They have life in some sense. They germinate, they grow, the plant is there...
- But because, in fact, they never finally bear fruit, Jesus, in his interpretation of this parable, lumps them with those where the seed is taken away by the Devil before it germinates **at all!**

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- So there is a whole category in the New Testament for people who receive something of the blessings of the kingdom, who do taste something of the powers of the age to come, but are not ***actually saved***.
- Haven't you seen people like that? It's surprising sometimes how far people can go in what seems to be a genuine Christian life, only to fall away in the end.
- After all, the Holy Spirit does his work of conviction, so in that sense they've become "partakers" of the Holy Spirit.
- Remember how the Holy Spirit fell on Saul in the Old Testament (1 Sam 11:6). What happens to him?
- It's no wonder that when David's confessing his sin, he cries out, "*Take not your Holy Spirit from me.*" (Ps 51:11)

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- What do we do with a Simon Magus? “He believed and was baptized,” we’re told (Acts 8:13).
- But Peter eventually tells him “*May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.*” (Act 8:20-22)
- Even though the man had believed and was baptized!

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- It seems to me, that the people described in Hebrews 6:4-8 are those who have been brought close enough to taste something of the transforming grace of God, seeing what the gospel truly is, understanding it, believing it, being, in some measure, cleaned up by it, and then, because there is ***no*** grace of ***perseverance***, because that's not a component of their faith, they look their Christian experience straight in the eye, see it for what it is, and walk away from it.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- I think this is the equivalent of what Jesus warns about with respect to the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, where he himself says, “*whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come*” (Mat 12:32).
- It’s not because blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is worse than blasphemy against the Son since the Holy Spirit is of a higher order than the Son. That’s not the point.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- The point is that all of us having begun as unbelievers have criticized the Son, or slanderously spoken of the Son, or whatever as part of the steps that have brought us to the gospel.
- But to come *so close* to seeing that this is the work of God, by the work of God the Holy Spirit transforming, converting, changing, cleaning up, to taste of the powers of the age to come, to see, experience, know, and then to deliberately say, “No. I dismiss this as Beelzebub,” and walk away.
- There is no repentance for someone like that.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Now, it does not follow that we will always have a good idea of what particular category a person is in.
- You can't just go through life saying, "Well, in that case it's backsliding and in this case it's apostasy and in this case it's never genuinely converted at all, just immaturity."
- Unless you have a lot more gift of discernment than I have, I don't think you're going to find it all that easy to decide these things, but there are a number of texts in the New Testament that reserve this category of apostasy for special danger.

The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

- Do you remember when we covered the “*sin leading to death*” in 1 John 5?
 - *If anyone sees his brother committing a sin **not** leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life--to those who commit sins that do **not** lead to death. There **is** sin that **leads** to death; I do **not** say that one should pray for **that**.* (1 John 5:16).
- I take it, then, that the apostasy described in Hebrews 6 is that special kind of “falling away” where someone, after having already enjoyed all of the blessings listed in verses 4–5, deliberately and knowingly rejects the gospel and is consequently damned.

Class Discussion Time



***Class Discussion Time**

- Have you ever known someone who gave every appearance of being a genuine Christian only to later walk away from the faith? Tell us what that looked like.
- Do you see how it is possible to have the kinds of blessings described in Hebrews 6:4-5 and still not be saved?
- Do you see how a person who, after having experienced the kind of blessings described in Heb 6:4-5 and then knowingly and deliberately walks away the faith, would no longer be able to return to the faith they once professed to have?
- Does knowing that such a category of professing Christian exists as we have seen described in our text give you cause for sober self-examination?